

Calvary Chapel Newport News

Multicultural Church Makes Disciples, Encourages Military Families

Story by Christmas M. Beeler
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins



Pastor Tony Clark

Bringing the Bible to the Bible Belt

Tony Clark was serving at CC Vista, CA, when his friend, Pastor Joey Buran, told him of the need and urged him to plant a church on the East Coast. At first, Tony responded, "Calvary Chapels are needed everywhere." As Tony learned that people were driving an hour and a half to go to the CC in Virginia Beach, he and his wife Jenise began praying about God's calling. In September of 1994, Tony visited; a month later, he moved there for good to plant CC Newport News, VA.

"We saw that this area was very religious," Tony said. "People commonly go

to church and think they are Christians; but there was a lack of the teaching of the Word of God. There was a lot of spiritual immaturity; only the Word of God can cause people to grow."

Desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

1 Peter 2:2b

Even though Tony had never lived on the East Coast, he sees several reasons why God has used him to minister in the Newport News area. "It's a big military community, and I'm a former Marine. It has been a good fit for me because I understand the military culture," he said.

Assistant Pastor Jim Alcodray added, "Pastor Tony has done a phenomenal job of bringing the Calvary Chapel style here and blending it with the culture of this area."

Having served with him in Vista, Jim joined Tony in the ministry at Newport News in 1996. Jim recalled, "He had to break a lot of barriers: People were used to the name-it-and-claim-it style of teaching. ... They weren't used to someone making the Bible plain and relevant to their lives. If you ask people what they like about coming here, most will say it's because Pastor Tony teaches the Word."

Tony's radio program, *The Word Made Plain*, is aired around the country, locally,

and on the Internet. Many have been drawn to the church for the simple, verse-by-verse teaching.

A Multicultural, Diverse Body

In an area where many churches consist primarily of one culture or race, Jim added, "We have a lot of diversity in our church. People have seen that we have an African-American pastor and executive pastors who are white or Hispanic. My wife is African-American; our worship leader's wife is Korean."

Freedom from cultural and racial barriers has always been important in the fellowship. "We create a atmosphere of acceptance here," Pastor Tony said. "We want biracial couples and people



Beulah Everett, right, and Zee Reynolds worship during service.

CC Newport News worship team leads the congregation in song.

from different cultures to feel welcome.” Because the church is near bases for several branches of the military, as well as a center for African refugees, the fellowship has people from dozens of countries.

“There is a difference between being multicultural and just being multicolored. Multicultural is when you celebrate the different cultures together instead of trying to make them all act the same,” Tony said. “We have nearly 30 flags in our sanctuary to show the various countries of the people in our church. In September we have International Sunday: After service, you bring a dish from your native land and we all get to sample it. It’s a great time of fellowship. We also have different people take part in the service. They greet us in their native tongue, translate it, and then give the announcements.” Some people speak three or more languages.

During the Sunday morning message, the teaching is translated simultaneously into Swahili so listeners from East Africa can understand it while wearing headsets.

Healthy Ministers and Ministry

That first Sunday in October 1994, there were more than 30 adults and 20 children. Now there are nearly 1,400 people attending CC Newport News every week. With a growing body and a high turnover rate due to the military lifestyle, the pastors have learned ways to keep themselves and the ministry spiritually healthy.

“I’ll never forget the time, from 2002 to 2003, when we moved from our smaller building into our larger building,” Tony said. “We moved into a sanctuary at least four times the size of our old one, and we were going back to one service. But four months later, the church doubled. Within a year, we were back to three services.”

While he was rejoicing to see all of the new families coming, Tony was also going through a personal time of spiritual burnout and exhaustion.

“It was April 2003. I almost burned out of ministry because it was growing faster than I could replenish myself spiritually. I hit the wall, and it scared me,” he recalled. He took a week off. “I sat in my backyard, listened to the birds, listened to some teaching, and tried to refresh myself in the Lord. I realize now I should have taken more time.”

He added, “When you’re teaching several services a week, you can become a sermon-making machine. There were days, especially when I was teaching on Sunday morning and Sunday night, that all I was doing was preparing sermons. I wasn’t getting in the Word to have my own time with the Lord. I was in the Word to produce another sermon. It became a taskmaster; it was whipping me good.” He added, “I was getting tired in the work but not of the work.”

