

Touching Hearts in New York

Calvary Chapel of Rochester

Story by Christmas M. Beeler
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

Near the cradle of Mormonism in New York State, a Calvary Chapel fellowship has been growing and thriving, drawing people from many different backgrounds together as one body under the verse-by-verse teaching of God's Word.

"Spiritually, it's a very interesting mixed bag in the Rochester area," said Pastor Geoff Brede of CC Rochester, NY. He explained that several factors in the community add up to a very liberal and lost culture.

One factor is its location: Rochester is near the city of Palmyra, where the angel Moroni allegedly visited Joseph Smith who then started the Mormon cult. Every year, Mormons gather from all over the country for an annual pageant. A liberal school of divinity in Rochester "embraces 'God' by whatever form or name you choose to worship him or her," Geoff said, adding that there are also many traditional churches which teach salvation based upon works instead of faith, God's grace, and Christ's finished work on the cross.

"But there's also a very strong movement of the Lord here, evident by the large number of Calvary Chapels in the area. Two outreaches have gone out from our fellowship," he said. On the west side of Rochester, Mark

and Theresa Mills started a church plant in 2007. Eight years ago, Scott and Joni Hathorn planted a church in Ithaca, nearly 90 miles southeast of Rochester.

Believers Pray for a Church

Geoff never intended to be a pastor. In the 1980s, he and his wife Linda were traveling weekly to Victor, NY, to attend Maranatha Chapel—now CC Finger Lakes. Bil Gallatin, then senior pastor, asked him to lead a midweek home Bible study in Rochester for the families who lived in the area. The Bible study grew steadily for a year, and people began praying that God would start a CC church there. "Lin and I were kind of shocked because that wasn't our intent," Geoff recalled. Another community invited Geoff to start a church, then Pastor Bil offered Geoff a position at his church. Geoff was overwhelmed by all the opportunities. "Bil encouraged us to just pray and seek the Lord. ... and that the Lord would begin closing doors," Geoff said. Soon, doors did close, and it was clear that he was to start a church. CC Rochester first met in October of 1984.

Reflecting on what God has done over the years, Geoff said, "I feel my role is not so much just to do the ministry but to help others discover their ministries and fulfill them."

Watching so many people in the fellowship step up to serve, plus the two families who have gone out to plant churches, he said, "just confirms that God is working through us as a body." He cited 1 Thessalonians 5:24, which says, "He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it."

Out of the "Dungeon"

As the CC Rochester fellowship grew over the years, they met in several different facilities before coming to their current location. One place they met was a nursery school. Geoff remembers that one of the classrooms was covered with Dungeons & Dragons paraphernalia, and the walls had to be covered with sheets to make it suitable for a Sunday school class.

"We never met the teacher, but we prayed for him continuously," Geoff remembered. "We asked the Lord to protect him and his students spiritually." Several years later, at their

current location, Geoff related in a message that they had prayed for a teacher who had Dungeons & Dragons on his wall at the nursery school. After the service, a man approached Geoff with tears in his eyes.

"Pastor Geoff, the teacher who encouraged kids to get into Dungeons & Dragons—that was me," confessed Steve Spezzano. Steve had come to Christ and started attending CC Rochester. He had no idea that it was CC Rochester who used to meet at the nursery school where he worked, or that the believers had prayed for him. Steve now has a passion for sharing Christ with the lost in Rochester, often taking Gospel tracts to area events.

"There were a lot of tears when we discovered what God had done," Geoff remembered.

Many other lives have been touched by the Lord at CC Rochester. Nearly 300 adults attend on Sunday, with 70-90 children. The church also has its own Christian school with nearly 60 students enrolled this fall in kindergarten through eighth grade.



Geoff Brede, senior pastor of CC Rochester, shares Scripture with Diane Boesel.

Taken from the Cobbs Hill Reservoir, this is the skyline view of downtown Rochester, NY, a city with more than 200,000 residents and nine colleges and universities. Rochester is also near Palmyra, the birthplace of Mormonism.



Pastor Geoff teaches from God's Word, the Bible.



Geoff's wife Linda, right, prays with Joilette Pearsall.



Tensu Hathorn, left, holds her son Aiden as Marva Barrett, center, and Meghan Seegler laugh with her at his antics. Tensu's in-laws, Scott and Joni Hathorn,

In the Hathorns' home, Scott began teaching the Bible on Sunday mornings while his wife Joni taught the children. Now their congregation of about 60 people meets in a hotel on Sundays and Wednesdays.

