

Personal Testimony: Jeff Schlenz

Story by Debra Smith

Pastor's Journey to Military Chaplaincy



Jeff Schlenz

One Sunday morning in 1997 at Calvary Chapel Oceanside, CA, Jeff Schlenz was fighting a spiritual battle. During worship, "God radically grabbed hold of me," said Jeff. "I was sitting there trying to keep it together and look impressive, with my obvious military haircut. But I was sobbing. God was convicting me of trying to meet Him on my own terms. I felt He was telling me to give my life to Him and serve Him entirely."

Jeff had grown up attending church in Southern California, but his life had remained his own—not the Lord's. When he joined the Marine Corps in 1993, "I completely fell into the things of the world," said Jeff. Stationed first in Japan and then back in Southern California, he was consumed in both locations by drinking and clubbing. But all along, "I had this conviction, this gnawing in my spirit. Because of my years in youth group, I knew what I was doing was wrong. But I wasn't ready to give it up."

After four years, Jeff grew tired of partying. Asking himself when life had been the best, he realized that high school—when he was active in youth group—had been his most fulfilling stage of life. "So I decided to try to come to God," said Jeff, "on my own terms." He began listening to Bible teaching on KWVE, CC Costa Mesa's Southern California radio station.

"I wanted to hear what God had to say," Jeff explained, "but I wanted to do life my way." However, one Sunday he decided to attend church. He opened a phone book and noticed a Calvary Chapel, which sounded familiar because of KWVE. Later that morning, Jeff arrived at CC Oceanside and surrendered completely to God.

During the next four years in the military, "I had some of the greatest ministry opportunities among the guys I worked with," Jeff said. "I would be at the rifle range or driving when someone would look over and ask, 'What does it mean to be born again?'"

Other doors opened, including teaching a Bible study for college students in Hemet, CA, where he met his wife Madeleine. Then in 2001, "I felt compelled by the Lord to leave the military," Jeff said. He pursued a bachelor's degree and began serving in Far Reaching Ministries' home office in Murrieta, CA. He sensed that God was preparing him for further ministry, he just didn't know what.

For years, Jeff had considered becoming a military chaplain. But chaplaincy requires a seminary degree, which Jeff felt would be financially impossible to earn while supporting his family. Also, chaplains must be backed by an organization registered with the military as an endorsing agent. At the time, Calvary Chapel wasn't.

Then in 2004, Calvary Chapel became certified as an endorsing agent. All Jeff needed to join the chaplaincy was a master's degree. The bachelor's he had recently earned, hoping to reenter the military as an officer, instead served as a prerequisite for him to begin seminary. The degree was "the first of a long series," said Jeff, "of my attempting something good—and then God using it for a different purpose than I planned."

Then, "Several things came together at once," Jeff recalled. The Schlenz's home in California had tripled in value; selling it enabled them to purchase a home in Virginia and pay Jeff's tuition. The family began serving at CC Lynchburg, VA. Jeff earned a three-year degree in two years and completed a summer internship as the top chaplain candidate in his class.

Madeleine was pregnant with their second son when Jeff graduated with honors, ready to enter the chaplaincy. He submitted his application to the Air Force—and learned that, because of an administrative dilemma, the armed services no longer recognized Calvary Chapel as an endorsing agent. "I had resigned from ministry, moved my family across the country, and gone to seminary," said Jeff. "I wasn't working, and I had no idea what to do or where to go."

Soon, he was outside sweating in the heat and humidity, swinging a sledgehammer on a construction site. "We spent the next year wandering in the wilderness," Jeff said. "God spoke to us about emptying ourselves of all personal ambition." He continues to be reminded that his personal agenda is subject to God by Ephesians 3:1b: "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—"

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In May of 2008, Jeff was asked to become senior pastor of Calvary Chapel D.C. Metro. Shortly after he accepted the pastorate, Calvary Chapel became registered again to endorse chaplains. He applied with the Reserves and now serves at Pope Air Force Base, NC, three weeks out of the year. Jeff remarked, "Looking back on what God has done, it's a phenomenal fit." He cited his experiences in two military branches and higher education as characteristics that make him relatable to the people of CC D.C. Metro, many of whom are in the military or have graduate degrees. "It's interesting the way God was working everything together—even far back in the past," he said. ↩



Pastor Jeff teaches on Luke 10 at CC D.C. Metro, which meets in a middle school. Photo by Jen Chang