

From a surf shop to a thriving fellowship with ministries in the Gulf Coast and around the world

Story by Christmas McGaughey
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins



There are three Sunday morning services.



Nearly 500 children attend children's church, geared to help them know Jesus.



The church has a bookstore, above, a skate shop, and is building a café.

Lance Cook never planned on becoming a pastor. And he never planned on starting a church, sending missionaries around the world, or setting up a major relief operation to hurricane victims. But as he followed Christ in the "same calling in which he was called," God led him step by step to lead a multitude. The Bible study at his surf shop grew into the hundreds, and eventually Lance accepted the pastorate of the church he had planted. Now Calvary Chapel La Habra in Orange County, CA, has grown to a thriving church with outreaches that span the globe.

Growing up in a Christian home in Norwalk, Los Angeles County, CA, Lance accepted Christ at age five. By his early 20s, he had a successful surf shop in La Mirada, CA, where teenagers thronged. The Lord pierced Lance's heart for those lost kids, using his connections and his "cool" image to open spiritual doors with many of the troubled youth. Lance would listen to their problems and then share his faith in Christ, inviting the kids to come back to a Tuesday night gathering to discuss the Bible.

"We had a lot of the kids who really weren't accepted in bigger churches in town," Lance recalled. "They still had long hair; they didn't fit the description of your average mainline denominational church of the 1980s. And a lot of them were getting in trouble at school." Seeing a change in their kids, parents spread the word about Lance's shop, and the study began to grow. Though Lance had a burden for the kids, he had no desire to be a pastor or to start a church.

A Reluctant Pastor

Wrestling with his priorities, Lance went to Hawaii to seek God's direction. He was young, successful, single, and happy with his life. "The surf shop was popular; we were making a lot of money. Marriage and ministry seemed way down the road," he remembered. But he felt God directing him to step out in faith and take more responsibilities. "God was calling me to grow up; I wasn't ready," Lance said. "I asked the Lord to ready my heart. That's where the Lord really reassured me of a calling on my life. He made it clear that I was supposed to go back, marry [my Christian girlfriend], Lori, and give my life for these kids."

When he returned from Hawaii, the Tuesday night Bible study at his surf shop exploded. He married Lori in 1987, and the two attended Calvary Chapel West Covina under Pastor Raul Ries—where Lance attended the Bible school. The surf shop study grew to 150 youth by 1989, and God provided a bigger meeting place. After they outgrew that facility and started meeting in a park, God provided a 40,000-square-foot warehouse in the early 1990s; they took the name "Committed Bible Study" with a crowd of 250.

The night before Committed's first meeting, unsolicited free chairs, a sound system, and lighting came in. Lance remembered, "This guy who was an electrician had been running from the Lord. He had a business deal that went south and had all these lights to get rid of. He saw us and asked what we were doing, so I told him. He started crying and walked out. Two hours later, he came back with 100 light fixtures and a handful of electricians and they hung the lights in our warehouse."



Twenty years ago, Pastor Lance Cook started a Bible study in his surf shop.

"We had a lot of kids who really weren't accepted in bigger churches in town."

Pastor Lance Cook



Lance, center, prays with a family after Sunday worship service. Many linger after service for encouragement and fellowship.



CC La Habra moved to its current site in 2000.



Worshippers sing praises to the Lord.



Youth have a separate worship and teaching service, “Committed Youth,” that meets during the second and third Sunday service.



High schooler Justin Woldridge shares about his mission trip to the Gulf Coast.

“No one is more significant than the other in God’s eyes.”

Pastor Lance Cook

The first year, nearly 600 people came, and Lance added Thursday night prayer and Sunday morning studies. By the third year, nearly 1,000 were coming on Sunday mornings. But still Lance, who grew up in a legalistic denomination, did not want to be called a pastor. “I didn’t want it to grow into something where those kids wouldn’t be reached anymore,” he said. Lance encouraged the kids and young married couples to plug into a church home, saying, “This is not a church; it’s a Bible study.” He added, “If someone called me pastor, I would gently say, ‘My name is Lance; I’m not a pastor.’ I was hoping someone would come any time to be the pastor.”

But when Oden Fong visited the Bible study, he encouraged Lance that God was using him to start a church. “He said, ‘This is a church. This is a Calvary Chapel.’ I said, ‘No, this is Committed Bible Study,’” Lance recounted. Shortly thereafter, an engaged couple from Committed asked Lance to officiate at their wedding at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa. Lance asked Oden to talk to Pastor Chuck Smith for permission; a few days later, he came home to find a surprising phone message. “It was Chuck on the answering machine; he said he had heard

good things about what God was doing and that they were ordaining me as a minister. The paperwork was in the mail.”

From then on, Lance accepted his role as a pastor and continued teaching. When the group grew to nearly 1,000 adults on Sunday mornings, it was time to move again. In 1996, a Christian couple whose son got saved said God put it on their hearts to help the church acquire the 5-acre facility on Euclid Avenue in La Habra. In 2000, Calvary Chapel La Habra was dedicated to the Lord.

