

Churches Loving Schools: Profound Perspectives and Practical Pointers

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Introduction

Have you ever wondered what would happen if your church no longer existed? Would the community around you realize that you were gone? Would they mourn the loss of the love that your church had poured into them? Many of us are hoping to make an impact in our communities. Many of us wonder whether we are or not. More than anything we would love to know how to make a genuine difference for Christ in our neighborhoods and beyond.

In our suburban community there are thousands of children who have not yet heard the gospel. Many of them also live in poverty. Calvary Nexus, the local church where I serve, is a movement of Jesus' followers devoted to loving God and our neighbors. As such, we are called to love our neighbors, reach children and their families for Christ, and remember and care for the poor (Matt. 22:37-39, 19:14, Gal. 2:10). **The children are the key to our future and the gospel is the key to their future.**

If you and your church want to discover and have access to a multitude of needs in your community-- and have a lasting impact through meeting those needs-- I believe that a key place of connection is to engage with the public schools. Local schools tend to be a nexus of socioeconomic diversity, where those with economic advantages and those with economic disadvantages come together, where children from families who struggle to put food on the table do life alongside students whose families have an abundance. The schools are also a nexus where children and families can connect to the greater community, through relationships with neighboring organizations. Our vision, simply stated, is to build relationships with the local schools, and then be available to shoulder economic disparities, one family at a time, to the benefit of children, and their families, in the name of Christ's love.

In the pages that follow, I will outline the inception, awakening, and convergence of God's plans, as it relates to a ten-year vision for our own church and as it applies to a general manual of sorts for other interested churches. I will also share my story of the marvelous ways in which I saw God working as well as include some of the inspiring stories of the people involved. My goal is to demonstrate how it is possible for churches to love schools in our California suburb and beyond. Along the way I will share the why, what, how, when and most importantly "the who" of the impact, in this life, and most importantly, in the life to come.

This resource is not intended to suggest that there is a one-size-fits-all plan, nor advocate for a strategic, organic or hybrid approach. Furthermore, this is not intended to be a discourse on the virtues of public or faith-based education systems. This resource is simply intended to encourage engagement of public schools to demonstrate God's love to a community.

**PART 1: Reflections of Inception, Awakening and
Convergence: The “What” and the “Why” of Churches loving
Schools**

Chapter One: Inception – the establishment or starting point of an activity.

In the beginning God created...

At the southern tip of California's Central Coast, conveniently situated between Los Angeles, the largest county in the United States, and Santa Barbara, a Riviera on the Pacific, is the City of Camarillo, with a present population of just over sixty-five thousand. Remarkably, the entire population could nearly fit inside the Dodgers Stadium, less than fifty miles away. The city is large enough to offer a host of amenities, but small enough to feel like a town. It is a place where community members regularly gather in centrally located parks for summer concerts, Fourth of July fireworks, and the Christmas Parade. Camarillo has picture perfect weather, manicured lawns, maintained streets, twenty-six parks, low crime, safe neighborhoods, ten schools serving elementary-aged students, and is likely the type of place you would want to raise your family. **It is in many ways an idyllic suburb.**

Despite all of its charming appeal and its advantageous location, though, according to research published by Barna in June 2019, ours was the ninth most unchurched area in America (more post-Christian even than San Francisco, CA). Tucked into the middle of Camarillo is Calvary Nexus, a Calvary Chapel church where I am the founding pastor and where I have been blessed to serve this community for twenty-five years.

My wife Karen loves New York City. She means that she loves the nightlife, architecture, arts, the food scene and the energy of NYC. I love Camarillo. When I say that, I don't just mean the pleasantries that I've just described (although I truly do enjoy and appreciate them). When I say that I love Camarillo, I mean that I want to see my community reached for Christ and I'm willing to sacrifice my time, talents, and treasure for that cause (Karen loves Camarillo the way that I do too).

People often move to suburbs like ours to avoid challenges associated with urban environments. Like many suburbs, one could travel the entirety of our community by car, bike, or foot and be unaware of problems. Nevertheless, when one peels back the veneer, the issues are there; they just aren't as obvious. This is the predicament for Christians: expend a minimum of energy to pretend that everything is fine or expend a minimum of energy to seek out and love families who are in need. As followers of Jesus, we are specifically called not to ignore the problems and not to walk by those in need, even if they are not glaring at us on the surface. In the suburbs where needs are not readily apparent, it may seem like we get a free pass; we may think that we are off the hook. What we really need is a new approach.

I confess that for more than twenty years I have missed this approach. I have lived and served in this community, a place I earnestly and genuinely love, and yet I have been ignorant, blind, and comfortably numb to some of the real needs in my community. Yet, in God's perfect

timing, the blinders have been removed, the veneer stripped away, and there has been an awakening. Not a rude awakening, but a wake-up-call, nonetheless.

Chapter 2: Awakening – an act or moment of becoming suddenly aware of something.

God loves children and cares for the poor...

Our church hosts a before and after school program that serves mostly elementary-aged children from approximately fifty families who are not otherwise connected to Calvary Nexus. These students enjoy Bible-centered, Gospel-driven programming. Because our program offers grants and scholarships, it attracts many single-parent families and families whose financial resources are tight.

At one point I began to discover that a single unforeseen expense, such as a car repair or medical bill could have a cascading impact on these families, leaving parents to struggle to provide groceries, clothing, school supplies, or pay for utilities. In response, our church started to pray and consider ways that we could help. We wanted to show God's love to our neighbors who participated in the program, even though they were not otherwise connected to our church.

Our response

In 2018 we decided to develop an **Assistance Request Form** (see, Appendix). On it, parents could provide basic contact information and check a box requesting assistance for needs such as: groceries, car repair, clothing, utility bill, school supplies, or other. The cards were collected by the end of the school week, at which point we would enter the contact information and a description of the need into our database. Then on Sunday mornings, individuals, couples, families, and Neighborhood Groups (our small groups) would "adopt" the need. The person(s) who volunteered to help care for the need provided their contact information on a detachable portion of the assistance request form.

On Monday mornings we would then add the volunteer's contact information to the database and email them the **Assistance Guidelines** (see, Appendix). The guidelines encouraged our volunteers to initiate contact by Tuesday, and to try to fulfill the need by Saturday (essentially within a week of us receiving the request). Volunteers were instructed to try to deliver the assistance in ways that were as comfortable and convenient for the recipient as possible, and in ways that never implied that assistance was conditioned upon "joining" Calvary Nexus. We also encouraged our volunteers to offer prayer for those in need, to extend the invitation to join us in worship (if they were interested) and to encourage the recipient(s) by explaining that God loves them and that His Gospel offers hope. Finally, once the requests were fulfilled, volunteers would email our administrator to let us know how it went. Our records were thus able to track that all the needs were met.

As we were figuring this all out for the first time, we **were also tapping into a broader opportunity: to be humble ambassadors sharing God's love and lifting up our neighbors in**

public schools in practical ways. By God's grace, we were able to meet all the needs that were presented to us that year.

During that first year, Assistance Request Forms were submitted by parents connected to the before and after school program. Initially, they trickled in like microwave popcorn--- pop... pop. Each need was cared for promptly, with gentleness, respect, humility, and love. As we demonstrated God's love in tangible ways more and more requests were submitted--- pop, pop, pop.

As the requests for assistance increased, so did our church's willingness to meet those needs. Our church body embraced this opportunity with a generous outpouring. To our surprise, the desire to meet needs out measured the request to have needs met. We found ourselves withholding request forms from our first service, so that there would be enough to offer to our second service. There was fruit for the harvest: children and their families were being cared for, church members were finding new purpose in serving, and in sharing, and love was flowing in both directions. An unintended benefit was that some of the recipients even started to attend services at Calvary Nexus.

As we were enjoying God's rich harvest from our new relationship with the before and after school program, we began to pray. God soon opened our eyes to see past our church campus, beyond our parking lots to the public schools in our community.

Previous to this new insight, our church had been involved with three Good News Clubs, evangelistic outreaches serving local elementary schools. These are weekly after school programs where children were presented with the hope- giving message of the Bible and encouraged to grow in character and spiritual strength.

My friend Jane, a Spirit-led follower of Jesus, is the liaison between church volunteers and the school administration in connection with these Clubs. She thought it would be wonderful for the church to engage with one of these schools in a similar way. First, we discussed which of the three schools would likely have the greatest needs, and then which of the principals seemed most receptive to a church being involved. We then arrived at the unpromising realization that the school with the greatest needs was also likely the one to be the least receptive. We didn't let our discouragement stop us, though.

After more prayer, I wrote letters to the three principals. I explained that our church would like to assist families in need as a demonstration of God's love, with no strings attached. In less than an hour, the principal of the school with the greatest needs (whom we had deemed the least likely to respond) was quick to reply and a meeting was scheduled soon after. God was opening doors.

Principal Thomas Holtke of the Pleasant Valley School of Engineering and Arts (PVSEA), welcomed Pastor Roger, another pastor at Nexus, and myself into his office and introduced himself as "Tommy." Tommy is an energetic man, a distance runner, a Dodgers fan, a career

educator and a person who deeply and passionately cares about the students, their families-- and by extension our common community of Camarillo.

Tommy explained that the school serves over 600 families and that 73 percent of the students participate in the Title I government subsidized feeding program. **This was my biggest awakening – the moment I became suddenly aware of something: there was significant financial need just below the surface of our idyllic community.** That afternoon, in Principal Holtke's office, Pastor Roger, and I had our eyes opened to the reality that there are thousands in our community who are genuinely struggling to make ends meet. In a suburb like ours this was a surprising revelation.

Tommy was interested in what we wanted to do, but also expressed concern as to whether or not we would reasonably be able to finish what we started. He recognized that it could be damaging if we were to offer hope and help and then suddenly stop, leaving families discouraged and disillusioned. I explained that we had estimated that the potential needs coming from the school would likely not exceed \$1,000 dollars per week. Since the school was in session for about 40 weeks, we were willing to place the sum of \$50,000 into a reserved account so that needs would be met for the year, either by our volunteers or by Calvary Nexus as a church. Tommy wanted to move forward with us but he also needed to get approval from the School District. Eventually, the District gave the green light, and we began to share God's love to our neighbors at the PVSEA.

Next we approached the school with a 4-part comprehensive plan:

1. Presentation and Communications with teachers and staff
2. Color Run in late Spring
3. End of Summer Back-to-School
4. Christmas gifts

1. Presentation to teachers and staff: We arranged to meet at the teacher staff meeting at the start of the calendar year. During the meeting we explained the **Assistance Request Form** to them and how we planned to care for students and families. We emphasized that our assistance would not be conditioned upon joining our church or responding to a religious message. At the same time, we provided **a gift card to each teacher for school supplies for their classroom and a personal notecard.**

Teachers are a stabilizing influence in any community. Although they generally receive a small budget for school supplies, almost all teachers spend their own money to supplement classroom supplies for students (often in excess of a few hundred dollars). As a church body, we wanted to recognize this sacrifice and express gratitude for their hard work and dedication in preparing lessons, grading papers, and navigating life issues that impact the children and their families. As such, we affirmed the teachers and provided \$200.00 Target gift cards to each one. We asked them to use the gift cards for school supplies, their classrooms, or on any other need related to the students. We let them know that we trusted their judgment.

