

Full Circle: Irish Teen Reached by American Team Now Impacts Youth in U.S.



Story by Gary Howell

In July 1996, 12-year-old Chris Kavanagh of Dublin, Ireland, heard that a team of missionaries had come to town with free gifts. The believers had traveled from CC Riverside, NJ, and CC King's Highway, Philadelphia, PA, to host a Vacation Bible School and basketball clinic. Upon showing up, Chris found that though the rumors about physical gifts were inaccurate, the gift of salvation in Jesus was freely available.

Team leader Steve Smith, pastor of CC Riverside, prayed with Chris when he accepted the Lord during that week of friendship and fun. But once the group left, Chris found himself asking, *Now what?* His surroundings in Tallaght, a town in southwest Dublin, included more drugs, crime, broken homes, and teen pregnancies than Bible teaching. Attending the church the Americans had directed him to required too much effort, and he didn't spend much time reading the Bible they had given him.

Every July, the team returned to Dublin, and each summer, Chris eagerly joined them. As he grew older, he helped coach basketball and lead VBS. But they always stayed just one week, and Chris then returned to the streets of Tallaght. When Chris was 15, Pastor Steve sent him an application for CC Bible College in Murrieta, CA. Steve included a message saying, "In the future, you'll probably want to go to this."

Steve continued sending a Bible college application every year; each time, Chris disregarded it. "I thought I would never leave Ireland," Chris explained. He soon became involved with drugs and theft, and within a few years, six friends had died of heroin overdoses. Chris gradually began asking himself, *What am I going to do with my life?* One particular night brought him to a point of decision. During an argument over drug money that Chris owed, a young man wielding a sawed-off shotgun shot him in the ankle. Escaping with his life and several pellet-sized puncture wounds, Chris saw the encounter as a wake-up call. *My life needs fixing*, the 17-year-old realized.

Lying on a hospital bed that night, Chris thought of the believers who visited every

summer. They talked about choosing to follow the Lord and conscientiously walking away from sin. Chris prayed, "Lord, help me. I need to pay this money I owe, but I don't know how. If You will help me find a way, I will follow You."

Chris' parents did not know until that night that he used drugs. The next morning, they returned to the hospital and told Chris they had located the drug dealer and paid the debt. After leaving the hospital, Chris walked away from street life. He began attending a small church where he met other young people who loved the Lord. There, for the first time, Chris saw people living everyday life by faith in Christ.

That fall, Steve again sent a Bible college application—and this time, Chris filled it out and mailed it. He soon left the only town he had ever known and headed overseas. After arriving in California, Chris immediately faced heartbreak: Pastor Steve died of cancer during his first semester, and Chris' oldest sister died of a heroin overdose in Ireland during his second. Chris struggled to see where God was leading him, but he felt that God was directing him to trust and pay attention to His guidance.

At the Bible college, Chris met and began dating Emily Vanover. After graduation, Emily returned to her parents' home in central Tennessee and Chris to Ireland, both praying for open doors to marry and to go into ministry. Two months later, Pastor Jerry McNulty of CC Rivergate in Goodlettsville, TN, invited Chris to become an intern—at the very church where Emily's parents both serve. Chris moved to Goodlettsville, where he and Emily married in 2008 and Chris became youth pastor later that year. "Emily and I love what we do," Chris said. "It excites me to see kids worship the Lord—when teens raise their hands and don't care who's around. We live in a generation that's more about 'me.' Seeing kids say to God, 'I want what You want, not what I want,' is phenomenal."

This past summer, CC King's Highway's leadership asked Chris to join them on their annual mission trip through which he had

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come to Christ 13 years prior. He, six teens, and an adult from CC Rivergate traveled to Ireland alongside believers from CC King's Highway. The team led a five-day discipleship group in Dublin.

"Discipleship is a cycle," Chris explained. "I was saved through the ministry of others; now we're pouring into these teens, and we want them to turn around and train others." Among the Irish attendees were several youth who were saved during recent years' trips. Chris also shared his testimony with about 40 teens, and six accepted the Lord.

Chris hopes to take more mission trips to Ireland and eventually to move back. "Emily and I talk about it often," he said. "Our hearts are for Ireland."

"I didn't get saved because people told me Bible verses," Chris continued. "I came to the Lord because the missionaries who came to Ireland—they just loved me." Looking back on his life, Chris added, "I wasn't always faithful to the Lord—but He has always been faithful to me." 🙌



Chris prays for CC Rivergate, TN, teen Alan Campman.