

A Brief History of Calvary Chapel

Calvary Chapel is a non-denominational Christian church which began in 1965 in Costa Mesa, California. Calvary Chapel's pastor, Chuck Smith became a leading figure in what has become known as the "Jesus Movement."

It has been estimated that in a two-year period in the mid '70s, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa had performed well over eight thousand baptisms. During that same period, they were instrumental in 20,000 conversions to the Christian faith. Their decadal growth rate had been calculated by church growth experts to be near the ten thousand percent level.



A remarkable pattern kept repeating itself. As soon as they moved into a new building, the fellowship would already be too big for the facilities. In two years they moved from the original building (one of the first church buildings in Costa Mesa) to a rented Lutheran church overlooking the Pacific. Soon thereafter they decided to do something

unprecedented at the time and move the church to a school that they had bought. The building did not match up to code so they tore it down and built another. But by the time the sanctuary of 330 seats was completed in 1969, they were already forced to go to two services, and eventually had to use the outside courtyard for 500 more seats. This was all fine in good weather.

But by 1971 the large crowds and the winter rains forced them to move again. They bought a ten-acre tract of land on the Costa Mesa/Santa Ana border. Orange County was quickly changing and the once-famous orange orchards were making way for the exploding population of Los Angeles.



Soon after buying the land, they again did the unprecedented and erected a giant circus tent that could seat 1,600 at a stretch. This was soon enlarged to hold 2,000 seats. Meanwhile they began building an enormous sanctuary adjacent to this site.

By the time Calvary Chapel fellowship had celebrated opening day in 1973 moving into the vast new sanctuary of 2,200 seats, the building was already too small to contain the numbers turning out. They held three Sunday morning services and had more than 4,000 people at each one. Many had to sit on the carpeted floor. A large portion of floor space was left without pews so as to provide that option.

Calvary Chapel also ministers over the airwaves, and this must account for many of those who travel long distances to fellowship there. A Nielsen survey indicated that the Sunday morning Calvary Chapel service is the most listened-to program in the area during the entire week. As of 1987, Calvary's outreach has included numerous radio programs, television broadcasts, and the production and distribution of tapes and records. The missions outreach is considerable. Calvary Chapel not only supports Wycliffe Bible Translators, Campus Crusade, Missionary Aviation Fellowship, and other groups, but they donate to Third World needs. They then built a radio station in San Salvador and gave it to the local pastors there. They also gave money to Open Doors to purchase the ship that, in tandem with a barge, delivered one million Bibles to mainland China. The financial commitment to missions exceeds the local expense budget by over 50%.

Today, Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa, the church which only had twenty-five members, has now established **1348** (2008) affiliate Calvary Chapels across the world and is among the world's largest churches with 20,000+ calling it their home church. It is one of the ten largest Protestant churches in the United States.