I believe that it is important for church leaders and volunteers to demonstrate their trust of teachers. If teachers are viewed with suspicion, then they are likely to reciprocate with similar feelings projected towards the church. Teachers (and principals too) are gatekeepers. If a church is seeking to help families at the public school, the first step is winning the trust of the teachers and the principals. The schools care deeply for the students (and their families) and will seek to protect them from a perceived threat.

During our initial meeting, I let the teachers know that I would love to see all of the children in their classrooms and their families in heaven with me, but that we will never condition assistance upon coming to church or hearing any type of religious presentation. Nevertheless, we will tell parents that God loves them, that hope is available, offer to pray for them, and let them know that they are welcome at our church.

Finally, I asked the teachers if I could pray for them before leaving their staff meeting. To my pleasant surprise the twenty-five teachers were receptive. Afterwards, they asked if I would take a picture with them and shared with me that they thought what our church was doing was wonderful.

2. Color Run in late Spring: During the spring we then facilitated an event where participants were sprayed with multiple colors while completing a foot race. We created age-appropriate courses for all the kids, who got sponsors to pledge financial support for participating and finishing. We invited kids and teachers from the school to participate, have fun, and raise funds, all of which were poured into their school.

The event was held at a park adjacent to the school, where we hosted a BBQ, prize raffle, and a brief gospel presentation for anyone who wanted to participate. On our promotional flyer we made clear that it was a Calvary Nexus event with all proceeds going to the school. Principal Holtke, some teachers, some kids and their families from PVSEA participated along with many from the church and their friends. It was tons of fun, kids received Christ, and we raised more than \$10,000 for the school.

3. End of Summer Back-to-School: Preparations

As a result of our relationship with teachers and staff, we discovered that there were students at PVSEA who needed new backpacks as well as school supplies. We also discovered that the teachers needed help preparing their classrooms. To my surprise, teachers shared with us that they typically spend 40 to 60 hours to prepare their classrooms for incoming students. I had previously been naïve to that need. We prayed about it and got to work. A month prior to school starting, we asked the congregation to begin to donate supplies and sign up to volunteer for a Back to School Serve Day. Shortly before school opened, we had mobilized 80-100 volunteers to help prepare classrooms and 100 backpacks, filled with grade appropriate, teacher-recommended supplies.

More preparations

Before we arrived at the Serve Day, we had asked the teachers to be explicit about the kind of help that they needed. For example, one teacher needed two people to do heavy lifting, four people to decorate walls and three people to collate curriculum. As such, we were able to prepare our volunteers by matching them with specific jobs and roles before we had even arrived.

On the Big Day

We started work at 9:00AM.

Right away Tommy and I found ourselves standing in a large grass area with the church volunteers on one side and the teachers and their families standing on the other. There were two groups gathered for a common purpose, but there was literally no mingling of the two. Our first hurdle was figuring out how to unite them, though that wouldn't happen until later.

Once the volunteers got to work, the first thing Tommy and I did was to visit every classroom, where I spoke with teachers to encourage and affirm them. Many of the teachers had witnessed the church helping students and their families via the Assistance Request Forms and they expressed their heartfelt appreciation for what they had seen- real help was extended to their families! They also expressed gratitude for our contribution to help them prepare the classrooms. We heard from at least a few very experienced teachers that despite several decades as educators they had never seen any organization offer to help them as we had.

Later that morning, parents came by to pick up backpacks and school supplies. We got a chance to meet the kids and their parents at which point many of them expressed sincere appreciation. We were afforded a moment to pray briefly for the upcoming school year, and to extend a whole-hearted invitation to join us at Calvary Nexus.

At lunchtime, Tommy and I made Caesar salad for 150+ people and the pizzas were delivered, at which point all the teachers and volunteers came together to eat. I prayed for the meal and Tommy thanked all of our volunteers. At that point the harmony happened: teachers were intermingling with volunteers and church folk were sitting at tables with school staff. What had started as two separate groups was now one big gathering. Three hours after we started working, the two groups were now united into one.

Presumably there are some in the church community who have negative impressions of public schools and the people who run them. Likewise, there are presumably some in the public schools who have misconceptions about churches and the Christians within them. Nonetheless, at our Service Day lunch, bridges between church and school were built; friendships were sparked, and relationships were started that could last for eternity.

4. Christmas gifts:

In addition to the Assistance Request Forms, Back-to-School backpacks, Teacher classroom support gift cards, and our Back-to-school Serve-Day, our church also decided to provide Target

gift cards for families from the school who were struggling financially at Christmas time. We purchased gift cards for 150 families, which were placed inside of Christmas cards. Before we distributed the cards, we had the words of our greeting pre-approved by the school. Despite the fact that the messages on the cards were very Christ-centered: focusing on God's love and how Jesus and His gospel are the greatest gift of all, the school approved it. We also included an invitation to our Christmas services with each card.

The school then provided us a list of names of families and the numbers of children in each one. We increased the value of the gift cards depending on the number of children. We delivered our cards to the school by December 10th so as to leave ample time for the teachers to distribute them to families.

The number of families on the list provided by PVSEA was less than a hundred, which meant that we had extra. An added bonus was that we ended up being able to provide Christmas gifts to over fifty kids connected to yet another elementary school in Camarillo (Las Posas School).

Conclusions and Reflections

As the first year of our church's efforts to love a public school had come to an end, it was clear that there had been an awakening among our church, PVSEA, and our local school district. All of the request forms had been fulfilled, children had the scholastic tools they needed, teachers felt part of their burden shouldered by our volunteers, families felt financial burdens eased at Christmas, and above all, God's love was shared as new relationships developed between the church and the school. As another surprise bonus, PVSEA nominated Calvary Nexus for a California PTA Honorary Community Service Award, which was presented to the church.

As I reflect on the joys of the first year of this endeavor, one Friday night in particular stands out to me. My wife and I had arrived at our church campus for the college group where I was scheduled to teach that night. In the parking lot we met a young woman who told us it was her first night, that she'd never been to the church before and that she wasn't sure where to go. Karen and I introduced her to other students and the college group leader. On Sunday, she was back at church and this time introduced us to her younger sister. She told me that when she got home Friday night, she had been super excited and so was telling her parents that she wanted to go back on Sunday with her sister. Her parents asked her, "what church did you go to?" She answered, "Calvary Nexus." Her dad said, "*That's a loving church.* When we first moved into our apartment, we didn't have mattresses to sleep on. Your sister's teacher found out and that was the church that provided us our mattresses." Our efforts to shine God's love onto a public school made way for a positive reputation for Jesus to take root.

I asked Tommy which story stood out the most to him after our first year. He shared with me a story about two brothers who were continuously showing up to their first period class late. As a dutiful principal he shared with them the importance of being on time. After a few days, Tommy investigated with the boys' mom, who told him that their car needed repairs that the family couldn't afford. As an empathetic principal, Tommy was heartbroken about the situation. Tommy then completed an Assistance Request Form and within a week our church was able to

get the car repaired. Tommy was overjoyed when he saw the mom driving the boys to school the next week. His gratitude for our church abounded.

Chapter 3: Convergence – the act of moving toward union.

God works supernaturally, in a seemingly natural way, to connect people, places, and plans...

As the 2019 calendar year was moving into December, I arranged a meeting with Principal John Reilley of Las Posas School. I wanted to discuss our plan to provide our surplus Christmas gift cards to over fifty of the families connected to his school. I also wanted to discuss our efforts at PVSEA and whether or not we could replicate the plan at Las Posas.

Based on Title I participation, Las Posas School has the second greatest need in our community. The school is located in an area where military families connected to a nearby base are housed. The military dynamic creates more frequent transitions into and out of the school, which in turn creates challenges for students and teachers.

Principal Reilley and I discussed the Christmas gifts plan, and I showed him our proposed Christmas card message. I showed him the Assistance Request Form and described all the benefits it had produced in our year with PVSEA. I let him know that our church leadership was praying and contemplating our capacity to add a second school for 2020. I advised him that we had made a commitment to PVSEA and we were going to prioritize that school. Nevertheless, we felt that based on the number of requests that we expected, and the smaller school size (Las Posas has 450 students with 50% Title I while PVSEA has 700 students with 73% Title 1) we thought we could likely help. Finally, I told Principal Reilley that we wanted to provide his teachers with Target gift cards to be used for school supplies or to assist students, and a handwritten card acknowledging their work, affirming their contribution to our community, and expressing appreciation. I asked John to coordinate an opportunity for me to briefly present to his teachers the idea behind the Assistance Request Forms, the Christmas gift cards and to deliver to the teachers the gift cards that were intended for them. Just like I had done at PVSEA I wanted to explain that we would deliver the Christmas gift cards for students and their families before December 10th.

Principal Reilley expressed interest, and also let me know he was going to need to do some due diligence before committing. I later learned from Tommy that as soon as I left John's office that day that he had called Tommy to inquire about his experience. I asked Tommy, "What did you tell John?" Tommy said, "I told him that Calvary Nexus are some of the few people I know who undersell and overperform!" Tommy had told John all the good that we had done for the students and their families, as well as the PVSEA teachers. He assured John that we weren't trying to force religion upon them, but that we were clear about our faith as a motive for doing good.

Principal Reilley called me soon thereafter to confirm that they were on board and thanked me for the offer to help. Soon, I was at a meeting with the teachers at Las Posas School, just like I had experienced with PVSEA. Teachers expressed gratitude, surprise, and were excited that someone was coming alongside to help them and their students. Again, the teachers were

receptive to my offer to pray for them at their meeting; once again the teachers asked if we could all take a group picture.

As 2020 began to unfold, we were more than able to handle the Assistance Request Forms that came in from both schools during the first couple months. Furthermore, we were already thinking ahead to the fall of 2020, and planning to do a Back-to-school Serve Day and prepare Backpacks and School Supplies for the Las Posas School. (We had decided to serve the Las Posas school with the Serve Day and Backpack initiative that next year rather than PVSEA in 2020, as we did not feel able to do both.) Then the Covid-19 pandemic triggered school shutdowns, and online learning became our new reality.

Covid affected every sector of our lives in unprecedented ways, as it did all over the world. In particular, teachers, administrators, students and their parents were severely impacted by the online learning experience (not to mention churches and businesses). School Districts were cautious about reopening as concerns mounted as to unknown potential health risks. Furthermore, issues related to schools reopening became highly politicized across the country. In my experience, teachers and school administrators tried tirelessly to do the right thing for the kids and their families.

It seemed at the start of the pandemic that there was a general sense of great appreciation for teachers, as parents began to realize through the online learning experience just how hard teachers work to educate kids. Nevertheless, as the months dragged on, some parents wanted teachers and kids to return to classrooms, which left the teachers in an ideological and political crossfire.

