



# URBAN CURRENT

## City soul-saving station

**A** gritty Chicago neighborhood ignored the birth of a Sunday school in 1877. Sara Dunn Clarke and her husband, Colonel George Clarke, were determined to reach the rejects of the area and “make crooked men straight.” In 1880, the ministry found vacated space at the notorious Pacific Beer Garden a couple blocks away. Colonel Clarke’s friend, D.L. Moody, suggested the word “Beer” be replaced with the word “Mission.” Who could have known then that Pacific Garden Mission would have a worldwide outreach?

A number of well-known evangelicals of the late 19th century became associated with PGM, including the mission’s future superintendent, Mel Trotter, and evangelist Billy Sunday. Both were saved as a result of PGM’s soul-winning efforts. Trotter, a hopeless alcoholic, was on his way to commit suicide in Lake Michigan but stumbled into PGM and was converted. He was instrumental in founding 66 other rescue missions from Boston to San Francisco.

In January 1923, a large cash gift from Billy Sunday helped the mission relocate to a strip known as Murderers Row. For the next 84 years its red neon “Jesus Saves” cross declared its core belief. The work expanded beyond homeless men to reach women, children, and service men, and perhaps PGM’s most famous ministry, the radio drama program *Unshackled*.

Beginning in 1950, this radio outreach is the longest running radio drama in history. It is heard across the globe 7,000 times a week in eight different languages. Each week the story of a sinner set free is presented in the old radio-drama style so popular in the first half of the 1900s. The international response around the world indicates the genre, the medium, and the message is still effective today.

Every night an evangelistic service is preceded by a prayer meeting. I was there on numerous occasions with Harry Saulnier, superintendent for 46 years (1940-1986). In the prayer room, Saulnier insisted everyone kneel on the concrete floor, at chairs looking like they had been inherited from the original beer hall. There was pleading with God for lost souls.

The jam-packed chapel was quiet but for shuffling feet, constant hacking coughs, and snores from dozers. The air is ripe with a garbage-dump variety of odors. The gospel is sung, testified to, and preached. Souls are snatched from the devil’s grip. Converts have dispersed to serve Christ all over the world.

As the area around PGM gentrified, neighbors and city hall pushed, pulled, cajoled, and finally demanded that PGM move. Now the derelicts, the drunks, the criminals, and the mentally ill will not be dirtying up the yuppies’ neighborhood. The city facilitated relocation in 2007 to an industrial area along the river about two and a half miles away. This state-of-the-art “green” facility is heated by solar power, has greenhouses, holds up to 1,000 residents, housing all PGM’s ministries under one roof.

In addition to having adequate space for the largely male population that arrives on a given night, there is also room for over 100 overnight female residents as well as long-term spaces available for mothers with children.

Everyone who arrives at the mission receives a shower, a hot healthy meal, clothing, and accommodations for the night. Upon request they receive individual counseling to assess specific needs.

PGM offers a free, professionally staffed dental and medical clinic. PGM also has a unique prison ministry that not only ministers

to the prisoners, but also to their families. There is an outreach to their many Polish, Roman Catholic neighbors using English taught as a second language as an evangelistic tool.

For those professing faith in Christ, the mission offers a discipleship program to help the new believer grow, address educational deficiencies, provide job training and job placement, and a path to a stable, orderly life.

First, they offer a 120-day Bible Program. Upon completion of this commitment, there is an opportunity for an eight-month program known as the Old Lighthouse Bible Academy. The academy offers courses in the Bible, evangelism, and preaching. Then the students enter the Career Development Program where they learn resumé and interview preparation, computer skills, and job searching skills. Throughout this process, there are daily meetings with PGM staff or teachers for active discipleship with the goal of the student becoming an effective witness for Christ.

While academics, nitpickers, and Phari-sees debated the pure gospel, the full gospel, and the social gospel, PGM has been on the front lines with the old-time gospel.

For 133 years PGM has served up old-fashioned truth, never afraid of newfangled methods. They have given wholehearted effort to bring the whole gospel to the whole man, reaching across the nation out to the whole world — from a beer hall on a skid row street.

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