

# servicing those without a shepherd

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For nearly two years, Calvary Chapel Cape Coral in southern Florida has been ministering to adults with special needs through weekly Bible classes. More than 30 people have attended the lessons, which incorporate games, crafts, and music.

One morning after the Bible story, a middle-aged woman named Christina was one of several who rose from her seat for class prayer time. Closing her eyes, Christina enthusiastically clasped her hands together. “Jesus, please forgive me and come live in my heart,” she began earnestly. Terry Mercurio, a believer who has helped with the lessons since their inception, quietly rejoiced. Christina’s heartfelt words demonstrated the transformation Terry had been noticing: Instead of approaching God with minor requests, the participants were beginning to pray for deeper personal and family needs.

## Serving on the Road Less Traveled

A unique invitation opened the door for this ministry, explained Pastor Chris Jennings. Two years ago, CC Cape Coral moved into a storefront building. An adult training center called New Beginnings was next door, and one day the director visited the pastor. “She came over and asked us to do a church service for the clients,” recalled Chris.

Though the idea had not occurred to him, Chris said he immediately thought, “How could I not do it?” He knew the high value Jesus placed on serving those in need—He had said it was actually serving Him. Chris began to plan the classes, and he discovered that his past experience teaching hearing-impaired children prepared him well. God’s heart for those with special needs became gradually more evident to him:

*But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest.”*

Matthew 9:36-38

“Some don’t see the harvest that is out there,” commented Chris. “When churches start various ministries, a lot of people are often left out. Like sheep without a shepherd, many have no one to direct them in their walk with the Lord. But no one should be left out. ... The biblical mandate is to share the Gospel with all people.”

Terry Mercurio, the volunteer who has served with the special-needs ministry since it began, has an infectious passion for the clients: “These are the Lord’s people, and we need to show them a tangible example of His love,” she said. “Giving a hug, holding a hand, patting a back—these things all really show God’s love to them.”

## Eager to Learn

Today, the class draws nearly 30 people, about half of New Beginnings’ clients. The men and women range in age from their 20s to their 70s. “They come in all smiles,” Terry related, “and when they leave they say, ‘We’ll



Pastor Chris assists Johnny Abdalah during an activity.



Terry Mercurio, center, of CC Cape Coral, gives words of encouragement to participants after Bible class.



Chris’ son, Josh, and daughter, Christine, help him direct a learning game about grace.



During prayer time at the end of a weekly Bible class, Pastor Chris Jennings, center, of CC Cape Coral, FL, is joined by Jimmy Hogrefe and Penny Pendleton. Chris teaches clients from an adult day training center located near the church. Participants have grown in their relationships with Jesus.



**During a teaching game, Chris interacts with Shatoya Brown while wearing “grace-colored glasses.” The attendees eagerly anticipate the Bible lessons, and they love to participate in the games and activities that illustrate the truths they are learning.**

see you next week,’ like they can hardly wait.” The services last for about 45 minutes and include songs using sign language for those who are nonverbal. A handful of volunteers from the church assist.

The church uses the Calvary Chapel Sunday school curriculum from CC Costa Mesa, CA. Chris explained that “the curriculum makes one clear point in each lesson.” It begins with a single Bible passage and proceeds to activities that reinforce the text’s central message. He feels this is effective for the ministry because “there are different degrees of attentiveness and comprehension from person to person. Our goal is to communicate as much truth as we can, on all different levels.”

In early 2008, the class began studying the life of Jesus. The group then continued with the Book of Acts, using a DVD series called *The Visual Bible* to bring to life the events of

the early church. The participants showed great enthusiasm for the Bible stories, Terry related. One day as Chris turned off the DVD, Christina exclaimed, “So I have to know, how does this story end?”

The class is currently studying the Book of Romans. “It’s challenging because this material is more theological,” said Chris, “But it’s also exciting because I get to focus more on sharing ... about trusting in Jesus Christ.”

### **Connecting**

Michele is a New Beginnings employee who has worked with developmentally disabled adults for more than 20 years. Regarding the classes, Michele said, “I thought it was a really good idea. They like to get out and do things that anyone else would do.”

Michele chaperones the participants to the church and sits in during the lessons. “Chris

does games with them, shows a movie, or interacts with the group using the dry-erase board,” commented Michele. “He explains things in ways that they will understand.”

Christina said that at the classes, “I learn about believing in Christ.” She added, “Pastor Chris is nice. I like his preaching.”

Melisa, another program participant, said, “I like to pray and to do things together with other people. I want to keep going to Bible class.” Pastor Chris and the believers at CC Cape Coral plan to keep the lessons going on a regular basis. ↩

### **Calvary Chapel Cape Coral**

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