Operation Bootstrap counseling and support program Newsome founded two years ago in Pittsburg. "People felt like, 'OK, Bootstrap is good but I need to take another step," he said. Someone suggested starting a church.

For a few months, Newsome, who felt too busy, just said no. Then, he weakened.

The former crack cocaine user,

who's done jail time for "quite a few things," has a background in mental health. At his day job with Alameda County, he keeps track of drug and alcohol-disabled people on Supplemental Security Income.

But there's work to do right where he lives, also. "I don't really like Pittsburg," he said. "I really don't like Bay Point. But God is saying, 'This is where you need to be.'"

With a typical Sunday attendance, Newsome says, of 50 or more, Recovery Temple is intended as a bridge between two worlds. Very few fall off, he says. But when someone doesn't show for a week or two, Newsome has to wonder.

"I don't know where Sister Maria is," he tells the multiracial crowd, in which only one man wears a tie. "She may be in a crack house. But I know God can go in and get her."

The service lasts two to two and a half hours, partly because of the many testimonials that members
Real-life stories

Fellow worshipers shout encouragement and offer occasional hugs, and Newsome plunks on a donated piano, as members tell of children taken away by the county, then returned, of realizing they can survive beyond the gates of jail.

Last Sunday, after warming up with the tale of David's sin, Newsome recalled the time he couldn't drive his Cadillac across the Golden Gate Bridge because — with a hallucinating mind full of mescaline — he thought it was too wide to pass through the toll gate.

He crouches behind the lectern to simulate his drug-induced terror during a concert many years ago.

Most at Recovery Temple are in Operation Bootstrap. Others are required to attend a church by the Love-A-Child Ministries shelter across the street. The latter organization lets Newsome use his building rent-free.

The minister says Recovery Temple could use musicians and a van for transportation. Eventually, he'd also like his own building.

"The church is my life," said Ralph Zendejas, a 41-year-old ex-heroine addict and a decoy at Recovery Temple. "I've lost a lot of (street) brothers to overdoses ...

with shootings, stabbings, drunk driving accidents.

"The Recovery Temple is a place of healing."

The church "makes me feel that there's something out there for me," said Rochelle Paul, 31, a former crack addict and mother of five. "That I'm not worthless, like I used to feel."

Newsome, assisted by his wife, Janice, started Recovery Temple after deciding his own church wouldn't do enough for the type of "difficult people" he feels called to work with.

Newsome, 49, was an assistant pastor at Greater Mclgothen Memorial Temple in Pittsburg briefly last year, but left after deciding it wasn't able to help those in most need.

He brought about 90 Bootstrap clients to a revival there. "I wanted them to see that we could pack the church out with drug addicts, ex-prostitutes, ex-felons," Newsome recalled. "People got up and started testifying ... and the church really was not ready for that."

Newsome was ready, but the first weeks with his new congregation weren't entirely smooth.

"People couldn't even clap at the same time," he said. "People would get up, go over to the side a little ways and smoke a cigarette. The language would shock most churchgoers.

"They weren't used to that kind of discipline."

Making eye contact

That isn't happening anymore, and it doesn't take new participants long to develop a healthier mindset, says Newsome, a minister's son who began using drugs in Vietnam and has been clean since the 1970s.

"I see them when they first come," he said. "Heads hung down, in despair, no hope. After about three weeks, making eye contact.

And I hear people say ... that they're beginning to feel human again. And have feelings that normal people share. Because when you're out there, those feelings die.

"You start hearing people talk about plans. To me, that's major ... That kind of stuff just drives me to continue."
ANTIOCH — It's confession time at St. Ignatius.

But the man talking is a priest, and the listeners are lay people. Father Leo Edgerly isn't revealing personal sins, but admitting the errors of his own Roman Catholic church.

"We sold pieces of the wood of Christ. As if we knew what it was," Edgerly says, laughing. "We sold indulgences to make money."

He speaks respectfully of the Protestants' prophet, dissenting priest Martin Luther, for getting some things right. He ridicules a "guy" who was pope in Luther's 16th century. He tweaks old-fashioned attitudes toward women, and sympathizes with a woman who calls another local priest rude.

The 46-year-old associate pastor strikes a cautionary note, too: "It's a lot more difficult to be a Catholic than before," he tells the tiny group clustered in the church kitchen. "We told you what to think, we told you what to say."

Using simple methods such as listening, light lecturing and humility, the twice-a-year Returning Catholics program at St. Ignatius tries to ease the transition for people reclaiming their faith, in many cases after decades.

And the supply of potential renewers is huge. While exact numbers aren't available, lapsed Catholics are thought to represent America's second-largest religious category, after active Catholics.

More than 40 percent of baby boomers raised as Catholics don't regularly attend a church, according to "A Generation of Seekers," a 1993 study by UC-Santa Barbara professor Wade Clark Roof. But only one-sixth of those folks are nonreligious; three-quarters are "inactive Catholics."

Common dropping-out reasons include objection to sexual teachings, personal practices that conflict with those teachings, discomfort with confession, and a feeling that the church is boring or lazy, according to a study the United States Catholic Conference published in 1981. Conflicts with priests are also important.

Catholics who return typically have children being raised in the church, feel a spiritual need, emptiness, lack of meaning or depression, or experience guilt for being away, the report said.

Or it may be a vaguer sense that something is missing without religion. "Sometimes, they didn't know they were looking until they saw the ad in the paper," says Kathleen Barbano, co-leader of the St. Ignatius group.

"Many of these people are looking for something more than an invitation to return," adds Bill Mitchell, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of San Francisco.

In programs like St. Ignatius', parishioners and often priests sit down, typically one night a week, with lapsed-but-seeking Catholics.

They reacquaint them with church practice and belief while listening to their concerns and personal background.

Depending on individual interests, they pay varying amounts of attention to points like birth control, divorce, abortion, molestation by priests, the status of non-Catholics, papal authority, liturgical changes and the church's refusal to ordain women.