Letting God Lead

Ministry is about having a burden for the lost, Lance shared, and following God’s lead. “I think we all have good ideas on how to advance the kingdom,” Lance said. “But they’re not all from Him. I’ve noticed that God’s ideas and His plans come with a burden that doesn’t go away, a burden for people—not for a skate shop or a building or a concept, but a burden for people that’s rooted in love.” The Lord leads step by step, Lance said, requiring us to walk by faith and follow His direction.

He cited the first few chapters of Nehemiah, in which God gives Nehemiah a burden for Jerusalem, opens doors through prayer, and brings others alongside the man of God. “Nehemiah was trusting Him step by step to do the impossible, plain and sweet,” Lance said. “The people were fainthearted, and they perceived that the work was done by God. I love that. That’s been my model book for approaching ministry—prayer and trusting God to go before you to open doors, to direct, and to provide.” He added that God often starts with an individual and then brings other like-minded people to help in doing His work. “No one is more significant than the other in God’s eyes,” he said. “Here, we agree that ministry is being established when God raises up others with that same burden and that same vision. It’s happened with every ministry that is bearing fruit that remains.”

Lance added that, as a church grows and leaders get more experienced, it can be easy to take things into one’s own hands. “It’s easy to say, ‘Oh, we’ve done Easter before, we know how to do it,’ but then you can miss what the Lord wants to do.” Instead of having planning meetings, Lance and the church leaders have started meeting together for worship and a time of prayer to seek the Lord. Many times as they are praying, Lance senses the same burden on two or more of the leaders’ hearts.

From these gatherings, many ministries have started—including small group fellowships and the church’s 2006 week-long Easter outreach. Instead of paying a large sum of money to hold a massive meeting in a stadium on Sunday morning, Lance and the church leaders felt a burden to develop relationships with people in the community. For seven days, they offered special events, music, and guest speakers; then leaders served a large meal to nearly 600 people at a time. “Instead of having 10,000 people for two hours, we had 8,000 people for 30 hours.” Many accepted Christ.

Beyond California

Since then, the church has gotten more involved with missions, supporting or sending missionaries to Chiapas, Mexico; Swansea, South Wales; Tokyo, Japan; Uganda and Rwanda, Africa; and Poi Pet, Cambodia. The La Habra fellowship regularly has day-mission trips to nearby Plan



Youth Pastor Damon Cassell, right, encourages a young man with the Word of God.



Damon prays with one of 50 teens that come on Sundays.



Sean Lawrence leads children in worship. A small worship team travels to six classrooms, each with a different age group, to lead children in youth-oriented praise songs.



Joy Jetton, left, Kelci Cook, center, and Megan Lopez read Kelci's favorite verse.

Libertador, Mexico. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, CC La Habra helped establish the Calvary Chapel Disaster Relief Center in Bay St. Louis, MS. Hundreds from Calvary Chapels have helped minister there, and a church has been planted with nearly 50 new believers.

"We didn't pursue these places. They just found us and overtook us," said Jason Stead, who oversees the church's missions program, Limitless Boundaries. "We're just trying to keep up with God."

One example is their involvement with Japan. After meeting a Christian Japanese musician in the States, Lance and some

"We didn't pursue these places... We're just trying to keep up with God."

Jason Stead



Fourth and fifth graders are taught on Sundays with "Through the Bible" curriculum.

church leaders began praying about Japan and traveled to that country. After working with nationals to plant more than ten churches there over the past few years, CC La Habra has sent the Austin family to establish a School of Ministry in Tokyo. George Austin trains many Japanese men from different churches, who are then sent out to start Bible studies. "Just like it was for the early church, that's a big step of faith for these churches," George said. Christians in Japan are often ostracized from their Shinto and Buddhist families, and many who get saved know it will cost them their families. CC La Habra takes teams to encourage the CC church plants in Japan and other parts of the world. Every month, the church devotes a week to missions with reports, newsletters, and prayer. Youth have gone on several mission trips, where they said their faith was strengthened and their hearts were burdened for the lost.

Love Shines at Skate Shop

Twenty years since Lance's surf shop ministry in La Mirada, a new ministry at CC La Habra is drawing skateboarders to Christ through the church's "Shine Boardshop." Drawing unbelievers from the community to the church grounds, the Shine shop sells skateboarding paraphernalia and donates the proceeds to church missions. Volunteers from CC La Habra staff the shop during the week with a heart to reach out to the skating community and neighborhood kids. "It's neat because people will

come here who don't go to our church," said Lance's wife, Lori. "They call us the 'Shine' church," she said laughing. "I think that's really neat since Jesus said to 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven'" (Matthew 5:16).

Believers at the shop have shared Christ's love with many kids who would normally avoid church. "We try to build relationships with them," said Nathan Perkins, 20. "Some are dealing with family problems and don't want to be at home. A lot of them are calling out for attention and companionship." Some have accepted Christ and plugged into the youth group and now invite their unsaved skateboarding friends.