Despite the economic upheaval in every community, the number of Assistance Request Forms received at the church actually diminished. The students were not on campus, the teachers were mostly remote, and the regular communication between families and the school about relevant needs began to fade away. In turn, our plans for the Serve Day and the Backpack Initiative were deferred.

Through the subsequent year much of my interaction with the schools was focused on trying to be a friend and encourager to the principals, Tommy and John, to remind them that we were praying for them, and to express support in any way that we could.

As the year was winding down, to our surprise Calvary Nexus was nominated by Las Posas School for another PTA recognition for our community service. Despite the setbacks imposed by a year plus under the shroud of a pandemic, thanks be to God, we nonetheless emerged with strong and still growing relationships with these two public schools. Even amidst setbacks, the consistent demonstration of God's love was producing benefits. We could see before our eyes **how immense the potential was when churches love schools.**

In the midst of all of this, in the early stages of the pandemic in 2020, two very generous donors provided large gifts to our church. There was concern that the economic impact of the

pandemic could have very significant adverse consequences for us and they wanted to ensure stability as the crisis was navigated. As a result of God's provision through their gifts, when the calendar year came to a close, Calvary Nexus had weathered the proverbial perfect storm and was still well afloat. The economic conditions reached equilibrium.

As we embarked upon 2021, our Core Pastor Team recognized that there was still a surplus from the two generous 2020 endowments, reserved in a contingency savings account. By then, economic conditions had greatly improved and there did not appear to be a realistic need for this contingency. As a result, we now had the enviable challenge of trying to discern what God was calling Calvary Nexus to do with this endowment. Why had God entrusted us with the resource (as opposed to another church)? What did we believe that God was calling us to do with it? How could we use these resources to show God's love and advance His kingdom either locally, globally, or both?

Our leadership team prayed, contemplated alternatives and options, and considered our past, present, and desired future. Our church had also been focused on saturating our community with Neighborhood Groups (small groups) where people learn to become disciples who love God and their neighbors better. So, as we processed all this, we found ourselves looking at a Venn diagram with three intersecting circles: make disciples who love God and neighbors, saturate our community (Camarillo), and adopt a need in the community. The intersection of the three was the bullseye.

We began to contemplate the possibility of engaging every public elementary school in Camarillo. What might that look like with ten schools? Was this feasible? Was God inspiring "Churches loving Schools?" How might our church, the School District, the teachers, and the community respond?

Although we did not have all the answers, *we were confident that there was convergence* – the act of moving toward union. I believe that God has designed us to view converging lines as aesthetically pleasing. The Eiffel Tower's intersecting (converging) architecture is perceived as pleasing—and here I go out on an interpretative theological limb-- perhaps because God also delights in convergence. One thing we do know from His word, and from our lived experience, is that **God works supernaturally and seamlessly to connect people, places, and plans!**

As a team, we knew that we had a lot to uncover and discover, but we believed that **God was calling us to love every elementary public school in Camarillo.** The idea reverberated in my mind: **The children are the key to our future and the gospel is the key to their future.**

Soon after the decision was made final by the Core Pastor Team at Calvary Nexus to show His love to every public school in Camarillo, I received a phone call. Principal Holtke wanted to ask me a favor, but the ask was not what I expected. *Tommy wanted to know whether I would officiate his wedding.* I was ecstatic at the thought. Suffice it to say that when I met Principal Holtke two years before he wasn't seemingly open to or interested in the things of God. Two years later, after a consistent demonstration of God's love, Tommy was my friend, and now he

wanted me to honor and represent God at his wedding. I explained the pre-marital process and that we would use a book I wrote on the subject of marriage as a resource. I told Tommy that he and Jamie could download the book from our church site or come by and pick up copies at the church. Tommy said, "We're coming this Sunday. So, I'll see you then." Words cannot describe the joy in my heart flowing from that conversation.

The Sunday before that, Bryan, who is a friend of mine, and a part of the Calvary Nexus community, was at church and had shared with me an idea. He operates a soccer academy in our community that is an alternative to AYSO. In an attempt to honor God and free up soccer players for church, Bryan's soccer group avoids scheduling games on Sundays. Bryan had shared with me that he wanted to offer free soccer clinics for the kids at PVSEA and any other schools that we were engaging. I told him that I thought it was a fantastic idea and thanked him for his generosity. I explained that since the school year was coming to an end that it was unlikely that we would get a chance to present his offer to principals for at least a couple of months, but I offered to move forward with him on the idea as was feasible.

Then it happened. The Sunday after I had talked to Bryan was the first Sunday Tommy came to church, with his soon-to-be-wife Jamie and their baby, Lily. They grabbed a seat on the aisle in the second to the last row. Bryan and his wife Marguerite were coincidentally in the row behind them, with their infant son Magnus. While we were praising God in song, the babies got fussy and vocal. Marguerite approached Jamie and let her know there was a nursery where they could take the kids, and still enjoy the service together. I was sitting with Tommy when Jamie returned with Lily toward the end of the service. I heard Jamie say to Tommy, "I love this church, the music, the message, and everyone is so loving. I can't wait to come back next week."

At the conclusion of the service, Bryan and Marguerite approached Tommy, Jamie and I. I introduced Tommy and Bryan and explained briefly about Bryan's offer regarding the soccer clinics. What I expected to take a couple of months to accomplish, God established in less than 72 hours. There was convergence. **God was working supernaturally, though in a seemingly natural way, to connect people, places, and plans.**

Tommy then arranged for me to present our plans to the Pleasant Valley School District (PVSD). The District is effectively a gatekeeper to all things related to the public schools. At the District I explained our plans, as I had shared previously at PVSEA and Las Posas Schools. The District Cabinet listened politely. At the conclusion of my presentation, I asked if there were any questions. The current Superintendent, who is retiring at the end of the school year, spoke. He shared, "As you might imagine from looking at me, I've spent many *many* years in education. I help school districts all over find qualified Superintendents. In all my time, I've never seen or heard of any institution, organization, foundation, or church do what you are doing. Before I retire from this position, we are going to recognize the work your church is engaged in." There were no questions and no apparent obstacles. We received a green light and we were granted the right to move forward in our desire to be a church loving schools in our community at large.

Within a couple of weeks, Pastor Jeremy, the Community Life Pastor at Nexus, and I were meeting with Principal Robert Waggoner of Dos Caminos School, the third elementary campus we sought to engage. Principal Waggoner was raised in Camarillo, where he attended the public schools and has since served here as an educator and principal. Tommy joined us for the meeting offering his support and advocacy for Calvary Nexus.

After giving my now usual presentation, I asked Robert if he had any questions. Principal Waggoner asked if he could share a story with me, and then proceeded to tell me about his grandfather. His grandfather had been a business owner in our community. At one point, he suffered a major health setback, and from that point onward the family's finances were significantly impacted. Robert's dad had been a gifted high school athlete, but because of the financial struggles the family could no longer afford to buy his cleats. There was a generous man in the community, however, who stepped in to buy Robert's dad's shoes. As Robert was growing up, his father would occasionally cross paths with the man who had bought his cleats for him when he was younger. Robert said that his dad never forgot the kindness of this man and that he wanted Robert to understand the significance that the simple act of compassion had meant in the family's life. (As an aside, Robert's dad was on the championship team.) As such, Principal Waggoner understood very personally how much of a difference it can make to help students and their families, with needs great and small. Then Principal Waggoner thanked us for what we were doing and planning to do and confirmed with us his eager and willing participation.

Suffice it to say that in these last two years we have seen ample evidence of God's convergence – the act of moving toward union. God has worked supernaturally, in a seemingly natural way, over and over again, connecting people, places, and plans, right before our eyes.

Yet, why should you and your church seek to engage and love students and families connected to public schools in your community?

Chapter 4: Why Churches Should Love Schools

I don't want this to become a theological treatise, but I do believe that it is critical to at least briefly address the theological foundations for churches loving schools. Then I will cover some practical considerations.

Theological Foundations

Image bearers: You and I have been created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-28). It is God's will that we are to exist in relationship with Him and to bear His image to those who don't yet know God (as well as to those who do). God's commandments help us to understand His nature, how we are to relate to Him, and how we are to represent Him to others.

Great Commandments and Commission: Jesus declared that all of God's commandments could be distilled to their essence, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. 'This is *the* first and the greatest commandment. The second *is* like it:' you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37-39). Despite the fact that Jesus was asked in the singular tense, "Which is the greatest commandment?" the LORD's response nonetheless includes two commandments (plural). He links the second greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18) to the first one, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:5). Jesus links these two commandments so that they cannot be separated. A person cannot love God supremely without also loving neighbors, and a person cannot love neighbors as oneself without first loving God. In Christ, the two are inseparable, they are mutually exclusive, and they are two parts of the same whole.

All of God's commandments and all the words of the prophets point to the same instruction: that we love God supremely. God is to be the master passion of our lives, such that the love we render is spiritual, intellectual, and emotional, an expression of our entire person (Deut. 6:4-5).

I'm assuming that for many, this reminder about the Great Commandments isn't a new revelation. Put simply, this is basic Christian doctrine. Similarly, the Great Commission--which states that we are to make disciples of Jesus-- should be familiar (Matt.28:18-20). The synthesis of the Great Commandments and the Great Commission is, "Be a follower of Jesus who loves God supremely, loves neighbors like self, and makes other followers who do likewise." Despite the relative simplicity of these concepts, we, as believers, often struggle to actually do them.

One of our obstacles is that it is often much easier for Christians to associate with one another, especially when they are similar. For example, we tend to be more comfortable with people who share a similar worldview, socioeconomic status, education level, political perspective, and theological stances. Thus, we tend to justify ourselves by "*one another-ing*" rather than loving the diverse range of neighbors where we live, work, study, and play.

If, however, we are to submit to and obey God's Great Commandments and His Commission, then we are to rise above these distinctions; we are to love any and all of those whom God puts in our paths and in our communities (where we live, work, study, and play.) The goal is, of course, that we are to represent Him to those who don't already know Him, so that they might ideally come to know Him. Since God demonstrates His love for us by unmerited, sacrificial, and committed service, we are called to do likewise to others. We are to engage, befriend, and love our neighbors so that they ideally respond to Jesus and His gospel and experience His redemptive love (Matt. 20:24-48).

Remember and care for the needy: In both the Old and New Testaments, God reveals that it is His will that His people show compassion to those in need (Deut. 15:10, Prov. 14:31, Gal. 2:10). He also reveals to us one of the many powerful mysteries of walking with the LORD, which is namely that by showing mercy and care to those in need, we are also in effect caring for Jesus Himself. If we indeed pour our love onto others (and Him by extension) there is a promise of a reward as such (Matt. 25:35-40).

On the other hand, however, if we do not extend ourselves to love the poor, there is an unmistakable consequence, made clear in Proverbs: "If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered" (Prov. 21:13).

