

A HEART *for* CHRIST

CC WORD OF LIFE REACHES OUT
TO INNER-CITY PHILADELPHIA
NEIGHBORHOODS WITH THE GOSPEL
AND PRACTICAL MINISTRY

*Story by Margot Bass
Photos by Micah Martin unless otherwise noted*

“Lord, we are beneficiaries of your grace. Give us a corner to go to so people can hear Jesus,” prayed Mark Abrams, senior pastor of Calvary Chapel Word of Life, before sending 50 believers to share the Gospel outside of his inner-city Philadelphia, PA, church. He had just trained the group from his own fellowship as well as from Calvary Chapel Philadelphia and other churches. Mark confidently assured them that it was simple to talk to strangers on the streets about Jesus.

He had advocated a gentle approach. “People know they’re sinners. We just have to remind them of the One who came to save them from their sins. If you do it in love, in the power of the Holy Spirit, then people will experience that peace of God,” he urged. “Sharing the Gospel is not this big intimidating, textbook thing that people make it.” On that warm late-March morning, Mark led them out to practice what they’d learned. Within minutes, he found a man on the street, gently touched his shoulders, and intently listened to and prayed for him. The rest, gathering in groups of two or three, moved onto a busy street. After an hour, they returned to the church building to testify of how God worked.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes

ROMANS 1:16a

Mark was saved in the mid-1990s, well on his way to a lucrative singing career. Raised as one of six children by a Christian single mom in a rough Philadelphia neighborhood, he had not yet adopted her faith for himself, even though he attended and often sang in churches. “At a nightclub one night, the Lord clearly spoke to my heart that I needed to get out of there. I did, went home, got on my knees and prayed, asking Christ into my life,” he recalled. He immediately gave up his secular music career.

“Right from the beginning, I was sold-out for Christ and on the street, witnessing,” he declared, adding that, at first, the only thing he knew to tell people was that Jesus had saved him. For several years, he was actively involved in evangelism in the churches he attended. In time he felt the urgency to encourage other fellowships to evangelize their own neighborhoods. “We started doing outreaches every Saturday—two or three in a day and sometimes even more over a weekend. We knew it was from the Lord because there was [spiritual] fruit.”