"Ithaca is home to Cornell University, which attracts graduate students from all over the world," Pastor Scott explained. He recalled struggling with his calling at one point: "I thought, 'Lord, who am I? I don't have a college education—and these people are sought throughout the world for their knowledge.'" Later that day, the Lord spoke to his heart the Scripture, "I have chosen you" (Haggai 2:23b). Scott added, "You need to make sure of your call [as a pastor], to have confirmation from the Word of God, and to know He has spoken to you. Then, when you are being challenged or despairing, you can stand on His Word."

Scott related that watching Geoff take steps of faith as the pastor at CC Rochester helped him to trust in the Lord. "He had a huge impact on me," Scott said. "I remember when Pastor Geoff decided not to take a salary for a while and just live by faith. ... That encouraged me when I felt God calling me to quit my job and step out. And He has provided, each step of the way." 🙌

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Pastor Geoff Brede

A Warm Welcome

"We have a very loving body of believers from many different cultures," said Pat Pettis, who has served on staff since 2001. "Our church is not so big that people can fall through the cracks, and it's warm enough that you will be greeted and welcomed when you come."

On Sunday mornings after the service, believers at CC Rochester can gather in the fellowship hall to enjoy a hot brunch and each other's company for about an hour before heading home.

Different groups of volunteers take turns preparing the meals, available for a small donation. "Now people don't have to leave after church to go eat. It's really awesome

because you can stay and talk, meet newcomers," Pat added. "People pray for each other and fellowship. The Lord's really been blessing it."

The church also supports mission works in Croatia, Israel, and Ethiopia. A young woman from Ethiopia came to their fellowship for a time before returning to Addis Ababa, the capital, in 2006. "We believe this happened in part because the Lord wanted us to be aware of that region of the world. We've been there twice and are planning a third trip this fall," Geoff said. "The churches are very weak in the Word of God and have been influenced by several false doctrines. So we've been working with pastors and elders, encouraging them to adopt a style

that's centered on the Scriptures." Speaking of Ethiopia and the spreading influence of Islam, Geoff explained, "The doors are open right now to share the Gospel. ... We just want to go encourage the saints there for as long as we're able."

A New Work in Ithaca

Scott Hathorn pastors a Calvary Chapel church plant started in Ithaca, NY, in 2000. He related that a family from Ithaca had attended CC Rochester and asked Pastor Geoff to start a similar work in their city. Geoff visited there for a few weeks, then asked his elders to pray about someone going to Ithaca to teach the Bible. Scott sensed the Lord was calling him and moved his family to Ithaca.



In a casual atmosphere, boys read along in their Bibles during youth night.



Pastor Ken Lang

Shepherding the Flock

Calvary Chapel Syracuse

Story by Christmas M. Beeler
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins



Enjoying an outdoor baptism and picnic on a beautiful summer day, Pastor Ken prays for the believers who are about to be baptized on the church grounds.

CC Syracuse

Ken Lang sat in the men's prayer meeting at CC Finger Lakes. He had been praying about whether to pursue advancement in his career or start a Bible study in Syracuse. He glanced down at Isaiah 6:8 and read the Lord's question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Suddenly a man in the room prayed aloud, "Father, You know who You want to go to Syracuse. Please direct that man whom You want to start the church."

Ken's eyes were fixed on the next phrase in the verse, Isaiah's response: "Here am I! Send me." The hairs on the back of his neck raised. His heart was pounding, and he felt a gentle prodding in his heart. All right, Lord, I'll go down there and meet the people, he prayed. After meeting the believers, he started teaching the next Sunday—March 1, 1992.

Growing Pains

Syracuse residents Dick and Cindy Howell had been praying that God would send a pastor to Syracuse to teach God's Word verse by verse. They had been going to a small

Bible study, but the leader returned to his home church in another city. They rejoiced when Ken and Lucy Lang came from CC Finger Lakes. Though a bit tentative in their new roles, the Langs shared God's Word and demonstrated Christ's love.

As the fellowship grew and moved into a larger facility, it also went through growing pains. Its most difficult time came when someone alleged that Ken was involved in financial impropriety. When individual members of the church approached Ken, he was able to share the truth with them. But many people simply believed what they had heard and left the church. "It felt like half our church left," Cindy Howell recollected. "My pastor never once pointed a finger or tried to get people on his side. ... He knew God was his Advocate and Defender. That left doors open, and we've had several people come back."

She added, "Those were painful times, but ... now we can look at each other and say, 'This is what it's supposed to be like.' This is what Jesus meant—that He wanted us to be one with each other as He was One with the Father."

Ken both teaches and exemplifies God's love described in 1 Corinthians 13, Cindy said.



An outward sign of faith, Eric Cohen is baptized.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,



was doing this for Christ and not for me.”