The Apostle John summarizes the necessary attitudes and actions towards those in need as follows, "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth" (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

Caring for the poor and those in need is not the means of salvation, but it is evidence of salvation (Eph. 2:8-10, Matt. 25:31-46). When a Christian cares for the poor, shares the good news of God's love and forgiveness of sins, and does it all for the glory of God, it is evidence of salvation in their lives. It is evidence that a life can be renewed and propelled by a contagious hope in Christ. On the other hand, when non-Christians care for the poor, they are not motivated by showing Christ's love or glorifying God; it is thus not evidence of salvation in their lives. You don't have to be a Christian to care for the poor, but you cannot be a follower of Jesus, whose life has been transformed, and not care for those in need.

Reach children (and their families) for Christ: God's desire to see children united with Christ is revealed by the following encounter: *Then little children were brought to Him that He might put His hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven." And He laid His hands on them and departed from there* (Matt. 19:13-15).

In this passage we see parents bringing their young children to Jesus to receive His blessing, while the disciples shoe them away. As happens in many other situations, the disciples were missing the mark. The disciples were guilty of thinking that children were not important, and did not deserve Jesus' time, efforts, energy or care. Yet, Jesus quickly corrects their thinking

when He declares, *“Let the little children come to Me...”* Jesus clearly reveals the importance of children to God. Furthermore, the act of laying His hands on them was a symbolic gesture of bestowing God’s blessing. Jesus makes it abundantly clear that children and their parents are valued by God and He desires them to know His redemptive love. *The children are the key to our future and the gospel is the key to their future.*

Jesus’ call for us to be image bearers, to fulfill the Great Commandments and Commission and to remember and care for the needy rings loud and clear. In the suburbs there are many who have excess resources and can be generous without significantly altering their lifestyle. Thus, they may give, but they aren’t really required to give of themselves. The goal of serving in a Christ-like way is for others to experience God’s sacrificial love not only through our financial gifts but also through our showing care for who they are. This kind of love creates a bridge towards Jesus. Our goal isn’t just to meet monetary needs, but to engage in relationships wherein we can share Jesus.

Reaching a place: In the Apostle Paul’s discourse with Athenian philosophers at Mars Hill he observed that God had determined the pre-appointed times and the boundaries of all peoples (Ac. 17:26). Transposed into a message for today, this means that God has brought you to where you are and when you are for the purposes I’ve just described above.

The Bible is written with an overarching sense of place. The Old Testament is focused primarily upon a place: the Promised Land. The Gospels focus on Israel and Jesus’ ministry there. The New Testament Epistles focus on places such as Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Thessalonica, and Philippi. The Book of Acts chronicles the early Church as it transitions from the primarily Jewish place (Israel) to the primarily Gentile places (the Roman Empire) in fulfillment of Jesus’ description of His gospel’s spreading influence (Ac. 1:8).

A Biblical worldview involves God’s people relating in community with one another and seeking to reach others in that place for God. Biblical worldviews are distinct from Western cultural perspectives in that for Christ-followers the focus is (or should be) on God and others, while for non-believers the focus is often on the individual and the individual’s comfort.

Practical Considerations

In contemplating how to accomplish the mission of bearing His image, fulfilling the Great Commandments and Commission, caring for the needy, and reaching the people (children and adults), engaging public schools is a great place to start. Simply stated, there is no other entity that connects children and families like a public school. There is no other place frequented by such a high percentage of a community’s population or with such a diverse population represented within.

There are, of course, countless other possibilities. For example, caring for the homeless, organizing food distribution, outreaches to widows, orphans, prisoners, and refugees are all important to God (James 1:27, Matt. 25:31-46). Similarly, engaging children in recreational

sports is another way to seek to reach children and parents. This document, however, asserts that an under-utilized starting point, and one with a rich field of needs, is the public school system.

Local schools tend to be a nexus of socioeconomic diversity in a community. In a suburban community, sports, parks and schools tend to be more diverse than other places in that community. Whereas extra-curricular activities such as art, music, and dance certainly play a role in the community, sports tend to draw an even more diverse crowd. As children age, though, the number of participants wanes, because not every child is an athlete.

Parks also tend to be great equalizers in a community. People from every socioeconomic sector gather in local parks for fitness, play, relaxation, BBQs, enjoyment of outdoor spaces, etc. However, a National Recreation and Park Association survey published in December 2016 reported that people, on average, visit local parks less than thirty times a year.

Statistics published by the National Center for Education Statistics show that the public schools, on the other hand, which are frequented by students some 180 days of the year, are frequented by a large cross section of our entire population. Data from 2018 shows that there are over six million students in K-12 public schools in California (42.7% in cities and 45.8% in suburbs). Thus, about 15% percent of the State's population is in public schools for a better part of one out of every two days of the year. These statistics are generally consistent across the United States, and similarly hold true in my community of Camarillo.

Furthermore, within this population, the socioeconomic diversity is evident. According to research published by Ed100.org in December 2020, California's public school population can be broken down as such: approx. 55% Latino, 22% white, 10% Asian, and 5% African American students in the public schools.

Schools represent an underutilized opportunity to show God's love to a community. Public schools likely have the greatest numbers of marginalized people and needs in a suburban community. The number of students (and thus families) participating in a Federal or State government subsidized food program is likely to exceed 20%. Yet, churches have not generally engaged public schools. The income inequality in California using the GINI index is higher than the national average, and these demographic standards are reflected in Camarillo.

Schools want their students and families to be assisted. Many church leaders have assumed that efforts to serve the students, teachers, or schools would not be welcomed. Although schools cannot endorse a particular religion, this does not preclude people of faith serving schools. Generally, schools want their students to get the help that is desperately needed. When children don't have proper clothing, medical attention, nutrition, utilities and transportation it adversely impacts education and lives. While schools greatly care, they are often at a loss as to how to help.

The local public school is the essence of a community. Some may be of the perspective that public schools need to do a better job and some may be critical of different curricula for a host of reasons. Some may even advocate for a utopian education system where they have eliminated the public school altogether. Nevertheless, the public school is the most accurate representation of what is really going on in a community – its essence. In other words, while private and homeschool opportunities can be wonderful options for those who live with a certain amount of privilege, the public school still reveals what is below the veneer in the community, and what is the only option for many who live without financial advantages.

The majority of Christians make their commitment to Jesus while school aged. Research by Barna in 2009 found that 64% of Christians made their faith decision before the age of eighteen. Given this statistic, it is logical that we put our focus on children and that we invest in them at this critical time in their decision-making process. Furthermore, we need to reach them before they choose destructive paths. We need to show them God’s love at a time in their lives when they are statistically more receptive to hearing about it.

Public schools are a mission field right in your community. Perhaps as you consider the thoughts that I’ve presented, your instinct is to push back. You may be asking yourself, “*what about homeschool families and Christian schools?*” I’m not suggesting that home school or private school families should be neglected. I’m also not advocating for an “either or” approach, but rather for a “both and” approach. Our local church will continue to esteem Christian homeschooling families and honor those participating in Christian schools. We even offer some scholarships for families to participate in Christian private schools. At the same time, though, we are convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is calling us to the public schools as a mission field. As part of this mission, we hope that many homeschool and Christian school families will join the effort of serving the public schools together with the rest of the church. Our goal is to reach the public school children and their families with Jesus’ love and to share His gospel. **Our goal is not to divide the church along the lines of educational ideologies.**

An unfortunate objection that I’ve heard, though, is that *the public school is our enemy*. Fortunately, this opposition is rare, but needs to be addressed because of the insidious nature of the objection. I recognize that most public school curriculum is opposed to Biblical values. Yet, the students, their families, the teachers, and the administrators are not our enemies, but rather, they are our neighbors. Furthermore, even if they were our enemies (and they are not) Jesus has called us to love them in spite of it—and to uniquely display His love to them (Matt. 5:44).

What about other programs or initiatives that may be curtailed? This is a constant tension in a local church. In order to effectively move forward with change and vision, the status quo is often disrupted. The process requires realigning, merging (or sometimes even eliminating) initiatives and implementing adjustments slowly. It also requires being creative and redirecting what is already in place towards new endeavors. (An example would be inspiring existing small groups to adopt an Assistance Request Forms, or to serve together at the Serve Day, or to pack backpacks during their meeting.) The end goal is to move towards a better future for the

church, the community and the kingdom, breathing new life both into the church and into the community, and growing God's kingdom.

Finally, *can we afford this?* Yes, we can! Sincerely engaging with the community and truly demonstrating Jesus' radical love can be simultaneously very extravagant and similarly inexpensive. Nevertheless, simply throwing money at a perceived need or problem does not appear to be Jesus' prescribed method or manner. Jesus' way was to listen and to give people the chance to share what was really going on in their lives. So, while money and financial resources are a relevant and significant factor to consider, often much of the way we show love is in taking the time ask what a person really needs and to care about meeting that need.

When God's people have a better understanding of why the church is loving schools, they will likely want to support the effort with their time, talents, and treasure.

PART 2:
**Practical Considerations and Inspired Contemplations:
The “How,” the “Who” and the “When” of Churches Loving
Schools**

Chapter 5: How we love schools

In this section, I'll explain "how" we seek to have the church love schools. This is not to suggest that this is the best way, or the only way. Our approach may be more strategic, and your approach might be more organic. Also, you will notice that our approach is intended to mobilize many volunteers and thus a critical mass of a local church. Again, I'm not suggesting that this is the only way or the best way. The answers to the question, "How can churches love schools?" appears to be unlimited in light of God's creative capacity. Thus, I'm only offering our model for consideration and inspiration. **In the section, I'll also include personal stories and reflections from some of the people that this initiative has touched.**

We could never have planned or predicted all that would happen, but we were open to having new ideas unfold before us. By encouraging church members to offer whatever gifts and talents they had, we opened a door for people to demonstrate God's love in ways that were unique to their training and calling. It was consistent with our overall plans, but also allowed the organic flow of unique talents to pour from our church onto the community.

When someone wanted to leverage their soccer academy experience to offer soccer clinics to elementary school kids, we jumped on board, helped connect them with the right people and gave them carte blanche.

When musicians offer to provide music lessons at no cost to the students, we will connect them with the right people and give them complete freedom. (We will even support the musicians by providing a stipend from the church.)

When a member of the Nexus community asked me during the early stages of our efforts whether it was okay or not for the volunteer to share their contact information with the assistance recipient, we honestly hadn't thought about the issue before. Our team then thought this over and prayed about it and decided that this was a great idea that would help develop deeper relationships between volunteers and the recipients of assistance. We simply asked him to let us know if he or his Neighborhood Group (small group) provided additional assistance (in addition to the original Assistance Request Form) and to let us know, so that we could track the information in our database.

Ideas like Color Runs, hair cutting events, car washes, medical and dental clinics, or any other ideas that arise and *are approved by the school(s)* can and likely should be considered by the church.

Methods: A Proposed Comprehensive 7-Step Approach for Churches loving Schools

1. Good News Clubs:

Jane's story

Who am I?

