

Calvary Austin

REACHING AN
UNCHURCHED COMMUNITY

Story by Kathy Blecker
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

A 26-year-old country/punk singer with dreadlocks, Bunjee Garrett walked into Calvary Austin expecting to be treated as he always was at churches—like he didn't belong. He had only come because his friend, Mike, a new Christian, had lured him there with the offer of a free breakfast. To Bunjee's surprise, he was warmly greeted by one of the elders and several other people that morning. In fact, they actually seemed excited to see him there. It was unlike any church experience he had ever had. As he sat listening to the verse-by-verse teaching from the Book of Galatians, he became aware and convicted of his sin. Later, when he was alone at work, he asked God to forgive him of his sins and surrendered his life to Jesus.

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Galatians 2:20

As he continued going to church and growing in his walk with the Lord, Bunjee became an intern at Calvary Austin. He eventually came on staff, serving primarily as the college pastor. In 2004, Bunjee started a monthly Bible study in South Austin. The following year, he was sent out by Calvary Austin to assume the role of senior pastor at Calvary South Austin.

And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-12

“During the seven years I was on staff at Calvary Austin, I learned about the ministry firsthand. Pastor Allen [Rigg] spent time every week discipling the leadership team. He encouraged us in our strengths and helped us work through our weaknesses. He also modeled the important balance between our ministry at church and our ministry at home,” Bunjee recalled. “But the most important thing that prepared me to pastor was seeing Pastor Allen simply teach the Word of God every Sunday and Wednesday.”

Sending Out Others

Since its start nearly 17 years ago, Calvary Austin has sent out 11 people to minister full time. Seven ministries are in the U.S., three in Europe, and one in Central America. Allen noted, “When I was younger, I imagined that it would be rewarding to be a pastor and watch people come to know Christ and see our church grow—and that is rewarding—but I never imagined the gratification that would come from sending people out.” Calvary Austin has sent short-term teams to Europe and plans to send a team to Honduras to support the work there among the street kids.



Senior Pastor Allen Rigg



At their new facility in Pflugerville, TX, Calvary Austin's main worship service is held on Saturday evening and twice on Sunday morning. Nearly 1,000 attend weekly.

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Pastor Allen Rigg



Assistant Pastor Mike Hardcastle, left, encourages other men.



In the church's main lobby, volunteers provide information while visitors browse shelves.



Assistant Pastor Darren Brock, right, talks about a premarital program with an engaged couple.

Relevant Teaching

One father in his mid-30s, Mike Hardcastle, and his family were attending a mainline denominational church when he first heard Allen teaching the Bible on the radio. Mike remembered, “He taught with a level of maturity and complexity. I thought, ‘This pastor teaches with the wisdom of an older man but with the vernacular of a younger guy.’” Discovering that Allen pastored a local church, the Hardcastle family decided to visit. Mike was astonished when his three sons came bounding out of their classes, excitedly explaining the deep truths they had learned. Mike liked the contemporary worship, applicable Bible teaching, and the freedom he felt. After attending the church for a while, Mike joined the staff five years ago. He has enjoyed watching his boys grow in the Lord through the children’s ministry, where they serve as junior helpers.

The First Calling

Senior pastor of Calvary Austin, Allen Rigg had been attending church his entire life before finally surrendering his heart to Jesus Christ at age 14. Allen recalled, “From that moment on, I knew this was what I wanted to do. Much of my decision was based on my admiration for my uncle [Pastor John Miller, CC San Bernardino, CA]. I wanted to be like him ... to do what he did. My uncle was a huge influence in my life—teaching me to love the Bible, to love good Christian

books, to read, and to study. I learned so much from him.”

In 1991, both Allen and his wife, Andrea, were on staff at CC San Bernardino and were praying about planting a church. After their long-time family friend—Pastor Skip Heitzig of CC Albuquerque, NM—suggested they start a work in Texas, the young couple set out for Austin later that fall. They were both 26 years old and expecting the birth of their daughter, Lauren, in a few months.

Allen began teaching a Bible study in their apartment on Thursday nights. As word spread about the verse-by-verse Bible teaching, the group began to grow. Soon, they relocated to a hotel, where they began meeting on Sunday mornings in June 1992. In 1998, they leased their own building, enabling them to establish their identity in the community.

During the past 10 years, Calvary Austin has grown from about 250 worshipers to nearly 1,000 every week. Throughout most of the 1990s, Allen’s messages were broadcast on Christian radio stations in the Austin area, which contributed significantly to the fellowship’s growth. The goal of the church, however, was not to reach the few who attend church on a monthly basis, but the estimated 750,000 people in the city of Austin who do not. “In most of Texas, about

60 percent of the population goes to church regularly; here in Austin, it’s more like 15 percent,” Allen said.