That season taught him several things: to make time for his personal relationship with

the Lord and his family, to raise up others to be teachers, and to trust God to take care of His church without holding too tightly to the reins.

“I’m still teaching, but I’m watching and monitoring my personal life more than I used to. I’ve also set aside a certain amount of time to just be with the Lord as opposed to studying for a sermon,” Tony said. “I allow the guys I’m training to get their feet wet and teach; and now that our children are grown, my wife and I go away together.”

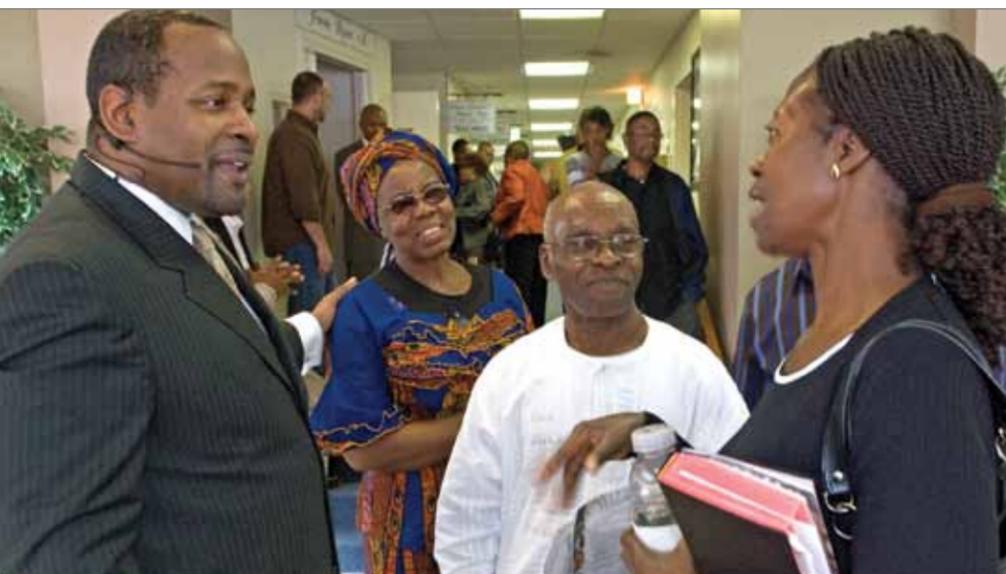
To new pastors, Tony said, “Watch your spiritual gauge. When you’re running on empty, stop and get away with the Lord. When we burn out as pastors, we can do stupid things.” Holidays are good times for a pastor to get away because many in the congregation are also traveling, Tony related. “Now when I go away, I don’t feel guilty. It’s not my church; it’s the Lord’s church. I remember when my pastor, Brian Brodersen, went to minister in England and Eastern Europe for six weeks. People asked, ‘What about the church?’ And he replied, ‘It’s the Lord’s church. God will take care of it.’ And sure enough, God did.”

Raising up Timothy’s

Leaders of each ministry are training another person to take their place, as the apostle Paul trained Timothy. “Life is unpredictable: something could happen to you, you may need a break, or you might get military orders to move to a new location,” Tony said. “So it’s been a really good way of keeping the ministries consistent and giving others a chance to serve.”



Pastor Tony Clark of CC Newport News, VA, right, began in ministry at CC Vista, CA. He advises young pastors and leaders to carve out time to be alone with the Lord in order to keep themselves and the ministries spiritually pure.



Keziah Wanjala, right, is one of four Africans that simultaneously translate the service into Swahili, the language of some East Africans in the congregation.



Lora Svitak and granddaughter Tekoa chat with friend, Ricky Brown.



Assistant Pastor Terry Haynes, left, prays with Rodney Jean after a Sunday morning service.



Jacob Muriira translates the teaching into Swahili, spoken by some people at CC Newport News.



Kayla Foster performs at the 2008 Fall Festival held on the church grounds each October.



Volunteers pray with the festival's attendees at the prayer booth.