My husband Ron and I have lived in Camarillo for 37 years and raised our three children here. We now have ten grandchildren and have been an active part of Calvary Nexus for almost sixteen years.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

I have been blessed to see God's convergence at work in my own life. Ten years ago, one of my grandsons, Seth, began kindergarten at PVSEA. His kindergarten teacher, Joy Felix, had recently started attending Calvary Nexus. I began to volunteer weekly in Seth's class and developed a friendship with Joy. The following year I volunteered in her class full-time and was able to develop relationships with other teachers and staff as well. They earned my admiration and respect. I could see how hard the teachers worked, the difficulties they faced, and their good hearts. As I met other parents and grandparents who volunteered in Joy's class, I was able to befriend them and share the gospel with many, including a Pakistani Muslim lady who has remained my good friend. I also fell in love with the students and could see the material and spiritual needs that they and their families experienced. I began to pray for a way to reach the children with the gospel.

What was my experience?

That summer after my first full year of volunteering, I ran into a lady I had known years before. As we talked, she shared her involvement in the Good News Club. I had never heard of it before, but as she told me about it, God lit a fire inside me that would not go out. I knew that God wanted one at PVSEA. I told Joy about it, as well as a few other friends who were equally excited. Within one week, God had put together our team! In the fall, Joy and I prayed and approached our new principal with the idea. She was immediately receptive, even allowing us to pass out flyers to every child through the classrooms. The first Good News Club at PVSEA began in January 2013 with 32 children. By May it had grown to 60 children, and God had added extra leaders and given us a bigger room to meet the need!

Since that time, because of God's blessing and continued favor with the schools and district, we have been able to expand into four elementary schools in Camarillo. God continues to bring the workers and the children. Hundreds of children's lives have been changed for all eternity as they hear the gospel for the first time and accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. They are then mentored through the club. Many of these children have never attended church and have no Bible knowledge. It is exciting to see them fall in love with Jesus and begin to share Him with

their friends and family members. Children are hungry for Jesus, hungry to know that there is a God who loves them, who will never leave them, who they can always depend on. It's the message children need to hear today, to give them security in the midst of unstable family and world situations.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

God has so greatly enriched my own life as He led me on this journey into the public schools. He's given me many new friendships and an avenue to share the gospel. It's a blessing to be able to use this time in my life fruitfully for His kingdom. I've learned that He can do anything, and He can use anyone. He calls, He opens doors, He equips, and He gives the fruit. It has been marvelous to watch Him work in me and in others as He develops us into leaders and teachers, making us fishers of men!

The support of Calvary Nexus in PVSEA and the district has helped to keep doors open to the Good News Club. It has given the principal and district office a more positive feeling about us and about what we are doing. The church's gifts and help have impressed the teachers, so they all seem to welcome us on campus. In fact, a Buddhist teacher even opened her classroom for the club last year at PVSEA, expressing thanks for the support of Calvary Nexus. Getting involved with local schools is a rewarding and fruitful way for churches to show and share the love of Jesus with their community!

Good News Clubs are a weekly after school group for interested students, who receive permission from their parent(s) or guardians to learn a Bible lesson, hear about Jesus and His gospel, provide hope, build character, and strengthen moral and spiritual growth. (<https://www.cefonline.com/ministries/goodnewsclub/>).

Good News Clubs have been offered around the globe for decades and are likely present in or near your community. The Good News Clubs (GNC) are available in community centers, homes, churches and public schools. Yes, public schools. Any school that offers clubs on campus (e.g., music, art, chess, video games, etc.) cannot discriminate against nor exclude a similar club that is offering religious content.

Generally, clubs require a teacher who is willing to open their classroom to accommodate the club. Nevertheless, it only takes one teacher per school. Thus, a teacher can serve as a gatekeeper in reaching the kids on campus. Teachers don't participate in GNC (I'll explain why later), though they can offer their classrooms in order to host. So, don't expect Christian teachers to be leading or participating in this after school program at their school.

For those who are not familiar with the impact of the GNC and the effectiveness in *public* schools let me share some brief insight. In our county, which I previously mentioned is located at the southern tip of the ninth most unchurched area in the country, there were almost 500

decisions for Christ through GNC in eight-plus months in 2019. During 2020, when schools were closed during the pandemic, there were nonetheless 268 decisions for Jesus.

Ron's Story

Who am I? *My wife, Jane and I have lived in Camarillo since 1984. My career has been as a mechanical designer/engineer, first working for companies, and then later, self-employed for 25 years. I've been retired for about two years now.*

I became a Christian at an early age, and because I had Jesus and His input and His mercy in my life, I was able to avoid a lot of the pitfalls that Satan and the world throw at us. As an adult, I have recognized and appreciated that my life doesn't have a lot of the scars that others have. This doesn't make me better than others, but I can recognize how Satan works to destroy lives and families. My mother was a believer as I grew up, but not my father. Again, I was fortunate that, although he wasn't a believer, he also didn't restrict my mother from taking us kids to church. Happily, he finally received Jesus about two weeks before he died, and I will get to see him again!

In my life, I have been fortunate to teach various age levels at church, from kids through to adults, throughout my adult life, and have also become a Stephen Minister leader, and recently, a Billy Graham Association Rapid Response Chaplain. I also lead two Neighborhood Groups and have been a short-term missionary in many different countries. Through all of these experiences and training, God has equipped me to listen to others, how to encourage and mentor them, and teach about Him to others. I had been thinking recently about how God, step by step, has grown me and trained me, equipping me to reach out, better and better, as an ambassador to the Mighty King.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools? *I first became interested in the Good News Clubs (GNC) through my wife, Jane. She had it in her heart to begin a local club, and although I wanted to become involved with it at that time also, it was a couple of years before I was able to make the commitment to begin. I could see her joy and excitement of working with the kids, and I had a desire to also be involved.*

I have now been active with the GNC for five years. I have been involved in all areas of the clubs, from teaching the Bible lessons, reading missionary stories, helping the kids to learn memory verses, plus leading songs and games. During the last two years prior to COVID, I was involved in two clubs each week, allowing me to impact even more children. This also served to let me use my preparation a second time!

I rejoiced when my pastor Bruce, and our church decided recently to get involved with the GNC, and the schools in general, and when they began supporting the GNC clubs with resources of time and treasure. I am trusting that God will lead many other adults into considering active involvement or other support of the GNC. I look forward to many additional schools and children

being reached for Jesus, for His salvation, and His help to the kids going through the struggles of life.

What was my experience? *Working with kids is both a joy and a struggle. The joy comes from their enthusiasm and excitement of learning about Jesus and their participation in the games and activities. When they ask or answer questions, you never know what will come out of their mouths, but what they say helps me to get what they understand, and what needs to be more clearly explained. It can be an interesting challenge to learn how to relate the Bible and its stories to them, in words and concepts appropriate to their ages.*

On the other hand, they have already been in school for the entire day, and, as kids, get restless. If they get bored or are uninterested in the current activity, they are quick to create their own fun, even though that means disrupting others. In other words, regular kids.

There is, of course, a time commitment for preparation of whatever I will be presenting during the current week GNC. Reading, studying, and re-reading the material, to be sure I present it accurately, and in a manner that will be interesting and understandable to the kids are all necessary prep work. At the end of a week's club, sometimes there are feelings of a job well done, though at other times, I recognize a need to review what needs to be improved in the future.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others? *Working with kids is a rewarding experience, just as all of ministry is. I have grown in my ability to relate to kids, and an understanding of how they think. It has been exciting to see them grow in love for God, and maturity in how they think and act.*

I have also gotten to know some of the teachers and faculty at the schools, and their commitment to their students. I believe there is a mutual kinship in doing the best possible for the kids.

Through the GNC and the other ministries that I have been involved with, God has grown me, and changed me, from a formerly quiet, introverted person, into a more open, extroverted person better able to listen to others, and to support and encourage them, sharing the love of God to them, and the way of salvation. I have become bolder in sharing my faith while speaking with others, and sharing how God loves them, wants to save them, and promises to be with them. As Jesus promised in Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." This same Jesus gives us His peace in the midst of any trials we may face, even the struggles we are all facing today.

In our community of Camarillo, prior to the pandemic, there were three GNCs at local elementary schools with approximately fifty students per school. In all likelihood, there were more students at a single GNC than in most of the youth groups in Camarillo.

1. One of the great fruits of the GNCs is that children typically leave with improved attitudes, behaviors and morals. This is attractive to most parents.
2. A second draw for the GNCs at the school is that it often solves transportation issues. Many parents are simply unable to provide transportation for their student to attend activities off-campus. Having the GNC on campus, immediately after the school day, resolves logistical issues.
3. Third, a great symbiosis and convergence happens between the church and these clubs. It not only increases the pool of volunteers from which GNC volunteers can be drawn but it also gives the church another place into which to pour their love for public schools.
4. Fourth, **it only takes five volunteers to operate a GNC at a school.** Considering the low threshold of volunteers to facilitate a club on campus, it is feasible to offer a GNC at multiple (elementary) schools in a community.
5. Fifth, GNCs will coordinate all the training for volunteers at the church and perform the necessary background checks.

2. Assistance Request Forms:

Bruce's Story

Who am I?

I am a twenty-five-year resident of Camarillo. I've been married to Karen for over thirty years, and we have two adult sons. I'm a pastor of a local church and have been a pastor and Bible teacher for over thirty years.

I had an awakening experience around 2016. I realized that my theology regarding the Great Commandments – to love God supremely, and love my neighbors like myself was sound, but my behavior did not align. I was so busy with ministry at the church that I did not have time, margin, or interest in engaging or befriending my neighbors. Simply stated, I did not know them, let alone love them, let alone love them as I loved myself. There was a sense of conviction that I had clearly neglected The Great Commandments. I could try to justify, deflect, or deny this reality or yield to God and change my attitude and actions. The decision to yield and better represent Christ in my community has made me a better person, husband, father, friend, and neighbor.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

As I've written, it seemed fortuitous, but I'm clearly convinced that my involvement was God's convergence. I was a willing instrument to be used by God to accomplish His purposes to love a community in such a way that people could come to know Jesus and His gospel.

My kids grew up attending public schools in Camarillo, and we had generally good impressions of the schools. Yet, I was incredibly ignorant of and naïve to challenges, and the level of commitment that school staff have towards the children, their families, their schools, and by extension my community. Karen had volunteered at the elementary school that our sons attended, but my involvement was limited to back-to-school nights, or school plays, and the like.

What was my experience?

My first experience with an Assistance Request Form occurred a couple of months after we started our relationship with PVSEA and Principal Holtke. Initially, the number of requests was limited. Since we wanted our church family to have the opportunity to show God’s love to the school community, I had initially waited before personally adopting a request. Then one day I received an assistance request from the school and sensed that God wanted me to intervene personally.

I called the parent who had submitted the card and explained that I received her card from the school, that I was connected to Calvary Nexus, and I wanted to help. She had checked the “groceries” box on the form, so I mentioned that to her. She then explained that she was giving her three small children cereal to eat, because there was no other food in the home to offer her kids.

I’ve had the experience in my home where someone has opened a seemingly full refrigerator and remarked, “There’s nothing to eat.” I’ve also had the experience of traveling in developing countries and encountering people who had little to no food; and that experience is humbling, sobering, and ideally life changing. Yet, I had not had the experience of discovering someone in our relatively affluent suburb of Camarillo who essentially had no food to feed her children. Clearly this was something that I should have been aware of, but I was not.