Reaching the Lost through Radio

The city of Austin, compared to the rest of Texas, is very liberal. It boasts a thriving live music scene and scores of technology-based corporations. The University of Texas itself has nearly 50,000 people, including Muslims, Hindus, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, atheists, and agnostics.

Stepping out in faith to reach the lost, Calvary Austin leaders decided to pull their teaching program off Christian radio and instead invest in reaching unbelievers through 60-second sound bites aired on secular radio stations. Pastor Allen said, “We’ve seen a shift. I think more of our growth now is coming from people who are new to the faith. ... The Great Commission is to make disciples, and that’s what we want to do.”

The church reached another significant milestone in fall 2007. After several failed attempts to purchase their own facility, the fellowship purchased a former grocery store for a price well under its worth. It is located in Pflugerville, a suburb of Austin, and sits strategically right next to a public high school. According to Darren Brock, assisting pastor at Calvary Austin, the new location



Patricia Kincade, right, and Rebecca Landwermeyer, center, have a time of fellowship with Toni Berke between services. Rebecca is holding Toni’s baby girl Edie.

“Austin is one of the most unchurched cities in America.”

Pastor Allen Rigg



Billie Logiudice leads the toddlers in worship.

has enabled the church to take a huge step forward in reaching the community.

Calvary Austin has reached out to their new neighborhood through a community coat drive and a food drive to help the impoverished in the area. Allen emphasized the church's desire to be “biblically faithful, culturally relevant, and socially aware” by teaching the Bible, worshiping in a modern music style, and tangibly helping the needy in the area. He explained, “Our mission is to change the community by changing lives.”

Discipling Children

Donna Cano became children's ministry director in 1997. Since then, she has seen many young lives changed. Nearly 220 elementary school children participate in the children's ministry each week. Many new families were visiting Calvary Austin this past Easter Sunday when 36 children

received Jesus Christ as Savior during the youth service.

Donna recalled another time when a little boy from the church had a terrible accident while away on a trip. He was severely debilitated, unable to walk or speak. The teachers and children prayed for him and sent cards to him. The boy mended quickly, regaining the ability to walk and talk much sooner than expected. Two months after the accident, the boy walked into class on his own. The teacher, with tears in his eyes, stopped his lesson. All of the children began applauding. They recognized that God had done a marvelous work and that they were a part of it.

Helping Believers Grow

While outreach plays an important role in the life of Calvary Austin, there is also a strong emphasis on discipleship. The leadership at

Calvary Austin encourages believers to take three steps: First, to “step in” by attending on a regular basis; second, to “step out” by participating in a small group; and third, to “step up” by serving in one of the ministries. To keep people connected, the church offers a 30-minute class every month for each of the three steps.

There are also small “Life Groups” with 10-15 people meeting together regularly in a home for fellowship, Bible study, and prayer. Life Groups are broken down into either application groups or study groups. Application groups help people apply the message they heard on the weekend. Study groups help people grow in their knowledge of the Bible or of a particular topic. For example, there is usually a study group for new believers. Application groups are open-ended, while study groups run on a semester basis in the spring and fall.

Chelan René Russ and her husband grew up in Christian homes and desired to find a church that would challenge them spiritually. “God has used Allen [to] bring forth the Word with conviction, yet with a little humor,” Chelan said. “You want to keep listening, soaking it in, and coming back. It's brought a lot more interest and excitement to reading the Word.” Chelan also noted that being involved in a Life Group and the women's Bible study has helped her connect with others at the church.

Another newcomer, Kelly McFarland, commented about the impact of verse-by-verse Bible teaching: “It's such a learning experience. It almost feels like I'm going to school. It's made me want to do more research: I go home and study because I want to know more.” Kelly also appreciates the way people at the fellowship have reached out to her husband, who is not a believer.



John Adams, right, encourages children in the Word of God during Sunday school. Students raise their hands to answer a Bible question.



John Landwermeyer helps young C. J. Garcia find a verse in Scripture.

not announced, they shall see; and those who have not heard shall understand.”
Romans 15:20-21



Austin, in central Texas, is the state capital and has 700,000-plus residents.

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Local “Mission Field”

With their new ideal location and an auditorium reminiscent of local music venues, Calvary Austin believers are praying about how to connect with the high school students right next door. “We'd love to open the building to kids after school and hang out [as a way to] meet them and develop relationships with them,” Pastor Allen said. “Austin is one of the most unchurched cities in America. Thousands are not thinking about God. We really want to reach the unreached people here with the Gospel. ... Andrea and I saw Austin as a mission field; that's why we came.”

And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation, but as it is written: “To whom He was