Participants in the voluntary program are also encouraged to get involved in parish activity, which reinforces the religious experience, says the Rev. Vince Cotter, St. Ignatius' pastor.

Returning Catholic Doug Sterling went to a church school in the primary grades and even served as an altar boy. But his parents didn't attend Mass and he became active in sports. He stopped going regularly at about 12, remained a Christmas-and-Easter worshipper for several years, then gave up, Mass entirely without actually breaking from the church.

Sterling found his manager's job with United Parcel Service stressful and had plenty to occupy him on weekends, so he ignored religion for many years. Then, he experienced a painful divorce and a need for spirituality.

"I was driving by one day," recalls Sterling, 45, who lives down the road from St. Ignatius. "And I thought, 'You know, this is something that could help me with my
recent personal problems." He attended that Sunday.

Surprised by the contrast with the old style before the liberalizing Vatican II reforms, Sterling wanted to learn more and signed up for Returning Catholics.

"In the recent meeting he heard Father Leo explain the church's attitude toward the Mass, which priests no longer celebrate by themselves, as they could in the old days. "All of us make it work, not just me," Edgerly says. "It's our prayer together that I articulate verbally for the rest of us."

Sterling likes the new Mass, the individual's greater responsibility for faith and lay people's stronger influence in the parish. Formerly "it was the priest's church," he says. "It was like going to the theater. You were there just to watch, not to really participate."

Parish member Barbano and her husband, Brandon, lead the St. Ignatius meetings, which average just three or four returning Catholics.

"Neither one of us have any theology background, but we have the (priests') support behind us," she explains. "The program's not based on theology. It's based on healing."

Each night has a theme: Vatican II, prayer and Bible study, the sacraments. Sometimes people pray or read Scripture. Lights may be dimmed or music played to aid concentration. Father Leo shows up for the second hour.

Church of the Good Shepherd in Pittsburg and Holy Rosary in Antioch also have offered programs like St. Ignatius'.

Holy Rosary just finished a six-week session and expects to begin another in February.

As in East County, churches in the Archdiocese of San Francisco have set up more returning-Catholics efforts in recent years, spokesman Mitchell says.

A special planning commission is expected to ask that each parish in the archdiocese, which includes San Francisco, San Mateo and Marin counties, offer a program. Most probably have one already, according to Mitchell.

The church doesn't demand a cookie-cutter approach, and all programs are not alike.

The Rev. Jac Campbell of Boston started Landings, which tries to match seven or eight observing Catholics with just two or three returners. That way, new people will better understand ordinary worshipers' experience and perspectives, he believes.

People in programs with the traditional ratio, Campbell says, have complained they didn't 'meet enough active Catholics and still felt like outsiders.
ANTIOCH — Canyon Gleabe is hanging out with friends in a G Street parking lot on a Saturday night.
A woman in a loose, plaid shirt and blue jeans comes up. She looks familiar.
"Did we just see you at McDonald’s?" asks Gleabe.
Yes, they did. Or some of them did. But the Cruise is a tricky field for a street minister like Kathy Lynch.
Lacking much else to do Saturday evenings, teens and young adults drive around, and between, downtown Antioch and places like the Mahogany Way fast-food mecca. Friends could be anywhere on the Cruise, and the police keep them moving.

So the kids and their cars slip around like mercury, and Lynch tries to keep up. She concentrates on passing out hand-sized fliers and orange cards for her Christian youth group, avoiding questions that put teens on the spot.

"There'll be lots of stuff for you guys to do," she will say, in a typical, low-pressure parting shot. "You guys be careful."
Gleabe, from Oakley, says Lynch seems all right. But he isn't confident, of wondering whether she might be an undercover cop.
"It's like somebody getting in your business, kinda," says the 20-year-old, sporting an Atlanta Falcons cap, who flicks a remote control to silence a sleek Nissan pickup truck's alarm.
He remembers that Lynch was chatting with a security guard by McDonald's. "That didn't look good," Gleabe says. Then, a real cop drives up and orders the group out of the parking lot.

Lynch usually seems to draw a polite, noncommittal response. Although she will chat with police, security guards; and teens to find out what is going on, she doesn't want to get in people's business.
The Cruise is a place, she figures, to reach youths who need good, clean fun and more spiritual influence.

"If I know them, usually I'll talk," Lynch explains. "But I try to contact as many kids as I can. I'm not out there to preach, that's for sure. That's not really the place to do it."

She's issuing invitations to First Call, a weekly program for youth ages 14-17 that kicks off Monday. It will meet from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. the first night, and 7 to 9 thereafter, at Antioch Wesleyan Church, 2800 Sunset Lane. Some 13-year-old eighth-graders can participate.
Lynch says her program will use role-playing games and other activities to stress things like respect for self and others, obeying parents, drug dangers, and getting kids to consider whether they really need to fight. Volunteers from different churches will share their stories. First Call needs male staff especially.

But Lynch's fliers for the program's opening night stress the "Human Slingshot" — a bouncing activity that simulates a bowling alley — pizza, games, and a prize, a Walkman, for bringing the most friends. Oh, and it's FREE.

Lynch believes in offering the most possible fun.
"Last year we went in a graveyard for a 'dead-man hunt,' " she recalls. "It was pretty cool."
She also promises kids they'll find cute members of the opposite sex. But she tells males 18 and over, who would find that equally interesting, they are too old to attend.

Lynch, who accepts anyone of the right age, says she met two 14-year-old hookers on Second Street a few months ago. "I said, 'Hey, look. If you want help, give me a call. But there's a better way. The Lord has a better way out — always.'"

The Antioch resident, who attends New Hope Community Church, is no stranger to teen ministry. She formerly ran a local program for the Christian youth group Campus Life.

Lynch has worked Saturday nights downtown for the last two years, promoting Campus Life and now First Call. New Hope, the local Wesleyan church and The Mission Church are supporting the program. Most of Lynch's promotion is actually done in the daytime, on corners by Antioch High School after class ends.
Her concern for the Cruise kids, who seem more bored than trouble-seeking, is rooted in her own experience.