I explained to the mom that I could deliver grocery gift cards to her home, or that I could meet her at the church, the school or anywhere else that was convenient for her, and that I could be there within a half-hour or whenever was best for her. She asked if I could come by her apartment. I arrived in less than thirty minutes.

The front door of the apartment was open, so she saw me through the screen door as I approached. She came out to meet me and I introduced myself and presented the grocery gift cards. She was clearly moved by the gesture of kindness and asked if she could hug me. She hugged me so tightly and for so long that it was almost uncomfortable, but really it was so pure and special that it was memorable.

I encouraged her that God loves her and her children and that hope is available in Christ. I then offered to pray for her and her kiddos and afterwards let her know that she and her family were very welcome at our church. I told her the location and times.

She thanked me again and returned to her apartment. As I was walking away, very slowly processing the experience, I could hear the woman say, "We're going to church this Sunday!"

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

The experience helped me to be better aware of the need to be involved personally. It is great to be generous with my financial resources, but it is better for me to also give of myself, like Jesus does. Those situations stretch me and reveal to me areas where I need to grow in Christlikeness to better reflect His attitudes and actions. The experience also revealed how relatively small gestures of kindness done to represent Jesus can have a marvelous impact to create bridges for people to come to Christ.

I also realized that there are undoubtedly many layers of challenges being experienced by this woman and her children. Neither I nor the church where I serve have the ability to remedy all those challenges. A couple hundred dollars of grocery gift cards could help temporarily, but there were Grand Canyon size issues there and I did not have enough rocks or boulders to fill the need. Yet, arguably the greatest thing that I did was communicate God's love, try to demonstrate God's love, and remind her of the hope of God. This life is filled with struggles, but God is offering life with Him, and an eternity where there are no struggles.

Assistance Request Forms (bilingual) can be filled out by parents, teachers, and administrators requesting assistance related to school supplies, clothing, groceries, car repairs, utility bills, etc. The forms are gathered weekly by Calvary Nexus, and needs are adopted on Sunday by individuals, families, Neighborhood Groups (small groups), and Calvary Nexus when necessary. The assistance is provided within the week; and assistance is not conditioned upon any religious activities.

I've written earlier about our experience with the use of the Assistance Request Forms, and the success and impact that we saw. Nevertheless, here are some additional thoughts:

1. First, most of the assistance that we are seeking to provide relates to relatively stable, controllable expenses. Generally speaking, they are the types of expenses that are likely to be cared for with an expenditure of less than \$250.00. These are the type of costs that an individual, couple/family, or small group are likely to be able to handle. The system is not designed to pay thousands for rent or mortgage expenses. This is helpful information to convey to school leaders including principals, counselors, teachers, or office administrators *prior* to implementing.
2. Second, it can be very **helpful for the church to create a budget for assisting with needs**. The scope of the budget will vary depending on a church's unique situation. Again, it is very helpful to explain to school leaders that the church has allocated a certain sum to help ensure that needs are cared for, and to occasionally help with larger needs. For example, the church may not be able to cover a \$2,000 rent, but they may be

able to provide \$400 towards the bill. Similarly, the church may not be able to pay to re-roof a house, but they would be able to provide grocery store gift cards to help offset costs so that more of the family's funds could go toward the larger repair.

3. A third situation may arise when the volunteer(s) who adopt an Assistance Request Form expect the total expenditure to be less than it actually is, and they cannot raise enough among them to cover the bill. For example, a small group adopts a Form for which the utility bill is assumed to be less than \$100 and it turns out to be \$200. In this scenario, the church can use their budget to supplement the difference and satisfy the need.

Tommy's Story

Who am I?

My name is Thomas Holtke and I am the Principal of Pleasant Valley School of Engineering and Arts (PVSEA). I have served in the profession of education as a teacher (kindergarten, first, second, fourth and seventh grades) and administrator (dean of students and principal) in three school districts and six different schools for twenty-six years. Each school district and their schools were unique with regards to demographics and socio-economic populations. Despite the schools' variations, the universal factor tying me to every school has been that I love kids and education.

PVSEA is a unique learning community with a school-wide Title I program. Seventy percent of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch, and we have an English learner population that is rapidly approaching 40 percent of our student body. When I took over as principal of PVSEA five years ago, it was struggling school. Students were not struggling due to inability to learn, as ALL students can learn. The students (and their families) were simply struggling due to a lack of outside advocates and resources directed toward their targeted needs. The challenge before me was to increase the students' opportunities and therefore ensure excellence for all.

As an educator, I get to engage with students for a finite amount of time on campus, amounting to roughly seven hours each day, including recess and lunch. To maximize the time spent with students, I put several measures in place: I hire and professionally develop outstanding teachers to lead classrooms, I employ a nurturing support staff to foster social and emotional learning, I create relationships and build rapport with students and their families to gain trust and support, I ensure a rich and robust academic curriculum at every grade level, and I manage the learning community to minimize pitfalls and distractions. All these tasks are designed and set into motion so that the time spent at school with students facilitates their greater success.

With this said, it is critical to note that NO learning will ever take place (despite all the efforts mentioned previously) when a student arrives to school without their basic universal human needs met. The basic needs that I refer to are: food, warmth, rest, and safety. Without these

basic needs met, a student is not ready to learn. How could one ever learn if they are hungry, cold, exhausted, or worried about their family?

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

PVSEA had been previously connected to Calvary Nexus Church on the campus, by means of the after-school Good News Club that served students. My connection, relationship and journey with Pastor Bruce and Calvary Nexus Church was in its infancy at that time. Over the course of four years, through countless conversations, a rapport was built on respect and a mutual friendship was established. It was evident that we both shared a common vision to love and serve the students and families of PVSEA. As our relationship grew, we shared conversations about student needs, unseen pitfalls, public school parameters to ensure compliance to rules and regulations, opportunities and resources that the church could offer, and ways to partner the church and public school to ensure there wasn't an entanglement of church and state.

What was my experience?

I was asked to share a story from my personal experience regarding churches loving schools. My story is not about a singular event, though, as I would inadvertently leave something out. Rather, my story is about the mosaic of events that all occurred when common resources were provided by the church to our families. It is the accumulation of all these gestures seen together that conveys, to me, Calvary Nexus' commitment to loving the students of PVSEA. It's a love that ensures that everyday basic human needs are met in the lives of school children. It is a love that enables students to come to school daily, ready to learn and achieve excellence.

In particular, the compilation of events revolves around the Assistance Request Cards (ARC) provided by the church. The way these cards work is that a simple card in English and Spanish is used by staff members, teachers, or administrators, to describe and detail specific needs of a child and their family. The card is then picked up by a member of the church and within one week's time, the student's needs are addressed. At PVSEA, I know that there are students whose only two meals of the day are the ones served out of our cafeteria. By completing an ARC, I know that a student's family will receive assistance in the form of grocery gift cards to offer dinners and breakfasts so that students will not arrive to school hungry. Completing an ARC also ensures that when I greet students in the morning, they are wearing shoes that are sized correctly, clothes that are free of holes and fit appropriately, and accompanied with a sweater or jacket for inclement weather-- because assistance was received in the form of clothing gift cards. An ARC also ensures that homework can be completed at home because the lights were on, as the electric bill was paid. An ARC also guarantees that the student will be well-rested due to having slept in a heated / air-conditioned room on a mattress, rather than on the couch or on the floor.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

As I stated, the basic human needs of our students were often out of the control of PVSEA staff and often directly influenced a student's daily success. The assistances being provided by the church were minimizing the hurdles that were in the way of a student's success. Calvary Nexus continued to make differences behind the scenes to increase the opportunities for success for

students. Nothing replicates a lesson taught by the teacher and therefore a student's daily attendance at school is crucial. Often students were late or absent because the family vehicle was inoperable. The completion of an ARC would ensure that the bill for the vehicle repair was paid and that alternative transportation was provided while the vehicle was in the shop. Many times, getting a student to attend regularly simply depended on the family having enough gasoline to get the students to school. Many times I saw this facilitated by the ARCs, such that gasoline gift cards were provided to families who needed them.

A student's success is also dependent on nightly practice in the form of homework or extension projects. Often, however, PVSEA students did not have a quiet place at home to study or the necessary supplies to complete a project. ARCs were also created to procure student desks and chairs and the supplies necessary for projects.

Calvary Nexus Church and Pastor Bruce have become the silent, behind-the-scenes advocates for all students at PVSEA by providing resources to fulfill basic human needs, and therefore expanding learning opportunities and ensuring excellence for every student.

Based upon the many successes between Calvary Nexus Church and PVSEA, my relationship with the church and in particular Pastor Bruce continued to grow. I found myself wanting to join the church's endeavors to share God's love with others. I have been able to serve as a conduit between the church, the Pleasant valley School District and now two additional schools (Las Posas School and Dos Caminos School) within the school district. These opportunities have led me to feel as though I am doing my part in Loving God and Loving My Neighbor. More importantly, as I continued to bear witness to the continuous acts of God's love through the church, I found myself wanting more involvement. More involvement within the Calvary Nexus Church has led to my fiancé Jamie and me attending church on Sundays. Jamie and I have been blessed that Pastor Bruce will be officiating our wedding this summer. God's love is such a miraculous thing!

3. Adopt-a-teacher: (On-going)

1. Adopt-a-teacher is intended to foster on-going involvement between a Neighborhood Group (small group) and a teacher. Any teacher seeking assistance in the form of school supplies, classroom volunteers, or prayer will be connected directly to a Neighborhood Group. The group will then focus their attention on the needs of this particular teacher. This creates opportunities not only for volunteers who are interested in serving at the schools, but also for the teachers who are seeking help.
2. One of the goals is that teachers would know that they, as individuals, are cared about. A bonus will be to know that they are also being prayed for and the meaningfulness of this.

4. Classroom Supplies for teachers (One-time)

John's Story

Who am I?

I have been the principal of an elementary school in Camarillo for the past seven years, and I have been in education for a total of 32 years. I have been a teacher, assistant principal and principal in that time frame, serving large and small schools with a wide spectrum of socio-economic needs as well.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

About two years ago, Pastor Bruce reached out to me at the suggestion of another principal in the district who has worked closely with Calvary Nexus. After a meaningful conversation and meeting personally with Bruce, I was convinced that his heart was in the right place and accepted his invitation to assist our local families in our school community. Since that meeting, his congregation has graciously provided real support in the manner of food, clothing, and basic necessities that we all need from day to day.

What was my experience?

Since first partnering with Calvary Nexus, my school community has been the recipient of their incredible generosity. Teacher gift cards and the implementation of assistance cards on my campus has been truly amazing. My staff and I have been incredibly impressed and humbled by the servant's heart that is consistently demonstrated by Bruce and his church members.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

This experience has truly reinforced the simple concept of the positive impact that one group can bestow upon another group, simply by living out the simple truth of loving each other as God loves us, with no expectation for recognition or remuneration...just because. That is a powerful statement in a culture that is looking to find fault with those in our community. Pastor Bruce and Calvary Nexus are truly servants that are filling the gaps that abound within our community. Thank you for sharing Christ's love in such a real, tangible, meaningful manner, friends! I am grateful to be your partner in this excellent endeavor.