A local teenager named Eric has been coming regularly to help set up the ramps and hang out with believers at the shop. Eric, 14, said, "The people here are nice; they treat us all like we're pros. If you come in short on money, they will hook you up." Another young man, Carlos Andrade, started coming to the shop when he was 13 and got saved when he was 14. Now he attends CC La Habra and volunteers at Shine.

Reaching Children & Families

Francel Esquivel oversees the massive children's ministry at CC La Habra. The church has between 500-600 children every week with more than 140 helpers. Every summer, the church conducts a vacation Bible school

La Habra in Rwanda

Story by Sean Lawrence



Local skateboarders Eric, left, and Riley, attend Tuesday night Bible study and skate night at CC La Habra's Shine Boardshop.

“We’ve seen a lot of these kids bring their parents, and then the whole family gets saved.”

Francel Esquivel



The Cook family, clockwise from left: Kendra, Lori, Lance, Kayla, and Kelci.

with up to 400 children. On October 31, the church holds a “Celebration of Life” festival for area families.

“Everything we do with children becomes an extended outreach to their parents,” said Francel. Gesturing to a nearby neighborhood, he said, “We have a handful of kids from these apartments who come by themselves. We’ve seen a lot of these kids bring their parents, and then whole family gets saved.”

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Kids practice skateboard moves in the rear parking lot of Shine Boardshop.

Just over a decade since massive tribal genocide in Rwanda sent shockwaves throughout the world, God has used His people to minister healing and salvation in this recovering nation. Several Calvary Chapels have worked with local pastors to bring a degree of reconciliation and peace, though many Rwandans still need to be reached with the life-changing message of a faithful, loving God.

The killings began in April 1994 and ended before the spring buds turned a dry summer brown. In less than three months, nearly 1 million people had been killed. The dead were not soldiers shot down by a foreign army, but acquaintances and friends beaten to death by the machete swings of neighbors—simply because they belonged to a different tribe. The long, complicated minority rule of the Tutsi tribe had brought suffering to the majority Hutu tribe, and the Hutus’ growing desire for vengeance reached its boiling point that awful spring.

That same year, Rwandan Pastor Francis Mutabaza saw the headline in the May 16, 1994, issue of *TIME* magazine: “There are No Devils Left in Hell. They are All in Rwanda.” Being a Tutsi, Francis had moved to Uganda several years earlier when tensions arose and had built a comfortable life. But the headline haunted him; he knew he must return to Rwanda and bring the message of hope and reconciliation.

So with the stench of death still hanging in the air, Francis returned to Rwanda and began ministering to his surviving countrymen. Francis’s obedience has led to what is today a healthy Bible-teaching church on the outskirts of Kigali where Tutsis and Hutus together come to worship.

In the spring of 2004 a team from CC La Habra, filled with a burden for Rwanda, visited the country where they met Pastor Francis, and a deep relationship began. Over the following year, Francis traveled to California and spent time at La Habra as well as the CC Senior Pastors’ Conference in Murrieta, CA, which led to a partnership in ministry.

“We have begun using the expository method of teaching that I have learned from Calvary Chapel, and we are experiencing God’s leading and touch,” Francis said. “We are now in the book of Acts—it is awesome. The church is doing well and growing both naturally and spiritually.”

Leaders from CC Kampala, Uganda, CC Entebbe, Uganda, Burundi, and CC La Habra, CA, recently held a conference in Kigali which drew more than 100 local pastors and leaders. Expounding on Acts 2:42 during the five-day conference, they emphasized the centrality of Christ, the Holy Spirit, servant leadership, faith and dependency on God, grace, worship, discipleship, a model of the Church, and the biblical qualifications of a leader. Each evening, the local pastors broke off into groups with the visiting teachers to pray and discuss in-depth the day’s lessons.

“The discussions in these groups were an insightful time,” said Mike Klunder, college pastor at CC La Habra. “Everyone asked questions that showed a genuine desire to know God’s plan. It was very encouraging.”

As the relationship between Pastor Francis’s Christ Church of Rwanda and several Calvary Chapels has continued, so have opportunities to minister. This past year CC La Habra joined Francis’s church in reaching out to the many children and teens in his neighborhood orphaned by the genocide and AIDS. The Abana Bumwami Foundation was birthed several years ago and provides education, school uniforms, and materials. The foundation also hosts a weekly gathering at the church for devotions and fun. Various families in the U.S are currently sponsoring over 120 young Rwandans.

Every week a team from Francis’s church visits these children, many who live by themselves with no adult supervision. “These kids have known only fear for most of their lives. We have an opportunity to share the life-changing message of salvation through Jesus Christ. That can change our country,” Francis said.

This summer, CC La Habra and CC Kampala will be hosting vacation Bible schools for the Abana Bumwami children. In the fall, various churches will send teachers to Rwanda for a leaders’ conference.



Children helped by the Rwanda church ministry sing Bible songs.

photo by Jason Stead