"I come from a pretty crappy background," said Lynch, who grew up in the Los Angeles area. "There was a lot of abuse ... I did the whole drug thing, all that stuff."

Although she became a Christian at 14, she couldn't follow through on it.

"I had nobody to show me what to do, nobody to tell me there was a different life," Lynch said. "I used to steal cars, sleep in parks."

When she was 29, with two young children and using a lot of crank, a relative's generosity allowed her to enter a drug-treatment program in Walnut Creek. She's been clean nearly eight years.

On the night prowl, Lynch brings her husband or a friend from church, Steve Sanchez. They may be with her or a couple of blocks away.

She avoids the riverfront — too dangerous because it's dark and isolated and the police aren't close enough. And she expects to start bringing Malachi, her young, biblically named Rottweiler-in-training.

"I love it," says Lynch, as Sanchez's van takes her down G for another pass at the cruisers. "I'm in my element here. This is my thing."

And there is always something new.

Later that evening, two young women walk up to Blu's Club, a bar across from City Hall on Second. They aren't allowed in. But an older woman — their mom, Lynch says — comes out, talks to them and hands them some money. "Now go home," she orders. They leave.

"Where they going to spend that 20?" wonders Sanchez. "In the kitchen?"

For more information call 778-8584 or 779-9955.
The Republican Congress may pass some version of a school prayer amendment, or moment-of-silence law later this year. But even if that happens—a big political “if”—it may not spark rejoicing at many East County churches.

Because they’d rather not involve government in the realm of the sacred, many religious leaders are underwhelmed at the prospect of organized classroom prayer.

Nationally, some Christian and conservative supporters believe school prayer would send a message that children need God’s guidance.

Brad Dacus of The Rutherford Institute, an organization that supports a voluntary prayer amendment, says the potential amendment’s real purpose is to ensure “that schools do not become ... any more free from religion” than they are now. Many backers essentially want to allow student-led and spontaneous group prayer during the school day, said Dacus, a staff attorney for the group in Sacramento.

But opponents, like the American Civil Liberties Union, think classroom prayer would violate the rights of children, parents and indeed teachers who are atheist, agnostic, non-Christian or merely outside a hazily defined Christian mainstream.

A 1963 U.S. Supreme Court ruling forbids organized classroom prayer of any kind, said Margaret Crosby, a lawyer with the ACLU of Northern California.

One key proposal would end the federal ban—but would also forbid all levels of government from describing a prayer to be used, in addition to protecting children who don’t want to participate, Dacus said. It might allow local districts or states to prohibit school prayer of certain kinds, he said.

But other amendments could be completely different.

Pastor Ricardo Armstrong of Iglesia Bautista Antioquia, an Antioch fundamentalist Baptist church, is against any proposal that would involve any level of government in prayer.

“Everyone should have freedom to speak as they will, whether it’s in prayer or whether it’s in what we call witnessing, talking to others,” he said. “To force someone to say a prayer, or make an official prayer, I am against that. I don’t believe in even the most innocuous official prayer.”

Government-adopted language isn’t even real prayer, he added.

But “there’s a difference between the establishment of it and the permission of it,” Armstrong said. “Permitting the free speech is upholding the First Amendment of the Constitution ... (But) I'm not for very many amendments to the Constitution ... if any.”

Other area pastors also dislike government involvement in school prayer.

“Who would write the prayer? And if one wrote a prayer that was really inclusive to all traditions, it would not fit any tradition,” said the Rev. Valerie Valle of St. Alban’s Episcopal Church in Brentwood.

At the same time, a prayer shouldn’t make kids uncomfortable, she said. “People say that a child can leave during the prayer time,”
Valle added, “But that’s very difficult for a young child to do.”

The Rev. Kevin Buchanan of Community Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg wonders whether districts would end up surveying children’s religion — an idea he doesn’t like — to craft appropriate language. “A minute for prayer would probably turn into at least an hour,” he added, while a too-general prayer would be “essentially meaningless.”

Valle thinks a moment of silence might be good. But she is leery of requiring teachers and pupils to observe one. And she’s concerned that kids would assume they were expected to pray.

“To substitute it for prayer (would be) disingenuous at best,” said Buchanan.

The Rev. Cynthia Smith, of Radiant Life Ministries Center in Pittsburg doesn’t want teachers or students leading prayers — partly, she said, because some don’t even believe in God.

Under a 1984 law, public secondary schools that get federal money and allow extracurricular clubs can’t discriminate against religious clubs, which may choose to pray after or before school, said Crosby of the ACLU.

And the ACLU believes a moment of silence is already OK under the state and federal constitutions — under strict conditions. Students, Crosby said, may also bring Bibles or wear religious symbols. Individual silent prayer is allowed, too.

But the Rev. Vince Warde, of Antioch’s New Life Free Methodist Church, favors student-led prayer, perhaps over the public address system.

It would send the message “that religion is an important part of our society, and our life,” he said. “And I think that would result in more students taking faith seriously, outside of the classroom.”

Warde added, “When the school does not ask God’s blessing, or when the students are not allowed to ask God’s blessing upon their day, the message that’s sent then is that ... God is unnecessary. And that’s not what this country was founded upon.”

While Smith doesn’t agree with Warde on prayer during the school day, she sees freedom-of-religion problems in the classroom.

“A lot of people say you can’t talk about religion in schools. That’s not true at all,” she said. “I hear it from everyone, I hear it from religious leaders, I hear it from students, I hear it from parents, I hear it from administrators.”

Parents “want their children to be able to express their faith in school without being embarrassed or put down if a discussion comes up,” said Smith.

“When I speak to kids,” Warde said, “they think it’s illegal for them to pray in school. For them to bring their Bible to school. And I’m not saying the school’s ever told them that. But this whole issue gets confused in their minds.”