1. **Recognizing that teachers** supplement a modest budget for classroom supplies with their own funds, we seek to support teachers by providing a Target gift card valued at approximately \$200 to provide for needed classroom supplies. Your church budget will influence the amount that you choose to provide per gift as well as the number of teachers.

2. It may be ideal to provide the gifts at the start of the school year as this is where funds are likely most needed. Any time, however, is appropriate as expenses are generated for teachers throughout the year.
3. It goes a long way to provide a handwritten card addressed to each teacher affirming them and expressing gratitude for their work with the children, their care for the kids, their families, their school and our community. A good opportunity to present the cards is at a teacher/staff meeting where it is often possible to develop more personal relationships. During the presentation, teachers are informed that the gift cards are intended for supplies for their classrooms or for them to use to care for a student's needs. It is helpful to emphasize that you trust their judgment.
4. Gifts can also be an inexpensive, but genuine expression of affirmation and encouragement. For example, providing gift baskets or coffee mugs at the start of the school year with words of welcome and gratitude go a long way, especially when provided with delicious edibles.
5. Teachers should be supported simply because they are doing good for your community. Loving them is a Christlike action. Also, developing relationships with teachers is important because they will only connect families to a church when there is trust.
6. Finally, teachers are gatekeepers for the Good News Clubs.

Again, we would recommend a designated sum in the church budget for these purposes.

5. Back-to-school Backpacks and Supplies

Ellie's Story

Who am I?

First and foremost, I am a follower of Jesus. Second, I am the wife of Dustin and the mother of Ruth and Zaiah. Third, I have a doctorate in Italian literature, I enjoy reading in Italian, Latin, Hebrew, French, Spanish (and am currently studying Greek) and my academic focus is on the use of the Bible in literature. I have taught at UCLA and Pepperdine and now the LORD is calling me to teach at Oaks Christian.

My family and I started attending Calvary Nexus when we were looking for a church that was committed to uncompromising Biblical teaching and whose heart was directed at being the hands and feet of Christ in the community. Since we began attending Calvary Nexus we have been abundantly encouraged and inspired by Pastor Bruce's resolve to preach God's word alone, and to live it out in the tangible actions of loving our neighbors.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

The LORD graciously wove me into Pastor Bruce's vision of Churches Loving Schools in the role of copy and line editor of this book.

What was my experience?

What happened during my editing experience was unexpected. As I entered into Pastor Bruce's narrative on the syntactic and semantic levels, I was simultaneously moved on the spiritual one. Pastor Bruce's sincere devotion to loving the children of the public schools convicted me and revealed that my heart had become somewhat hardened towards the public schools. My stance had previously been to try and protect my children from the controversial new ideologies being presented as truth in the schools. My attitude, thus, towards the schools was defensive; I was not in a position to extend love. God was showing me, however, through Pastor Bruce's powerful vision that my hardened heart was not of God and that it was keeping me from loving my neighbors. Even though it was my job to improve the grammar and sentence structure of the book, it was the ideas within his book that were improving me.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

As a result of my new heart towards Pastor Bruce's vision, my daughters and I jumped on board to get supplies for a backpack. We enjoyed the process so much, that we emailed the office administrator to see if we could get another one. It says in Matthew 6:21, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Even though we were just buying school supplies, in the act of extending our treasure onto another, we also found our hearts going with it. We have begun praying for the students who will receive the backpacks we packed and we are eager to get involved, if possible, with all the other initiatives tied to Churches Loving Schools.

1. **Prior to the end of the school year**, obtain a list of school supplies for the next school year, and a number of students at that school who will need them. School staff will communicate with families to let them know that school supplies are being provided and can coordinate distribution.
2. Establish a goal or number of backpacks that your church hopes to fill.
3. Schedule:
 - a. Let the school know, eight to ten weeks in advance, that you plan to include a **printed card** with the backpacks, signed by volunteers. Include the proposed text for approval. Here is a **sample text** that we've used:

We want to encourage you as you return to school that your neighbors at Calvary Nexus care about you, your family, your teachers and school. We are praying that this is a very special and good year. We are glad to share God's love with you.

*Include your church logo,
address
and website.*

- b. Eight weeks before the date you plan to deliver to the schools: order backpacks or plan for your volunteers to purchase them. Make sure that the styles are diverse so that the recipients cannot be identified or stigmatized. Attach to them a list of individualized grade-level appropriate supplies (i.e., a shopping list).
- c. Four weeks before the distribution date: distribute backpacks to church members.
- d. One week out: have filled backpacks returned.
- e. Have volunteers check the contents against master supply lists to ensure all items are present (be prepared to supplement missing items if needed).

You can start with any goal, and ideally increase the number annually. The more supplies, the more schools and students that you can serve and share God's love with. Again, creating a certain sum in the church budget for this purpose allows you to expand the impact.

6. Back-to-school service day to help teachers:

The Story of Cameron and Summer Draine

Who am I?

We have lived in Camarillo since 1988 and attended Calvary Nexus Church since 2006. We have two children and two grandchildren. I, Cameron, am mostly retired from real estate investments and farming. My wife Summer served as a Marriage and Family Therapist and is currently a Docent at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Most importantly, Summer blessed our family by raising our two children and taking care of our family. While our children were in elementary school, Summer also volunteered weekly as a parent aide to help the teachers and school with extra needs.

While attending Calvary Nexus, we have enjoyed helping with the refreshment service, cleaning the church, serving with the moving ministry, going on mission trips, and volunteering for some of our Big Events, such as our Christmas Shop.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

When Pastor Bruce mentioned the idea of adopting a school to assist the children, their families, and the teachers, we were interested in helping. When he informed us of the percentage of

families that were living below the poverty level-- in our wonderful Camarillo-- we were shocked. This intensified our desire to help in any way we could.

Both of our children have become teachers. Over the years we have become aware of the time, interest, and personal cost they have invested in their classrooms. This includes buying supplies, preparation efforts, and of course time spent with their students. When Pastor Bruce mentioned the desire to help the students by providing back-to-school backpacks filled with supplies, and to help the teachers prepare their classrooms for the first day of school, we were excited about the opportunity. We jumped in to help clean classrooms and to help financially. Calvary Nexus made Assistance Notices available to the families, teachers, and staff at the school as a way to request help. Unfortunately, for Summer and me, every time we would ask to take an Assistance Request Form, all the notices had already been taken. What a blessing for the school; there were more of us wanting to meet needs than there were needs to meet. Our church family was so excited and driven to help the school, we were practically racing to see who could help first.

What was my experience?

Cameron's Perspective: When I arrived, the tents were being installed, backpacks were being unloaded and placed on tables for the parents to pick up. Shortly afterwards, when everyone had arrived, we all gathered with Principal Tommy, the teachers, and the staff to discuss the day and pray.

I was assigned to the task of distributing boxes of books to each classroom, along with about ten other volunteers (most of whom I hadn't met before). The staff member who was our leader was very nice and extremely organized, a true teacher. Throughout the morning we worked in teams dropping off boxes at each classroom. This gave us an opportunity to get to know the people we were working with and to see who and what was going on in each classroom (i.e., cleaning, painting, decorating, organizing).

Summer's Perspective: Upon arriving at the school, I was directed to a classroom to assist in cleaning the room for student arrivals on the first day of school. The teacher and her husband were also there helping us as we cleaned walls, floors, baseboards, chalkboards, bookshelves, and every other little thing we could see! It was wonderful to be able to help the teacher, as she would have been doing this all by herself if we hadn't been there. She and her husband were very, very appreciative.

Following the work, we all gathered in the lunch area where we prayed and enjoyed pizza and salad. That was a nice way to end our workday. We were given delicious food and time to sit and get to know each other. There were both people from the school and from Calvary Nexus there. While we were eating, a woman at the table next to ours started to feel ill. She was laid down on the bench. She spoke very little English, but her family and friends said that she felt nauseous and dizzy. She was given some water and oranges and then we prayed for her. It was powerful to see so many people interested in her wellbeing and recovery.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

Cameron's Perspective: Amid our busy lives, as we drive through Camarillo, passing schools, libraries, and businesses, we seldom think about what's going on inside those buildings, much less about the people inside and what they are living through. While we were working at the school, I got to meet schoolteachers and staff for the first time. I also got to spend time with my fellow church members. Many of us shared issues we were going through. We were able to take the time to listen and share and become closer to each other. Now when I drive down Temple Ave. and drive past the school where I worked, I reflect on Principal Tommy, the teachers, staff, students, and their families. It's no longer just an anonymous place to me; I'm connected to it now.

Summer's Perspective: Our workday at the elementary school was a huge blessing for me. Helping others is not only good for my psyche, but it's good for my heart and my soul. I hoped that when I helped at the school, the school personnel would know that I gave from a loving heart, a heart that is grounded in love of God.

Back-to-School Serve Day Plan:

1. Schedule a Saturday within a few weeks of the start of the school year. Seek to mobilize 75+ volunteers to help teachers prepare their classrooms for returning students. As previously noted, teachers generally spend in excess of forty hours to prepare their classrooms for the school year.
2. Have teachers pre-identify needs for heavy lifting, class decorations and curriculum organizing, by writing a list and giving it to you before the serve day. Some teachers bring spouses or children to help, and combined with the church volunteers, there are opportunities for all ages.
3. Plan to arrive at the school at 9:00AM and work until noon. Then consider breaking for pizza, salad and drinks provided by the church. The communal lunch is often a highlight for everyone. During the lunch gathering, try to encourage teachers and volunteers to sit and talk together. After working together for three hours, relationships have begun, and lunch is a wonderful opportunity to develop them even more.

The more volunteers that you can mobilize, the more schools that you can impact in a single year. Other ways to spread the love could include switching schools annually to foster new relationships.

7. Christmas gift cards:

1. Determine goals in regard to the number of families that you plan to serve and the gift amount per family.
2. Eight weeks prior to the scheduled delivery date (December 10th works well), sometime around October 15th obtain a list of family names from the school with the number of kids in the household.
3. Providing Target (or other such) gift cards rather than shopping for specific items is helpful and it also empowers parents to make choices appropriate for their kids. We ensure that there is \$50 per child up to \$150 per family.
4. Pre-print your card and have the text sent to the school for pre-approval prior to printing. Here is a sample that we used:

Jesus entered our world to provide hope, comfort, and love, and to show us how to truly live with God today and forever. Jesus is God's greatest gift!

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

John 1:14

Merry Christmas from your neighbors at Calvary Nexus

Logo

Address

Website

5. Print the Christmas Card insert so that volunteers who are sponsoring the Christmas gift can sign and send any personal note. The card is addressed to the family (e.g., "Dear Jones Family,"). Also include with it an invitation to Christmas related services.
6. Deliver gift cards, cards and invitations to the school by December 10th. This gives teachers adequate time to distribute them before school gets out for winter break.