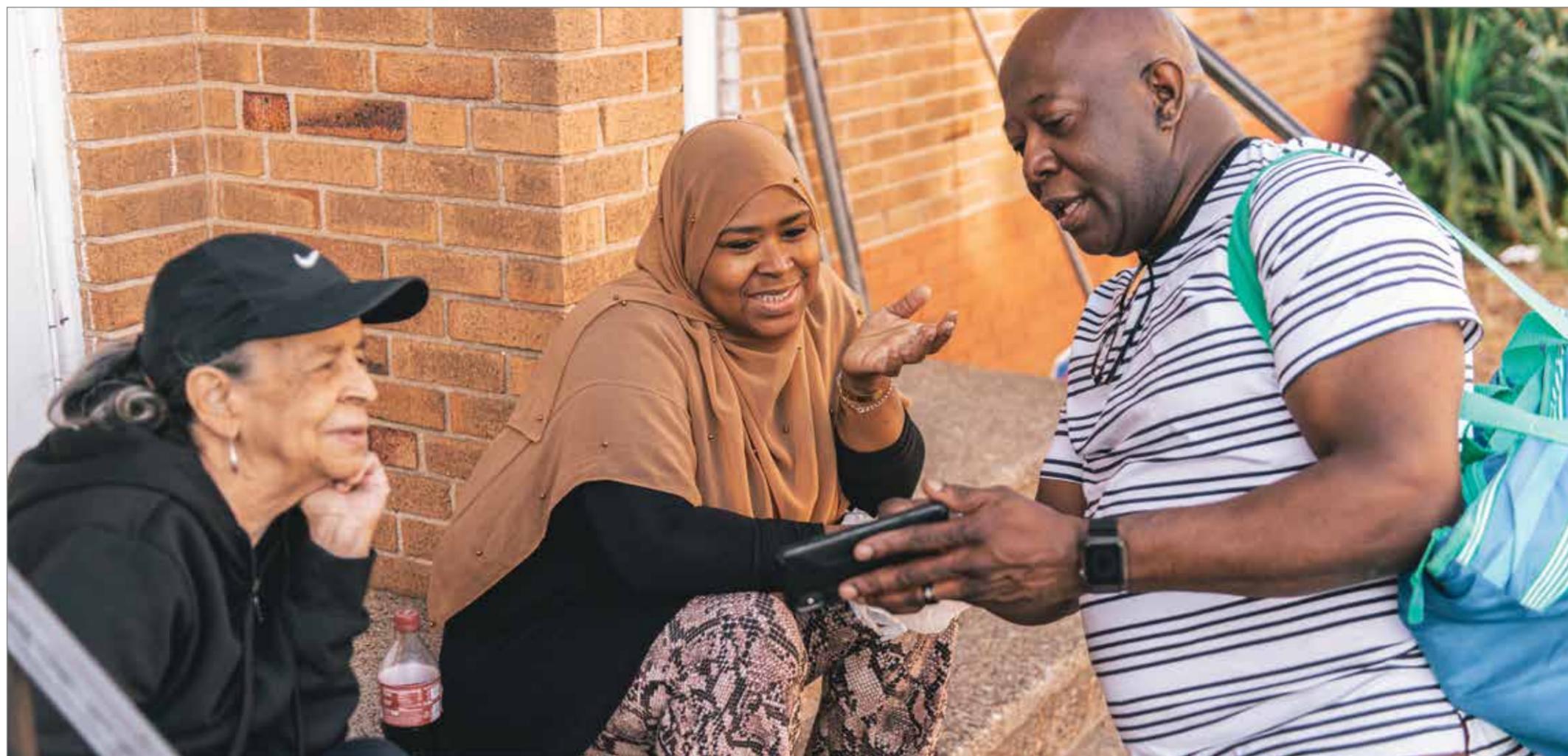
Top right: A woman (right) prays to receive Christ.

Photo by Joanna Liegel

Middle right: Pastor Mark Abrams (right) shares Jesus with three college students.

Photo by Joanna Liegel

Bottom: Mark uses an outreach photo while witnessing to a young Muslim woman.





This evangelistic calling grew into his ministry while he worked as the director of a mental health program. Mark has taken his training to both the East and West Coasts, to inner-city and suburban churches, to Calvary Chapels, and other denominations. Now a pastor, he continues street evangelism and large, practical outreaches in Philadelphia neighborhoods.

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord ...

2 TIMOTHY 1:7-8a

During the evangelism training, Mark taught on the following questions, each answered with solid Scripture and real-life examples: *Who are you sharing with? Why do people reject the Gospel? Why do we fail to share the Gospel consistently? When do we share the Gospel?* Then he and

his church leaders led role play demonstrations and answered specific questions.

“Jesus presented Himself before people with a sense of quietness and intimacy,” Mark stated. He called up a participant, Shannon, to demonstrate a Gospel encounter. After introducing himself and asking her name, he learned that she was a college student. He told the audience, “I’m not only going to pray for Shannon’s needs, but I’m going to pray for her to receive the Gospel: ‘Lord, help her through this season in college; Jesus, keep Your hand upon her life, and help her to be all You want her to be,’” he said. Then to Shannon he added, “By the way, have you ever invited Jesus into your life? Let me tell you about Him. He was crucified, buried, and rose again on the third day, having died for the sins of the world. Do you believe that? If you repent of your sins and believe that Jesus is Lord, you’re now part of a new family.” After she “accepted” Jesus, he

provided information about churches and a female contact to call. “If you’re gentle, they can sense your heart,” Mark observed.