Smith said a state Department of Education guidebook is available that can help parents understand the rights, and boundaries, of religion in public schools.

Still, she doesn’t think school prayer is of great importance to the kinds of problems pastors worry about.

“There needs to be a re-emphasis on the family, a re-emphasis on the home, period ... Those are the things that are going to bring about meaningful change,” Smith said.
Many of East County's approximately 140 churches are holed up in rented commercial space or stuck in buildings that are inadequate to their needs and dreams.

But when it comes to erecting new churches, there's more talk than action.

Land is scarce, banks aren't eager to lend money, and a congregation with the financial advantage of an already owned building must sell it on good terms; then move into a temporary home.

One of the few area pastors to pull off such a project, Larry Adams of Golden Hills Community Church, knows the secret: "God's the one that has to do it."

Divine will aside, Golden Hills started off with at least two other pluses: A big membership and financing from its denomination.

When the then-renting church bought its land west of Brentwood several years ago, it had 600 to 700 members, Adams said. Although that number included children, it still made Golden Hills one of East County's largest churches.

About half of the project's $3-to-$3.5 million cost came from members, while a denominational loan took care of the rest, Adams said.

At Heritage Baptist Church, Pastor John Mincy wants a sanctuary on his new Sand Creek Road site in Antioch. The congregation now meets in a building there that houses its academy. Mincy hopes to build a church-school gymatorium in four to five years; then, someday, the church.

Before even the current building could go up, Heritage had to sell its church on East 18th Street. It was hard to find the right buyer, someone who could basically pay cash up-front, Mincy said.

The Salvation Army eventually bought the property, but locating a new home was tough, too. Finding five suitable acres was "next to impossible" and took several years, said Frank Coon of Coldwell Banker Coon & McCready, Realtors.

Heritage also got a break when a deacon spotted what is now the church/school building sitting off a road in Antioch. The four building sections had been gathering dust for more than a year since a plan to put medical offices on Hillcrest Avenue fell through, and Mincy snagged them cheap.

Once things got rolling, Heritage also benefited from the mere fact of being a church, the kind of cause some businesses want to help, Mincy believes. Home Depot, Du Pont and others assisted in various ways.

But the church didn't even consider getting a contractor because of the cost. Fortunately, a knowledgeable retired member was able to serve as project manager for minimal pay. Boys from the church helped to lay a water main; girls drove nails and painted.

Every year, Mincy asks worshippers to think and pray about what God wants them to give for the project. Worshippers are asked to fill out anonymous slips so church leaders can get an idea of how much money may come in.

In addition to financial demands on a congregation, a building absorbs most of its energy and time, Mincy said.

Other important work may go on the back burner. Merely moving to an interim site, such as a host church with its own needs and schedule, may reduce flexibility for activities. Heritage cut back on home Bible study, reduced outreach, and dropped a Sunday-
school bus service and Vacation Bible School.

In addition, the flock must be overwhelmingly behind a project, Mincy said.

Members must understand clearly what's being built and why, and they need to know they're doing the right thing, said Adams of Golden Hills. When he was a minister in Oregon, Adams saw another church break up over a building project.

Mincy and a team spearheading the Heritage plan gather in one of the classrooms every Saturday morning, praying for wisdom, dollars and volunteers.

If a church puts it all together, the benefits can be tremendous.

Not only are there better facilities, but a new building can draw more worshipers. When the doors opened at the new Golden Hills, Adams said, "we picked up about 500 to 600 people the first week."

But despite all the undeveloped land in East County, churches have a hard time finding a location.

"There hasn't been anything happening for a while," said Ron McCreary, president of Coldwell Banker Coon & McCreary.

He has offered money for future church sites, but developers weren't interested.

"They just want to build homes," McCreary said. "And the city won't even get involved anymore." Meanwhile, developed Antioch's so-called "infill" sites are too small for churches and no available buildings seem suitable as permanent locations, he said.

Stacy MacLean, a spokeswoman for major local developer Kaufman and Broad, said the company has not been approached to sell property for a church in East County. Also, Kaufman and Broad almost exclusively buys land that already has a basic city-approved map outlining the desired uses, MacLean said. "To our knowledge," she added, "there's been no talk or any kind of proposal of a church."

But Vic Carniglia, deputy development director for Antioch, said the city has approved at least two landowner-submitted development maps with church sites. Also, anyone can request a change to a map.

Churches are allowed in basically any non-industrial zone and church proposals on future development sites aren't harder to get approved than other plans, although the city has sometimes rejected locations that planners intended as commercial centers, Carniglia said.

Churches are well-advised to move aggressively.

Some bought in what is now Golden Hills' neighborhood after word spread that the then-agricultural land was for sale, said Adams, who shares the area with a Mormon church and another Baptist congregation.

And the Diocese of Oakland got a jump on development and high prices by way back in 1981, buying 5 acres at the corner of Lone Tree Way and Sand Creek. But there's still no target date for building a new Roman Catholic church there. The diocese paid for the land, but construction funds would probably come from local parishioners, said Jim McCann, diocesan property manager.

Even sites closer to town aren't impossible to find.

United Lutheran Ministries, now renting in a shopping center, bought about four acres on Hilcrest near Deer Valley Road last spring — thanks to a loan and the sale of its interest in a building formerly shared with a sister congregation.

But loans aren't a snap.

A church's cash flow is hard to predict because it depends on giving, not sales, said Brian Garrett, CEO of East County Bank.

Financial institutions also cannot be sure what they're seeing when they examine church accounts. The books often don't conform to professional standards, so they aren't a great basis for judgment, according to Garrett.

Most important, he said, bankers don't view foreclosure as a practical fallback if the project fails: Kicking a non-paying congregation out of its building is terrible public relations.

When the bank does lend, it prefers a long-established, growing church, said Dan von Krakau, senior credit officer at ECB. The church should have a good record of contributions, and if possible, a denomination that can back it.
Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour of the week. White people are in white churches, black people in black churches, and Hispanics at churches with other Hispanics.

