

Holding Fast to God's Word

Story by Debra Smith
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

Serving their community for 38 years, Calvary Chapel Downey in Southern California has reached thousands with sound Bible teaching.

In 1973, CC Downey, CA, became one of the earliest churches born into the Calvary Chapel family of fellowships. Planted amidst the Jesus People movement, during which thousands of hippies turned toward Christ, the church quickly began growing explosively. But in those busy years of ministry, recounted Pastor Jeff Johnson, "I got into an affair. Not with a woman, but with the church. I neglected my family." When Jeff became aware of his mistake, "I had to repent and change my actions to love my wife as Christ loved the church," he continued.

The Calvary Chapel in Downey, a city on the southeastern side of Los Angeles, CA, was planted by Jeff and his wife Karyn after they were discipled at the original Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, CA. CC Downey's first meeting almost four decades ago was attended by 10 people, and average Sunday attendance is now around 8,000. The church's ministries include prison outreach, evangelistic events, Calvary Chapel Christian School, a café, a radio program called Sound Doctrine, prayer chains, Sunday school for the developmentally

delayed, and residential discipleship for those battling substance abuse.

Seeking, Finding, and Founding

As a teen, Jeff began using marijuana and New Age meditation to pursue unity with the divine. Drugs, however, brought him a brief imprisonment in California at age 18 and a near-death experience in a Hawaiian jungle at 20. After he and Karyn were married in 1969, they were taken to church by a friend of Jeff's—his former drug supplier, who had come to know Jesus that week through friends. As Jeff sat and listened as the Gospel was explained at the service, he said, "I realized I had tried everything but Jesus." He accepted Christ that night. But Karyn considered Christians weird and fanatical, and she was disgusted when Jeff discarded his drugs upon their arrival home. She also became quickly irritated by his new habits of church attendance and Bible reading. "At least when you took drugs, you were here at home," she told him—instead of away at frequent Bible studies. Half a year after Jeff's conversion, Karyn filed for divorce and left with daughter Christy. Months later,



Pastor Jeff Johnson of CC Downey, CA, encourages a family after a Sunday service.



During a pause between worship songs, fathers stand as Jeff prays for them on Father's Day. The church began with 10 people meeting outside in a public park in 1973.



People leave CC Downey after one of the church's two Sunday morning services.



Sunday school teachers Robbie and Nancy Boyd lead 2nd graders in worship. The couple feels called by God to provide children with all aspects of church, including prayer for one another, worship, financial giving, and Bible lessons.

though, she surrendered to Christ, and the two had a second wedding in 1971.

For the next two years, the couple attended CC Costa Mesa, CA. There they were trained in God's Word by Pastor Chuck Smith, whose simple verse-by-verse teaching attracted thousands of countercultural Christian hippies termed "Jesus Freaks." But the Johnsons were driving more than 30 minutes south from Downey to the church, and Jeff felt burdened to reach his own area. After prayer and counsel from Pastor Chuck, Jeff and Karyn held CC Downey's first service outside in Furman Park in May 1973. The group rented a building once the area's rainy winter arrived, and rapid growth over the following years prompted move after move.

Raising Up Kids and Reaching Out to Youth

After beginning to attend CC Downey six years ago, Robbie and Nancy Boyd started teaching 2nd grade Sunday school together in 2007. The couple typically worships and hears the Bible taught alongside other adults at the early service, then winds through the massive church-and-school's hallways to the classroom where they teach during the late service. After leading the kids in group prayer and musical worship, the two take turns giving the Bible lesson. On one of Nancy's Sundays when the class was studying the New Testament Book of Hebrews, the day's lesson included a quotation from the Old Testament Book of Joshua—which the class had studied the year prior.

For He Himself [God] has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

Hebrews 13:5b
(Quotation from Joshua 1:5)

"Now," Nancy asked her students, "where have we heard this promise before?" The class of 15-20 grew silent for a split second. Nancy later recalled, "Then a little boy said, 'Joshua!' and I got so excited. I thought, *They're getting it! They're learning.* That moment reminded me that the time and energy spent preparing are worth it—the kids really do take in what we teach them."

CC Downey has also recently strengthened its efforts to reach the area's youth. "The teens aren't coming to us, so we need to go to them," said Pastor Jeff. "The high schools are open. Many have Christian principals, and some are begging us to come share Jesus." The church recently hosted a concert involving Christian group the Whosoovers. The event, which was held on an east Los Angeles public school's football field, required staging, lighting, and hired security. "About 2,000 kids showed up, and hundreds came to know the Lord," Jeff said. "It fired us up to go into the high schools." Two similar concerts are planned for the spring.



People lay hands on dads as the congregation prays for them on Father's Day 2010.



Jeff greets children, one with a ring pop, after Sunday service. The church of about 8,000 is a half-hour south of Los Angeles, CA.



Students follow along as a Sunday school teacher reads Scripture. Because numerous families both attend CC Downey and educate their children at Calvary Chapel Christian School, many feel the campus is like a small community amidst a large city.

The Other Side of Prison Bars

Associate Pastor Mark Maciel, who currently oversees CC Downey’s publishing and radio ministries, began adult life in a Southern California prison at age 18. “I had almost killed someone,” Mark said. “Once convicted, I blamed God—and a lot of people. I felt my life was gone, ruined.” Mark’s large family had been traditionally religious, but he didn’t know God personally. “And I didn’t care for Christians,” Mark added. “I thought they were hypocritical phonies.” Yet in prison, Mark met numerous Christians who challenged him to recognize his own sinfulness and need for Jesus’ forgiveness. After two years, Mark gave his life to the Lord at a chapel service. During his last year of incarceration, Mark began prison ministry from prison. With the supervision of officers from his own penitentiary, he visited other prisons and churches sharing how Christ had empowered him to give up a lifestyle of violence and revenge. Once released in 1981, Mark was well connected with area churches—including CC Downey.

Mark had spoken at the church before his release, and he respected Pastor Jeff’s vision. “Jeff is ingenious about how to reach the community,” Mark said. Desiring to participate in the church and its fledgling prison ministry, Mark moved in with his father in Downey. He soon met his future wife Patricia at the fellowship, and the two were married by Darrell Sutton—the prison chaplain during whose sermon Mark had accepted Christ in 1980.



A middle school mission team from CC Downey’s Calvary Chapel Christian School (CCCS) prays before an outreach in Pisco, Peru. Photo by Amanda Mendez

When the state offered Mark a part-time chaplaincy, CC Downey committed to pay the other half of a salary so he could quit truck driving and serve full time. Under Mark’s leadership, the church’s New Life Prison Ministry began not only reaching inmates, but equipping other fellowships to do so. In the decades since, CC Downey has sent Mark out both domestically and internationally, helping churches establish or strengthen ministries to reach prisoners with Jesus’ message. ✚

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me [Jesus], because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor ... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

Isaiah 61:1



CCCS 6th grader Harmony Buffington, right, plays a game with a Peruvian girl.

Photo by Amanda Mendez

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