Testimonies from the Street

“Philly is a tough mission field,” Mark warned. “Every mission field is tough, but that doesn’t negate the fact that Jesus is still Lord. The Gospel transforms the inner-city and addresses the underlying sin problem. People who are saved will take more responsibility for their actions.”

Josephine Mannino and Shannon Sullivan came from CC Philadelphia. “It was a great experience letting the Lord speak through us. They were so open to listen to God’s Word,” Josephine stated. “I prayed with someone and gave another woman a church flyer; she was very interested in going back to church.” Shannon admitted that she was nervous—this was her first time witnessing on the street.

Abel Ocasio and Joy Mosley of CC Word of Life were able to lead a young woman to the Lord as she came off the subway. The woman knew of the church and once considered attending. She accepted Christ after they asked her if she knew where she would go when she died. “She



Top left: Men who have been incarcerated in the past respond to an altar call during CC Word of Life’s monthly men’s breakfast.

Top right: Mark fellowships with church attendees following a Saturday night service.

Middle right: Members of CC Word of Life’s leadership pray for an upcoming outreach.

Bottom right: The congregation worships the Lord during Sunday’s second service.

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responded, ‘No, but I think about it all the time,’” Joy said. They took her phone number to keep in touch. They also shared with a Muslim man for 15 minutes, giving him a tract called *Jesus and the Qur’an*, which contains quotes from the Islamic holy book.

Donna Luczyszyn and Doris Darden, both from CC Word of Life, teamed up for the day. “We approached two men who were obviously homeless and in active addiction. I was able to reach them, I think, because I’m a recovering addict saved by Jesus Christ,” Donna said. “I let them know I’m living proof they don’t have to live like that and can come to Jesus.”

Stephanie Smalls from CC Word of Life went out for the first time and brought her 8-year-old son Makhai. After watching her experienced evangelism partner, India, she decided to approach the next person, a lady she learned had just lost her son. She prayed with her; the woman seemed interested in coming to the church.

Eric and Tasha Hatten from Word of Life discussed sin with a young Muslim man. Although the man eventually walked away, Tasha added, “You could tell he was convicted. He let us pray for him.”

A Reluctant Pastor

“You are the light of the world. ... Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.” MATTHEW 5:14a, 16

Jerry Paradise, an assistant pastor at CC Philly and Mark’s close friend, said, “I used to refer to Mark as an ‘outreach animal’ because if there were 52 Saturdays in a year, he would do 52 outreaches to reach the community for Christ.” CC Philadelphia has participated in many of those outreaches. Mark didn’t intend to start a church. “I like to be behind the scenes,” Mark stated emphatically. “I always felt like I could come alongside and assist pastors—not be the pastor.”

Mark began attending CC Philly in the early 2000s, attracted to its verse-by-verse teaching. One Sunday, his young son dragged him down the aisle to meet Senior Pastor Joe Focht, and they became fast friends. CC Word of Life (originally CC North Philadelphia) was born in 2005 out of CC Philly, from Mark’s growing Bible study originally meant to spiritually feed those he’d led to Jesus. Later, Joe asked him what he would do with his spiritual gift of teaching. “Joe always told me, ‘I’m going to put it on your gravestone—the man who didn’t want to

be a pastor,’” Mark related with a laugh. He now pastors the lively, racially diverse CC fellowship located several blocks from where he grew up. “Mark always saw himself as an evangelist, not a pastor. Years later, he has concluded that he’s a pastor, too,” said Jerry Paradise. “God’s raised up a church around him, hundreds come to it, and he still does tremendous amounts of outreach. We’re investing in him, doing anything to help the work that God has raised up there. Mark attends every staff meeting at CC Philly.”

As a pastor, verse-by-verse teaching is the foundation for all Mark does. People attend his church for that teaching, he believes, even if they come for help first. “We have a whole group of women who come now—who first came for the food pantry—because they like the teaching. People keep coming back.” His greatest hope is that the Word of God is taught in churches. “Evangelism is so important, but there has to be the teaching of the Word. There also needs to be good discipleship; to me, good discipleship begins in the pulpit,” Mark stated.