Separation in the house of God is likely a matter of habit and history more than conscious exclusion.

"Common backgrounds in ethnicity, economics, education ... tend to draw the same people," noted the Rev. Kevin Buchanan of Community Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg.

But color division is eroding. Several East County churches pride themselves on their multiracial character. And some denominations press churches to watch for insensitive symbolism.

A multiracial experience can be a richer and more spiritual one, ministers say.

"Each of us has unique differences and gifts and histories to bring to the community of faith," said Buchanan, whose flock has 30 to 40 minority members out of 200.

Two of nine people on Community Presbyterian’s board are of Filipino background. A “Filipiniana” party was held last month. And the congregation, which also has Hispanic and black members, has considered working Filipino traditions into worship.

"To me that opens all kinds of opportunities for seeing that God is not white," Buchanan said. "That gives more majesty and awe to God." But it can’t be contrived, he said.

Love Christian Fellowship World Outreach Church in Pittsburg has black, white, Hispanic, Filipino-American, Haitian and Middle Eastern worshipers. "You’re going to learn cultural diversity and those things when you get to heaven," said the Rev. Raymond Dorrough.

Indeed, Dorrough believes God is breaking down racial division in the last days of history to prepare man for the advent of his kingdom.

Love Christian Fellowship, which opened in 1985, has gradually become more multiracial.

"Fear has no color," Dorrough said. "Insecurity has no color. The need for salvation and deliverance when a person is hurting has no color.

“They don’t need black comfort or white comfort.”

Still, the experience isn’t for everyone. In the past, some nonwhites liked the church but weren’t at ease with racial mingling, said the pastor. They didn’t want to be distracted by memories of discrimination, for example, when they saw white people.

And total dismissal of race doesn’t come readily in any event, Dorrough admits. "You have to train people to become spiritually minded and not just have a physical, natural way of relating."

For his part, Dorrough has had to learn other cultures. If you’re picking up a donated refrigerator from Hispanic, Caribbean or Middle Eastern people, he has concluded, you don’t do your business and leave promptly. You’re expected to make it a social visit, hang around and maybe eat.

At Living Word Pentecostal Church of God, Pastor Larry Roper comes from a prejudiced Arkansas background. The Antioch church is about 20 percent Hispanic and includes about 40 black members.

Roper remembers feeling ashamed when he saw blacks ushered out of white churches in the South. "Now they wouldn’t turn them away," he said. "They would just shun them." And some local blacks have told him they were criticized for attending a mostly white church, Roper said.

In a continuing effort against his own bias, he said, he seeks out situations that might be uncomfortable. For example, he was one of two white ministers at a Pittsburg meeting called to defuse tension in connection with the Rodney King case.

He hasn’t revised his service to be multicultural. But he’s adjusted times, moving away from what he considers the typical punctuality of white congregations.

"We start at about 11:05 instead of 11," Roper said. "Everybody files in from about 11 to 11:30 ... even up until noon." Church runs until 12:30 or 12:45.

At his Joy of Life Christian Center in Antioch, the Rev. Curtis Timmons tries to make everyone feel comfortable by using black, white and Latin music styles. He gets Bible study participants to discuss racial issues head-on, asking people what stereotypes they’ve heard about, say, Hispanics. Then, Hispanics are asked to address the prejudice.

Another rainbow congregation is Radiant Life Ministries Center in Pittsburg, where services are translated into Spanish, Tagalog and African tongues.

Religious multiracialism isn’t wholly spontaneous, though.

United Methodists are urged to use liturgy and music from diverse cultures, consider the pictures they display — is there a Last Supper with 11 white apostles and a dark Judas? — and ensure Sunday school material is inclusive.

Methodist churches are even supposed to have working groups on racial matters.

"We believe the Gospel demands that we combat racism and become inclusive, because anything that divides people from each other also divides people from God," said Barbara Ricks Thompson, secretary of the church’s General Commission on Religion and Race.

Congregationalists, too, have a nationwide racial justice panel, said the Rev. Ronald Weber of First Congregational Church of Antioch. The 170-member church, which welcomes everyone, has no black worshipers but some Hispanics and Filipino-Americans.

The denomination is publishing a new hymnal with many songs from other cultures, including Hawaiian, American Indian and Zulu. "Some are not in English," said Weber. "We’ll just have to learn it the best we can."
By David Frisk
Staff Writer

ANTIOCH — Facing a tiny room in a big Christian church, Rabbi Sholom Groesberg pulls out three strips of leather.

T'fillin, wound carefully around the forehead, non-dominant arm, middle finger and palm, are used for home prayers or weekday morning worship.

Two have a little leather box — one is for the head and one for the bicep, in line with the heart — to hold Torah verses.

"What do they indicate?" asks Sheila Oakley, one of several people in the Introduction to Judaism class. "I’ve never seen one."

Before answering, Groesberg explains how the t'fillin, or phylacteries, are made. He even passes out a simple diagram that reflects his ex-engineer’s precision.

"Why do we need to have t'fillin?" he asks. "The Bible tells us it is so you will remember certain commandments and certain mitzvahs."

Reminding people of mitzvahs, or obligations, is part of Groesberg’s job.

But as spiritual leader for East County’s only synagogue, the rabbi also is educating Jews to a firmer grasp of their historical customs and language. And he sees this as part of a nationwide struggle — with intermarriage rates 50 percent or higher — to preserve Jewish identity.

"I want to move them in a direction of tradition," Groesberg said of 35-family Congregation B’nai Torah. "But I don’t want them to do things mechanically. I want them to understand the rituals."

For a year and a half, the synagogue has held classes on topics like ritual, Hebrew and differences between Judaism and Christianity. The current series ends Thursday, but courses start again in the fall.

Classes met at First Congregational Church of Antioch, where B’nai Torah — now using a Lutheran church — will move on May 1.

