



Students at Greenville Elementary School walk to one of three mobile Released Time Christian Education (RTCE) classrooms, where God's Word is taught.

Released Time Christian Education



Pastor John Atkinson, senior pastor of CC North Long Beach.

Through Released Time Christian Education, many children are taught the Bible in mobile classrooms each week in Southern California.



Children at Garfield Elementary School raise their hands to answer Bible questions during RTCE class. Classes are held off of school property to comply with state laws.

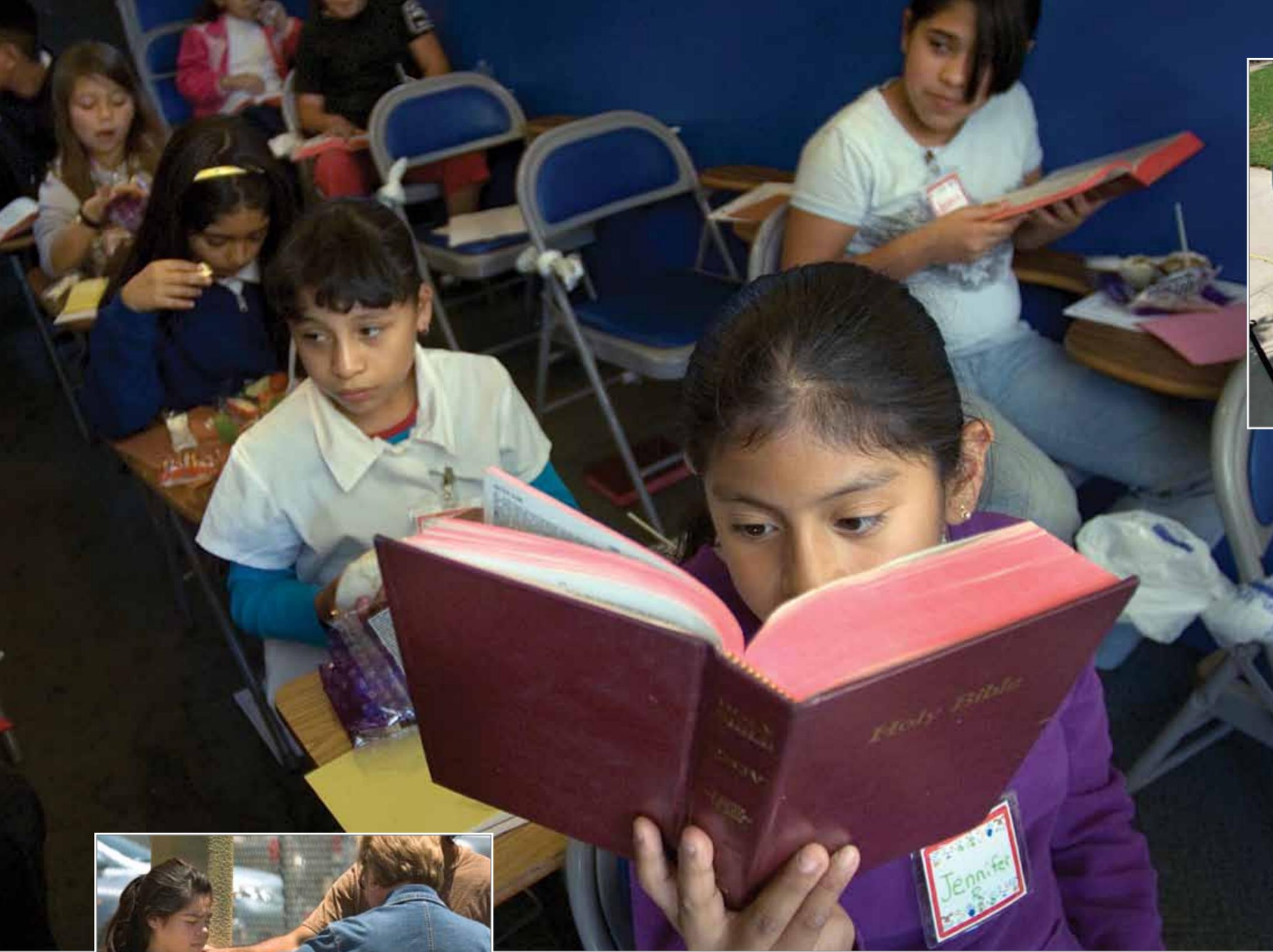


A Released Time student recites a verse in 2 Corinthians as teacher Rika Wallace of CC Costa Mesa holds the verse above.

Story by Sarah Yardley
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

Timothy sat in the front of his fourth grade class, his eyes filling with tears. Angels, camels, donkeys, and a baby born in a stable had seemed to captivate the thoughts of his other classmates as teacher Janie McLaughlin told the story of Jesus' birth. Troubled, Timothy raised his hand.

"Is this story true? Why have I never heard it before?" The narrative account had seemed too good to be factual to the small fourth grader—maybe another hoax of the holidays.



Andy Durate of CC Costa Mesa distributes and records lunches given to RTCE students. The ministry provides a lunch that is subsidized by the school district.

Timothy had never been to church and lives in one of the poorer areas of Santa Ana, CA.

The common initial reaction to this program is one that was shared by Pastor John Atkinson of CC North Long Beach when he first heard of it: "Isn't that illegal?" As one of the Calvary Chapels first involved in the program, Pastor John and his wife, Sally, learned that Released Time Christian Education is far from illegal.