Kids try to throw a bean bag through Goliath's head or mouth at the game booth.



A pie-eating contest draws a large crowd of participants and onlookers as teens wear what they missed on their faces.

Jim, who oversees the home groups, screens each home host and leader carefully to ascertain their motivation and their relationship with Christ. "Is their primary authority the Word of God? Is their husband or wife on board?" he said. "I also go to each home myself—I'm not looking for perfection but for any stumbling blocks. Will people see Jesus when they go into that home? Do they have liberties that could cause another person to stumble?"

The home groups go over Sunday's teaching, ask questions, and discuss how it applies to their lives. "We train our leaders to keep everything centered around the Word of God and not get into arguments about things that don't matter," said Jim. "If other issues come up—like a family who lacks resources or someone who needs counseling—they can direct those people to me or to one of the church leaders." Having small groups ensures that people don't fall through the cracks and their needs are met. "We have groups for married couples, military wives whose husbands are deployed, college/career age believers, military families, a new

believer's study, and a financial planning class," Jim said.

A New Creation in Christ

Administrative staffer Sandy Scott has been at the church for 14 years and shared how God impacted her life through the ministry.

Sandy pulled up to her home around 3 a.m. and sat behind the wheel in stunned silence with tears streaming down her face. She had almost killed a family that night because she was driving drunk while coming home from a club. *God, why did You let me survive that?* she thought. Deep down, she knew He had a reason. She remembered giving her life to Christ at age 22. She had separated from her abusive husband seven years ago, and since then had plummeted into a pit of drinking and despair. Angry at God, Sandy didn't want to live anymore, even though she had three children.

Still trembling, she honked the horn. Her 15-year-old daughter, Elaina, came out of the house. The girl opened the car door, helped her mom out, up the steps, and into



The grounds of CC Newport News are transformed into a sea of fun and games. The church's annual Fall Festival gives families an alternative to other celebrations held at the end of October.



Audry Gostomski, right, and her son Paul (kneeling) instruct the children in the Calvary Kingdom class.



Tony Shepherd teaches the Ignite teens, which is the church youth program.

the shower. All that day Sandy kept thinking, *I almost killed a family. God, why are You keeping me here?* Later that week, at her night class, a young woman invited Sandy to attend a new church being started by a man from California, Pastor Tony Clark.

She went to the new church that first Sunday in October of 1994. As she listened to the Bible teaching, she felt the Lord speak to her heart, telling her He had allowed her to live because He loved her and wanted her back. Over the next year, she continued to attend church and grow in the Word. Tony and Jenise welcomed her warmly, helping her in practical ways and showing her God's love.

Pastor Tony often came with his young son to mow her grass; he would never go inside but instead sipped the cool water

she brought him from the front porch. She noticed his humble attitude and his respect for God's holiness. When she became involved with a non-Christian man before her divorce was finalized, the pastor gently corrected her. "Who are you to tell me what to do?" she had challenged. But Tony pointed her to God's Word in 1 Corinthians about marriage—that she was to be joined only to a believer, and then only after she was divorced.

In 1995, Sandy felt the Lord speaking to her through Jeremiah 29:11, "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." She felt God telling her that He had a special purpose for her life, and that she should share her testimony with other women.

Silently, she offered a prayer of surrender: *Okay, Lord. I am done with my old life. I just want to live for You now.* She encouraged other ladies at the church, volunteered to help Jenise with several ministries, and eventually came on staff at CC Newport News.

For seven years, she remained single and grew in the Lord. There were lonely times, but she felt the Lord teaching her to find contentment in His love, not the love of a man. Sometimes she struggled with guilt over her past, but God's Word encouraged her.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

2 Corinthians 5:17

"I would feel the Lord telling me that He had forgiven me," she recalled. "I was a new creation; the old Sandy was gone. I was the new Sandy who was fully in Christ. I belong to Him." She remarried in 2002 and has been on staff at CC Newport News for six years. Sandy added, "I have learned, as His Word says in Romans Chapter 8, that nothing can separate me from His love, and that He works all things for good." 🙌

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Newport News is located on the southeastern shore of Virginia.