Class member Lin Arney grew up in a nearly all-Jewish environment in East Orange, N.J. Here "I feel like an oddity," said the Oakley resident. "When I come to these classes," she added, "I feel a connection again that I’ve missed."

People in the area tend to be uninformed and often quite wrong about their heritage, said Groesberg, who became the congregation’s first official rabbi at the end of 1992.

"They might have mistaken notions about an afterlife," he said. "There are Jews who think it is a tenet of Judaism that there is a bodily resurrection in an afterlife in a place called the Garden of Eden... It’s a subject of discussion, but it is no (part of Jewish) doctrine."

Some Jews also think the strictures against pork and shellfish were based on hygiene. "That is not the fundamental tenet," said Groesberg. "It teaches one discipline, and it’s a means of continual reinforcement of one’s identity."

For language, B’nai Torah had a four-session Hebrew class and a course on chanting the haftarat, selections from the Books of the Prophets.

Even in Reform synagogues, the liturgy is at least partly in Hebrew. Worshippers can read English translations, plus some Hebrew transliterated into the English alphabet, in their prayer books. But that isn’t the same as knowing the words when you hear them.

Being a people, and not just a community of faithful, requires a common tongue, a common ancestry and a geographical locus, Groesberg said.

Hebrew "brings with it an emotional feel of authenticity," he added. "That’s very important, because we cannot prove any of this stuff and it’s a question of belief... Antiquity lends authenticity. It makes it more credible — not factually, but psychologically."

But exposure to it need not mean authoritarianism. "I welcome dissenting opinions and I respect them," said Groesberg, a New York City native who used to teach engineering at Widener University in Pennsylvania. "And this also pertains to theology."

B’nai Torah — not officially affiliated with any of the three major branches of Judaism — is a hybrid. "Ideologically we are Reform," said Groesberg, referring to social issues. "But liturgically — by which I mean, how we conduct our worship — we lean closer to Conservative."

People are seeking "more than ethically" and Reform leaders are paying increased attention to Jews’ spiritual needs, he said. "Not that we are losing sight of the social justice agenda. But there has to be sort of a dual concern."

In addition to learning their heritage, Groesberg believes Jews should be more authentic in worship than they sometimes have.

"There was a time not too long ago where if you walked into a Reform congregation wearing a head covering, an usher would come over and ask you to remove it," said Groesberg. "It was both a reaction to Orthodoxy and an attempt to possibly establish the legitimacy, shall we say, of the religion in a Christian culture. Saying, ‘We’re the same as you,’ in other words."

When Groesberg arrived two years ago, B’nai Torah had Friday evening services but not the traditional Saturday morning worship.

This stems from the early American Jewish experience, in which many immigrants had to work Saturdays, according to the rabbi.

That’s been reversed at B’nai Torah. "Friday night needs to be celebrated at home," Groesberg said.

He involves synagogue members in teaching, and classes are open to the general public. "Judaism and Christianity: The Differences" was taught by Darrell Goodin, founding president of B’nai Torah.

The rabbi also wants to offer classes on Jewish theology and the evolution of the worship service, but not enough people have been interested. Groesberg hopes larger, Central County synagogues will join with B’nai Torah.
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David Frick

By JOHN W. YUON 1 6 1995

ANTIOCH — Two local Lutheran congregations have ended a decade-long marriage and struck out on their own.

One church, Concordia, moved into a storefront on San Jose Drive two weeks ago. The other, St. John's, remains in what was the churches' joint building on Tregallas Road.

The congregations worshiped under the same roof for about 12 years but had never committed to a permanent fusion, their pastors said. A self-study by St. John's a few years ago endorsed a stronger identity for that church.

"In effect, you had a ship with two captains ... We felt that it would be difficult to give a consistent direction and leadership throughout," said Peter Vandermat, council president at St. John's.

The congregations established separate worship times in April 1994 and worked on the financial disposition of their building over the past year.

St. John's has now bought out Concordia's interest in the $1.1 million property. Concordia netted $400,000 from the deal.

Concordia on June 4 held the first service in its new facility—a rented space in the Dobrich Plaza shopping center. It hopes to build a formal church.

"I've always felt that the church has been its healthiest when it's been under a little stress ... I'm glad we were the church that got to move," said the Rev. Roger Kuehn of Concordia.

Kuehn's church now called United Lutheran Ministries — the umbrella name used by congregations when they worshiped together. Kuehn will continue holding weddings at St. John's and is working amicably with its new pastor, the Rev. Rod Platte, he said.

United Lutheran will continue to run the Antioch Ministerial Fellowship Food Closet — a free service for the needy — from its new space.

The churches have always recognized the possibility of separating, said the Rev. Roger Lee, who left the helm of St. John's 3½ years ago and now heads a Lutheran church in Hanford.

The two congregations joined forces in the early 1980s. At that time, they hoped for an economic benefit from sharing construction costs for one building and also believed their branches of Lutheranism were likely to merge, Vandermat said. At first they worshiped in Concordia’s old church, then they moved to Belshaw Elementary School.

Together, they built the Tregallas Road building, completed in 1987.

"The thinking was that by combining the resources of the congregations, and combining the programs, that stronger and better programs would result," Vandermat said.

But during the 1992 self-study — routine procedure after a pastor leaves — members said their church hadn't grown enough and wanted development of programs in evangelism, volunteerism and adult Christian education. The study committee called for a more autonomous St. John's, leaving open the question of separate worship, said Vandermat.

"We could not keep the status quo," he said. "Our synod required a better definition of the relationship between the two churches ...
the roles of the pastors."

Communication between the congregations "basically broke down," said Bishop Robert Mathiesen, who heads St. John's organization — the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America — in Northern California.

Kuehn, who disagreed with Mathiesen's comment, said the self-study basically opened the door to desires for independence that some at St. John's felt anyway.

In any event, both Kuehn and Plattee — the first permanent minister at St. John's since Lee — are focusing on the future.