Outreaches are varied. During Mother’s Day events especially geared for single moms, Mark has rented out auditoriums holding up to 2,000 people, cooking for the ladies and giving away gift bags and flowers. “Last year in a raffle



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Top right: The church opens its doors every Saturday night as a food pantry to nearly 1,800 people from the community.

Middle right: Volunteers from CC Philadelphia and other churches serve at the weekly food pantry.

Bottom: Sunday morning church attendees welcome each other with warm and loving hugs. Hundreds fill the halls and sanctuary for each service.

we gave away a Honda Civic to one mom,” Mark reported. Church members have gathered in some of the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods to give away items in free flea markets. “The flea market was always about getting to know the neighborhood, sharing the Gospel one-on-one, following up, and building relationships. The draw was not only the clothes but helping parents by supplying back-to-school supplies for their children.”

Church members have gone to shelters, turning them into nice cafés for a night, bringing desserts and a concert. In addition, the church pays for post office boxes for the homeless who need an address to get a job. The homeless must first attend church six times, where they’ll hear the Gospel. Staffers will discuss issues related to getting them off the streets and into a job, with no requirement of becoming a Christian. Mark enjoys the barber-shop outreach. “We’ll rent a barbershop and provide free haircuts for unemployed men all day,” he remarked. The free food pantry—open after every Saturday evening service—serves approximately 1,800 people a week. Recently, the church provided formal suits for men at Easter.

CC Word of Life leases space inside the Berean Building at the Philadelphia Technician Training Institute, a trade school, in a zip code area where 58 percent of the

population earns no income. “We have a strong desire to help these young men get trade jobs,” Mark declared. “We’ll do an event and invite them to church. When they get here, there will be words of encouragement, and we’ll share the Gospel.”



And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

EPHESIANS 4:11-12

Jerry added, “Mark is committed to teaching verse by verse and has completed teaching the entire Bible. He studies like crazy and writes his sermons out ahead of time. His notes are a treasure.”

Mark described his motivation for ministry. “You have to love the Lord, first. You have to love the people. You have to believe God puts you in a place for His glory. In all my reluctance, God saw a neighborhood He wanted to put me in. That’s a privilege.”

Calvary Chapel Word of Life
ccwordoflife.org



Left: Mark encourages musician Josh Mason at the men’s breakfast.

Top right: Food distribution is a major part of the church’s outreach to the needy.

Bottom right: Mark gives “Mom Joyce” a kiss goodbye. She raised numerous foster kids in the projects and started attending the church after an outreach to her neighborhood.



SHARING THE HOPE WE HAVE IN JESUS CHRIST

Mark Abrams, senior pastor of CC Word of Life, and his leadership team offered tips for witnessing:

- Start with prayer and God’s Word. Memorize 10 verses to use in witnessing—that list will grow over the years.
- Share a simple message—Jesus died on the cross for the sin of the world and rose from the dead on the third day. Whoever believes in Him and receives Him by faith is saved.
- Share how Jesus changed your life, and that God loves them and can change their lives.
- The power is in the Gospel, not us—the apostle Paul came to Corinth in weakness, fear, and trembling.
- If you encounter a hostile person, don’t get caught up in questions or rabbit trails.
- Be careful about touching people. At most, touch a shoulder or hand.
- Go in a team of at least two; if possible, a male and female. Men minister to men and women to women.
- Avoid speaking in “Christianese”—theological terms only believers understand.

Why Do People Reject the Gospel?

- The god of this age—Satan—has blinded their minds. Pray: Lord, open the eyes of their hearts.
- They suppress the truth about the consequences of dying without Christ. They aren’t rejecting you, but Jesus.
- Don’t worry if people don’t come to Christ; they may surrender their lives later. You’re not a failure.