Turning Point

The next year, 1997, was a turning point—when Ken realized that being a pastor was not only about teaching at church but also ministering to people outside the church.

Ken remembered how he had walked nervously into the hospital for the first time as a visiting pastor one day in 1997. He tried to sound natural as he asked for the room number of an elderly woman named Angie. Her daughter, Laura, had asked Ken to visit her mother, who suffered from polio and was in her 70s.

Ken knocked on the door, entered, and introduced himself: “Hello, I’m Pastor Ken—I’m Laura’s pastor.” She invited him in.

Unsure of what to say, the pastor sat down next to the bed of the petite, frail-looking woman. She rolled her fragile frame to the edge of the bed, looked up at him with wide brown eyes, and smiled. The two of them began to talk about the Lord, and Angie was so grateful that someone had come to visit her.

“I walked out of there almost on a high,” Ken said. “I realized that this is what God had called me to do. And I enjoyed it; I enjoyed being with people. It was a big change in my perception of what He had called me to do as a pastor.” Ken cited Luke 4, where Jesus said He was anointed to “preach good news to the poor” and “to release the oppressed”

Each Sunday morning, believers are taught through God’s Word verse by verse.

and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:1-2

“He tells us that we can do all these things for God—missions, prayer groups—but if there’s not love in the body, then it’s not glorifying to God,” she said. “And when your pastor not only teaches it but lives it—as both he and Lucy do—then the whole body is affected.” As an example, Cindy cited their helps ministry, called “Mercy Works,” for which more people volunteer to help than there are opportunities for them to serve.

Slow Steps

Ken had wanted to be sure that his calling was from God and not his own desire to lead a church, so he took “slow steps” in planting the new fellowship. After two years, the Langs moved to Syracuse. Then in 1996, Ken quit his job at a nuclear power plant and became a full-time pastor. “All along the way, God validated His calling on my life,” Ken asserted. “I wanted to make sure I



Pastor Ken, center, fellowships with Chris Curtiss, left, and Kim Raterman, right, at a church picnic.

(verse 18, NIV). He added, “That doesn’t always mean in a sanctuary—it can mean in a hospital room or a funeral parlor.”

A New Way: Grace

Another believer in the church, Eddie Eagan, shared how God brought him out of legalism to a deep understanding of grace through verse-by-verse Bible teaching.

A successful investment advisor in Syracuse, Eddie had accepted Christ in 1979 and then attended a large, works-based church for nearly two decades. There his desire to serve God on the mission field had been discouraged by a church leadership that also publicly disciplined its members.

After visiting a Calvary Chapel in Florida in the early 1990s, Eddie returned to Syracuse and met Pastor Ken Lang who gave him a copy of Pastor Chuck Smith’s book, *Calvary Chapel Distinctives*.

Reading the book, Eddie realized that his former church had been lacking in balance and grace. He read:

“We believe in the love and grace that seeks to restore the fallen. There are some churches that are severely lacking in the grace of God [and have] a very harsh, inflexible, and severe form of legalism that allows no room for repentance and restoration” (Chuck Smith, *Calvary Chapel Distinctives*).

Ken also gave Eddie some teaching tapes from Jon Courson, pastor of Applegate

Christian Fellowship in Jacksonville, OR. Through Pastor Jon’s teaching, Eddie began to understand God’s grace in the daily life of a believer. While Eddie was serving in Honduras with his family, God rebuilt his concept of grace through the Word. “At my old church, there was no grace at all and no love on the part of the elders—it was all strict discipline and harshness. I lived with the feeling that I would never measure up,” he recalled. “When I finally got off that treadmill, it was so wonderful. I realized my acceptance from God wasn’t based on what I do but on what Christ did for me.”

Eddie cited John 1:17, which says, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” He emphasized, “In Him was grace and truth—you’ve got to have both to be balanced as a Christian.”

After returning from a year of serving the Lord in Honduras with his family, Eddie eventually became



Lucy Lang, right, pastor Ken’s wife, talks with Dorothy Clement.

missions’ director at CC Syracuse. Eddie’s desire to reach the lost in other countries is contagious, Ken said, adding, “Now we have a passion for missions as well.”



In north central New York, Rochester and Syracuse lie south of Lake Ontario.

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Sunday school director Tony DelPriore points out a Scripture verse to one of his students on a Sunday morning. Nearly 50 children regularly attend each week.



Patti Hill and daughter Libby chat with Bill King and daughter Kimberly after worship service.

“I realized that this is what God had called me to do. And I enjoyed it; I enjoyed being with people.”
 Pastor Ken Lang