Plattee hopes to give his church a more active role in Antioch and to work harder at retaining teens.

"My perception of (St. John's) is that in the past, it has not been very outreaching," said Plattee, 55, who started there May 1. "It existed to serve the needs of its members."

Plattee and his wife, Jeanette, recently returned from a year spent teaching English at a Lutheran college in Japan. He was formerly a pastor in Los Angeles and King City, and most recently at Atonement Lutheran Church in Sacramento.

Plattee also worked as advertising manager and salesman at a newspaper in Hawaii and used to own a small paper in the town of Dorris, near the Oregon border.

"I covered court news, wrote the police blotter and chased the fire trucks," said Plattee.

Although he wants St. John's to help with community needs, he isn't yet sure what that will entail.

"We have to do more with (our own) youth than we've done before," Plattee said. "The Lutheran church has not historically done a very good job communicating with youth or keeping youth."

Children typically are confirmed as Lutherans around age 14. Plattee doesn't like that idea. He'd like to see confirmation at ages 10 or 11, with better integration into the faith. That policy will start this fall, he said.

Plattee, who estimates 110 to 115 adults attend his church, also wants to increase membership.

Kuehn, who served on the Antioch school board until 1993, said his congregation expects to build a new church with a preschool/day care center and a fellowship hall for use by the area's elderly population.

A church site was purchased recently on Hillcrest Avenue near Wildflower Drive in growing southeast Antioch. Architects are now being interviewed, but the project's timetable will depend on funding, Kuehn said.

Kuehn's and Plattee's churches belong to different branches of Lutheranism but don't differ theologically. While St. John's is with the ELCA, United Lutheran belongs to the Missouri Synod.

ELCA, which absorbed older Swedish- and Norwegian-American branches, is more active in social issues than the German-based Missouri Synod. Also, ELCA ordains women, while the Missouri Synod doesn't.

Antioch's third Lutheran church, Bethany, is part of the theologically conservative Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.
ANTIOCH — Jim Clites' appointments lead through mud, weeds, garbage, germs, epithets, indifference and the emotional demons of society's outcasts.

Stood and moving with a pronounced limp, the 53-year-old evangelist totes his weathered Bible, Christian comic pamphlets, and the occasional blanket or sack of toilet paper to the sleeping places of Antioch's homeless. He prays with them, listens to muttered confidences and reminds them of the free meals offered with the religion.

He's been there.

Twenty-five years ago, in Antioch, Arizona, Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Utah, "I was homeless as a matter of choice," Clites said.

"I was a hopeless alcoholic. I was a bad alcoholic. I used to go from dumpster to dumpster looking for food and shelter and not doing too good. And I got into gambling. As if I had any money left over, right?"

Later he found a home, but didn't change his ways. Then "the Lord sent a friend by ... Even worse off than I, if you can imagine. This guy just flowed with the love of God all over him."

Two decades later, Clites runs The Mission Church. His worshipers are mostly alcoholics, drug addicts or homeless, while others are just plain poor.

Clites, who's on Social Security disability, is especially concerned with the homeless because they stagger under such crushing burdens — and because of his own background.

His goal: Change an occasional life for keeps. "Our message is simple — 'Give it to the Lord ... You are important. You are special. 'Cause God don't make junk.'"

In the late '70s Clites, then a Los Medanos College custodian, trained as a Sunday school teacher in a local church. Eventually he attended Denver Baptist Bible College in Colorado. He became "bus director" at Hillside Baptist Church of Antioch, then an elder in the Open Brethren Mission Church about two years ago.

When the latter congregation's pastor left in 1993, Clites took over. Living 'Word Pentecostal Church of God on Sixth Street allows Clites, whose own church was formerly at Seventh and A streets, to use its basement. Antioch Church of the Nazarene helps by letting the Bible study meet there instead of City Park, when participants decide to.

Crucial is convincing the homeless, especially, that they have worth. "Everybody's looking at me, everybody's against me," is the mantra in their minds, Clites said.

"It affects the way you think about people, and yourself, and things," he explains. "Who do you hang around with? People who will accept you. People who are just like you.

"And what they do is drag each other down. They steal from each other, and they hurt each other. I do their funerals and their memorials and it's a sad thing to see. Many of them are saved. But ... they're being eaten up like a cancer."

Yet the funerals also show flickers of light in the homeless' grim world, as they acknowledge the souls of other street people they've harmed. "They may have rolled this person at one time. They may have fought with them, they may have stolen from them," Clites said. "And they will come and pay their last respects."

"There's a hope," he concludes. "The Lord has brought some of them out."

One success story was a drug-using alcoholic biker Clites and his wife, Lynn, brought "very drunk" — with the man's equally plastered girlfriend — to another congregation's Bible study and service. A year later, he's a street worker with The Mission Church, Clites added.

He also knew Thomas Henderson — the transient who committed suicide by burning himself to death at Blu's Club on Second Street two years ago. He counseled the Vietnam War veteran, who came to services maybe half a dozen times. "I didn't hold anything back with Tom," said Clites. "I did everything I could."

The man was reaching out like a person that's drowning ... You throw them a life raft — but then a life raft isn't what they expected. But then they find out, 'Gosh, maybe it is what I need, whether I expected it or not.' They're up and down, up and down, up and down."

Clites visits or looks for homeless people about once a week, bringing things they requested, or need, along with his Bible. Sometimes individuals knock at the door of the Clites' Rivertown house for
things like toilet paper or feminine hygiene products.

Lynn sings country gospel on summer evenings in the park, which "can be a haven for dopers and alcoholics," Jim Clites said. She also counsels people, and leads a women's Bible study on Friday mornings. Sometimes she accompanies Jim on his search for homeless folk.

Only 10 to 40 people attend a typical service. Participation dips at the start of the month, when welfare checks come. But that doesn't discourage Clites. "It won't succeed because of me," he said. "It will succeed because of the Lord."