Public school students began attending released time classes in 1914. The practice was challenged but was approved by the Supreme Court, and most states have passed laws establishing a released time policy. Public school students are allowed to attend with parental permission but instruction must take place off school property (in a trailer, school bus, or even a home).

With a program in place, the door is literally open for the Gospel to be shared in 'one of the greatest mission fields in America: children in our public schools.' Several Calvary

Chapels have taken advantage of this open door. CC North Long Beach has been very active with this ministry since its inception in 1994.

"When we began teaching 23 years ago, our house was across the street from the public school, and our home became our classroom," John recalled. While John's wife, Sally, still teaches that same age group in their house each week to this day, the Atkinsons now have a much wider sphere of influence. John oversees the Released Time program in the Southern California school districts of Long Beach, Compton, and Bellflower. Together John and Sally operate a ministry and website that serves Released Time teachers and parents on a national level.

In the Long Beach area, the teachers include three senior pastors from two Calvary Chapels and one local non-denominational church, as well as Sunday school teachers and ministry leaders. At CC Costa Mesa, the Released Time program has been an outreach to the schools of Santa Ana for



Janie McLaughlin of CC Costa Mesa, right, now a volunteer, prays for a student at Lowell Elementary.

Jennifer and her classmates at Lowell Elementary School follow along in the Bible while they eat their lunch, which is provided.



Janie McLaughlin

Janie reassured her young student of the validity of the Bible story. After class, she spent time communicating to Timothy the wonderful message of hope and love and eternal life that came that first Christmas. Later when he was ready, Janie led Timothy in a prayer to receive Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior.

A salvation is precious every time, but this story might be less extraordinary were it not for the setting and the students. Timothy was one of about 20 public school students "released" during school hours to the Bible study. The classroom was a small trailer that houses the students on the curb outside of school property. Like many of the students,

"But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 19:14





Jane Roberts, who has volunteered for four years, has a special moment with a student at Greenville Elementary as they walk together to the mobile classroom. The program allows children to develop close bonds with their teachers as mentors.

*Train up a child in the way he should go,
and when he is old he will not depart from it.*

Proverbs 22:6



Pastor John Atkinson teaches in a bus at one of RTCE's locations organized by CC North Long Beach. He and his wife, Sally, have been teaching RTCE for 23 years.

the past nine years, and in the words of former director Janie McLaughlin, "It has been incredible to watch how the Lord fills the spots where we need teachers. He always brought them in answer to our prayers. Often someone would tell us they could only teach for two or three weeks, and as we would begin praying, a new teacher or volunteer would walk through the door."

Teaching God's Word to public school students is a remarkable opportunity, which comes with its own challenges and difficulties. Janie shared, "We once had little boys who would bring knives to class each week. By the end of the year, those same boys had given their hearts to the Lord and their attitudes had completely changed."

The Released Time classes also provide an opportunity to reach the parents and whole families through the testimonies of their children. One parent wrote, "My daughters were blessed to have John and Sally Atkinson as their leaders. I witnessed them teach the Gospel with every Bible study in a winsome, loving way."

Often the children within this program come from broken and difficult home backgrounds. Last year, one of the students in the Santa Ana program was spending time with his father at a park. As they stood in front of their house, a local gang drove by, shooting and killing the father as the son held his hand. In an instant, this small boy's world was torn

apart, and the teachers in the Released Time program were able to reach out to him.

As Janie said, "Through the tragedy of this loss, we had an opportunity to go into the home of this child, minister to his family in Jesus' name, and make a difference in their lives." While not every story is as dramatic as this one, the children's decisions for Christ often impact their families.

As a sower who casts the seed, many of the teachers do not know if their lessons will bring forth fruit, some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred (Mark 4:20), but they are faithful to proclaim God's Word to students each week. One child within the Long Beach program gave his life to Christ



A student prays at a RTCE class conducted by CC North Long Beach.

Photo by Jon Rogers

and came home each week eager to share the Bible stories that he had learned in his classroom. Over several months, he shared the Good News with his aunt, who in turn gave her life to Jesus. Today, she directs the Child Evangelism Fellowship program in Long Beach, reaching hundreds more with the Gospel.

A unique opportunity of this program is the chance to reach students in their formative years. A Scripture that has defined the program at CC Costa Mesa is, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." (Proverbs 22:6)

As Janie shared, "I came to know the Lord personally at age six, and I know that these children certainly have the ability to understand what we are teaching them and make decisions for Christ." Every year, there are hundreds of first-time decisions for Christ through the program.

Out of those hundreds, each one is a vibrant possibility of a life for Christ. At the end of last year, one student summed up her experience in Released Time in this way: "I would just like to say thank you for teaching us, even though sometimes there aren't many people coming to our class. You have taught me many things about the Bible. Thank you very much."

The open door to preach the Gospel in public schools is incredible, and for many of the teachers, what makes it all worthwhile is watching the joy and discovery on their student's faces as they hear the stories of Scripture unfolded for the very first time. Sacrifices in time and the warfare that accompanies these classes is all worth it when a young fourth grader, like the one at Jefferson School in Santa Ana, comes bounding up to the bus, grinning ear to ear, and yells, "I just can't wait to learn about JESUS today!"

Photo courtesy of CC North Long Beach

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