This year, Clites — who shuns the title "pastor" — hopes more churches will help donate, prepare and serve the hot meals. That way, everyone can be fed as he drums up greater attendance. He also wants to expand the number of ministers who take up financial collections for his church.

He'd like the owner of a downtown building to donate it for a "family rescue mission" he hopes to start. And Clites wants a van.

One morning last week his tenuous foot search for a homeless person led to Ron, holed up in a shack with his dog. The 36-year-old man hadn't been to a service for months.

"Do you ever wear glasses, Ron? "Cause we have glasses," Clites urged as they headed to the Bible lesson in City Park. The offer was accepted. "Well, Ronnie, do you think you and (a sometime girlfriend) will ever get back together?"

Ron said he respects Clites, who he met at a Scripture study two summers ago, because the evangelist "knows what it's like" to be homeless. "I never really read the Bible much before, and here it's like I'll read parts of it," Ron said. Clites "opens everything up."

"You can talk to people if you've experienced it," said Pat, a 49-year-old once-homeless woman who attends the church. "What I have read, Jesus was the first homeless person. He didn't have a home of his own, except for heaven ...

This is an example, these days, of what Christ would do."
The Rev. Sylvester Brown comes, in a sense, from another world: He has plowed a cotton field with a mule, studied for the ministry by oil lamp and baptized people in snake-infested waters.

The quiet Louisiana native, 84 and entering his fifth decade as a local pastor, was honored last month with an “S.B. Brown Day” that drew many colleagues to Solomon Temple Missionary Baptist Church.

“There were probably about 20 ministers and pastors there,” said the Rev. Lawrence Holmes of St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church, where Brown preached from 1955 to 1986.

“We all (walked in procession) in our robes, which was unusual ... to show respect for him. The highest respect for him.”

That respect doesn’t come from a blazing record of activism, which Brown cannot claim. Fellow pastors say they simply celebrated 40 years of service to his church, saved souls, and faithfulness to a biblical life.

“He is steadfast,” said Holmes. “He will not give up. The theme of our service was ‘Old Soldiers Never Die.’”

Brown has heart trouble, diabetes and cataracts. He makes fewer visits to convalescent homes and shut-ins than he used to. But neither is he about to leave the pulpit at the Pittsburgh Veterans Hall near downtown, where his current church, Shiloh Missionary Baptist, meets.

Not “until the Lord stops me,” Brown says.

“There’s no place in the Bible where ministers are supposed to retire.”

Brown is mentoring two younger preachers who sometimes take his place, but still leads more than half of the services.

And he maintains vigor and a good memory, Holmes said.

“He doesn’t sound like he’s 84 years old when he preaches. I’ve heard him preach several funerals ... He goes back from the time he met the person until the time they died. He just tells their life story.”

Brown is used to persistence and commitment.

His father, a poor tenant farmer allowed to keep just one-quarter of the cotton and corn he grew, was also a minister.

Called himself at the age of 12, Brown started preaching at 14, got a license at 16 and became pastor at 18, in 1930, at St. Matthew Missionary Baptist Church in Newellton, La. He studied theology and eventually graduated from United Theological Seminary in Monroe. For a time, Brown pastored eight rural churches in Louisiana and Mississippi, dividing his Sundays and evenings among them.

For a young minister, the segregated South was both a harder school and an easier one than East County.

“His word had to be his bond,” said Bishop D.O. Jones, another Pittsburg clergyman who grew up in Louisiana. “The elderly people would take a young preacher in those days, and they would push him on, and they would support him.”

“You didn’t have baptism pools like you have now ... you had to use a lake, a river or a ‘branch.”

“Some of those baptisms, the water was tainted,” Jones added. “It had snakes, alligators, and Christian folks in those days would go out and team up and fight back,” eyes peeled for danger in the water.

“We had to watch all the time,” said Brown.

He came West in 1954 to move closer to his sister in Vallejo, who said he was needed as a preacher here.

Brown found California another world at first, according to Jones, his friend for 40 years and a pastor here since 1948. There was less “Christian spirit” in the South, Jones said, referring to lower attendance here and less generous tithing.

“He had to adjust to the system. But his character held up.”

A job was available in Sacramento — until Brown learned the current minister was being dumped. “I didn’t want that,” he said. So Brown started Mt. Moriah Missionary Baptist, also in Sacramento, shortly after arriving in California.

While building up Mt. Moriah, Brown also pastored two Sundays a month at St. Mark in Pittsburg, then meeting at a community center in Columbia Park. He took full-time duties at St. Mark in 1960, staying until 1986. Although Brown wanted to continue, he was forced to quit because of poor health, he said.

He later formed his own church, Shiloh, where he leads 50 to 70 people compared with the 300 to 400 on Mt. Moriah’s rolls in the 1960s.

Lacking his own building doesn’t discourage Brown, but occasionally reading the paper hurts.

“You don’t feel good” about crime news naming suspects and victims who once were in your congregation, he says. “You feel that they didn’t take your instruction as they should have.”

Relaxed dress standards also bother Brown, who complains that people will attend church on “jump suits and everything else.” He doesn’t want that at Shiloh, where women are asked, although not required, to avoid wearing pants.

He also fondly remembers the days when new worshipers had to face the congregation and explain what convinced them to become Christians.

Since churches have abandoned that demand, “we have to take their word for it. A lot of folks in the church are not of the church.”

Regardless of what new Christians must do in front of others, Brown doesn’t believe accepting Jesus is the end of the story. He wants a lifetime of spiritual effort.

“You ought to be better today than you were yesterday,” he says. “Better this year than the year before ... You grow into perfection like the fruit on the tree.”

In addition to pastoring, Brown sits on the board of Jones’ Downtown Pittsburg Alliance Ministerial Union, serving also as its chaplain. Mary, his wife of 32 years, has helped him over the decades with his ministry.

Jones, 77, said the pastor’s example has given him more confidence in facing life’s ups and downs.

“I learned how to stand firm on my word,” Jones said, “because I’ve seen it never fail with him.”