Again, I suggest having a certain sum in the church budget to supplement and help meet your goals for sharing God's love at Christmas with your community.

Joy's Story

Who am I?

I've resided in Camarillo for over forty years, spending thirty-five of them as an elementary school teacher in Pleasant Valley School District. Two years ago I retired. I did not come from a Christian home but became a believer in Christ after my three children grew up and left home, about sixteen years ago. At that time, I realized, with regret, how much better it would have been for my children to have been raised to know and love Jesus. So, I became passionate about telling my grandkids and other children in the community about Jesus.

How I became connected with Calvary Nexus' attempt to love schools?

About twelve years ago, I began attending Calvary Nexus. There I became acquainted with Jane Boyer. Her grandson was also in my classroom at El Descanso (now PVSEA) so we became good friends, as she helped in the class regularly. One day, Jane approached me about starting a Good News Club at our school. Months later, when the club began, the students filled a whole classroom. Each week, more children joined, often recruited by their friends who were already in the club. There were children who had no Christian background as well as those from strong Christian homes. Some students came from broken families, some from families that did not speak English. Some came because their parents made them; others had to beg their parents for permission. Sometimes it was the snacks and games that brought them. Others wanted to be with peers who also loved Jesus. Whatever the reason, they came and they heard the gospel every week.

As I watched those meetings, I saw how well organized and smoothly presented the lessons were. The curriculum is organized in six-week sections focusing on a book or theme of the Bible, such as Creation, Joseph, the Patriarchs, Jesus, and more. Each meeting includes songs, a memory verse presentation, prayers, a Bible story, a gospel presentation, review game, missionary story, and more. All this is carefully orchestrated within a ninety-minute meeting, which also includes a short snack time. There is no wasted time. As a teacher, I was impressed with this efficient use of time and how much children were learning about the love of Jesus, while also having lots of fun.

What was my experience?

Soon after the first meeting, I knew I wanted to be a part of this ministry that equips young people to know, love, and follow Christ. I learned that no one teaches or even assists until they have been screened and trained by Child Evangelism Fellowship. The training starts with a day-long service for new leaders, followed by monthly meetings (during the school year) for all GNC leaders and helpers. The training and monthly meetings turned out to be a great blessing for me as support, direction, and fellowship were built into the program. So, I began my involvement as a host.

As I assumed some leadership roles and hosted (though I did not lead) the program in my classroom, GNC students from other classrooms began to come to me during recess or after school to talk about the club, practice their memory verse, get registration forms for friends, ask questions about God, or sometimes disclose issues which Jane and I could pray about later.

These were precious interactions, allowing me to touch the lives of children in a deeper way than I normally could during the school day, as a public school teacher. Sometimes other teachers would ask what all the excitement was that they saw in my room after school, or comment about the beautiful singing they heard. Some of those teachers later offered their classrooms for Club meetings.

How did the experience impact my life and show (God's) love to others?

The experience of being part of the Good News Club while being a full-time teacher opened unexpected doors for me. I could talk privately during the day to troubled GNC students and bring up Biblical principles and the love of Jesus as support for turning around inappropriate behavior. Parents of Good News Club members would often open up about their faith to me during conferences, knowing that, as one of their child's GNC hosts, I was a Christian. Other Christian teachers made themselves known to me. A couple of them began praying with me every morning before school. I could feel God working in our school community.

Then, a couple of years ago, God again blessed our school when Calvary Nexus began supporting PVSEA with gift cards, help for family needs, prayer, and classroom set-up. This was unprecedented support with no strings attached, no fundraising or grant writing—just help, where and when it was needed. Teachers and parents were amazed and touched. Our entire school community felt the blessings from God through His faithful servants. To me, it felt like the spreading of fertile soil because people were getting a glimpse of what the love of Jesus looks like.

Chapter 6: When churches should love schools

The quick answer, “Anytime, all the time.” How do we accomplish this? In three ways:

1. **Programming:** the on-going programmatic approach outlined in the seven steps above.
2. **One-time activities:** e.g., Color Run fundraiser.
3. Purely **organic approaches** e.g., a volunteer from the church visits their nearby school and offers to help in whatever needs the school has.

Programming

Programs generally require structure and scheduling and are often focused on alleviating a specific need. They generally involve a significant amount of labor and a level of leadership. Once programs are established, they are generally sustainable, meaning that you can repeat them over and over again. While programs mobilize more critical resources of time, talents, and treasure than a one-time event, they can also create greater leverage or influence. Programs designed to have churches love schools should be geared towards not only helping to meet a need, but also fostering relationships between the church and school and the populations (community) each represents.

An advantage of a program is that once you’ve created it, refined it, and determined that it is effective, it generally can be reproduced in another context. Thus, if you can implement the program at one school, you can likely implement it at another one, too.

Programs over time demonstrate the extravagant, gracious, and generous love of God and His people. Programs build bridges for people to come to Christ!

Bridges take time to build. I live within two hours of Legoland, a popular amusement park in Southern California. One of the great attractions in this amusement park is *Miniland*. Therein seven iconic American locales have been recreated in miniature using over 20 million Lego bricks. San Francisco’s Golden Gate and New York City’s Brooklyn Bridge are there to be marveled at, along with other amazingly detailed venues. I try to imagine how long and complicated a process it would be to painstakingly build those mini bridges. That is what it feels like for churches to love schools. The imperceptible and slow addition of small bricks, connected over time, eventually develops into something beautiful, amazing, and life changing – in this life and ideally in the life to come.

Churches loving schools is not a quick fix, single-weekend event that will produce instant results. To the contrary, it is like barbeque – low and slow. Too much heat too quickly simply burns the meat, and no one will enjoy it.

Thus, I’m advocating for using programs as a foundation for your efforts to love your local schools. Organic and one-time efforts by the church can enhance programs, but they are unlikely to effectively replace programs.

Duration= Effective. I believe that the longer your church commits to love local schools, the more effective it will be. This is an axiomatic truth in regard to scope of vision generally: the longer you can work towards perceived goals the more likely you are to attain them. Also, there are outcomes that simply cannot be accomplished in a brief duration of time. I believe a long-term vision is particularly important in the context of churches loving schools.

Chapter 7: Perceived but not insurmountable obstacles

First, there is the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution and “**Separation of Church and State**” matter to be overcome. In 1971 the United States Supreme Court rendered a decision in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* that continues to guide churches and schools as they navigate these matters. In that decision the Court outlined three guiding principles:

1. Public schools cannot prohibit or promote religion. Thus, children can pray and they can read a Bible or Koran (or other perceived sacred text) at school. On the other hand, schools cannot compel the reading of one perceived sacred text over another or promote the adoption of a faith or creed.
2. Schools, and by extension their employees, must be motivated by a secular purpose. Thus, having a church involved to provide tangible assistance (secular motive) is acceptable, but having a church involved to primarily proselytize is not okay.
3. Schools must avoid excessive entanglement. Therefore, as long as other entities (secular and other religious) are also able to offer and provide assistance and services, there is likely no violation of separation doctrine(s).

As a quick aside, and as I mentioned earlier, this is why the public school teacher who is part of your church, who loves Jesus, and also loves their students (and wants to see them all in heaven one day) is unable to participate in the Good News Club. He or she can, however, offer their classroom and serve as a host.

As a result, schools (including District leaders such as superintendents, principals, teachers and staff) all have to respect the boundaries created by our laws. Therefore, there is an inherent tension if schools perceive churches seeking to primarily accomplish a religious purpose. This would be in violation of the laws that govern their school, which could cause school personnel to be sanctioned, reprimanded or lose their job.

Overcoming that tension takes time. Demonstrating that the church understands separation of Church and State and wants to work within the established boundaries is the first hurdle to clear. For example, imagine a church leader proposes a fundraiser at the school as a one-time event. The leader and the church have no existing relationship with the school. The leader wants to share the gospel with all the students and promises to raise a large sum of money. That leader is likely to be frustrated when the offer is declined and think poorly of the school’s leaders. On the other hand, the school’s leaders are likely to be thinking the church and its leader(s) are clueless to the reality of existing laws in this country related to these matters. Cases like this are lose-lose scenarios.

Second, like most sectors of life in the world, **churches and schools have different language, organizational structures and contexts that tend to be divergent.** It takes time to understand

how to communicate across these differences, how to relate and understand one another. False assumptions also need to be identified, rectified, and overcome. This requires intentionality and transparency.

Third, it takes time to develop the necessary **relationships between churches and schools**. Typically, due to their smaller school size (and generally having more parental involvement than with middle and high school-ages) elementary school principals tend to have the most connection with parents and families. They are an excellent place to start.

School counselors are also intimately connected to areas of need associated with their schools. Front-office staff and teachers are fantastic resources to coordinate help between churches and schools. In addition, District-level personnel are an incredible source of information and assistance.

All these relationships take time to cultivate, but the wisdom you can glean from them is indispensable. I'd rather have someone point out the landmines than discover how to remove shrapnel on my own.

Fourth, a long-term plan allows for reproduction. As for our church, we identified ten schools involved with elementary-aged students. This helped to shape the duration of our vision: ten schools and ten years to show God's love to every school serving elementary-aged students in our city. Though we are in a place to be able to chart a ten-year course, **I would recommend, as a minimum, at least three years, but preferably longer, to accomplish God's work of churches loving schools.**

Our timeline:

Assess the scope of needs: We began by determining the number of students at each school and the proportion of students who were participating in Title I (government subsidized meals). This information is generally available online. If you have difficulty gathering information this way, a meeting with a couple principals will provide a fairly accurate assessment.

Determine the order of assistance: We began our relationship with the school with the greatest financial need. Simultaneously, it had one of the largest student populations. Thus, each school we add will be easier in regard to needs and scope, since the numbers at the subsequent schools will be less. In our assessment, we discovered the greatest percentage of Title I students in our District was at a school that had just over 70%, and the school with the least need was at 10%.

Our plan involves offering Assistance Request Forms to a new school each year. By working from the school with the greatest needs down to the school with the fewest needs, we are optimistic that we can add additional schools while still faithfully loving the schools that we have already committed to serve. As an aside, if we can add schools more frequently than once a year, we will. And if we are unable to add a school as quickly as we hoped for, we will adjust and promptly communicate with the schools.

Meet with principals and school district officials: explain the scope of the plan and the rationale for why a particular school is being served as opposed to another. Any reasonable explanation will help school leaders to understand why you are doing what you are doing and when you plan to do it. Being available to answer any questions and always waiting to get their permission before moving forward are necessary practices.

Look for incremental opportunities to love and serve: for example, because of a surplus of giving among your congregation, you may be able to give gift cards to teachers for school supplies beyond the school(s) that you are loving with the Assistance Request Forms. Similarly, if you have more backpacks filled with school supplies or more Christmas gift cards than are needed at your current school(s), then you can add one or more schools. The generosity created by these gifts-- and more importantly, by the new relationships-- will help when you are ready to start new Good News Clubs in your community.

Appendix

1. Assistance Request Form

LOVE OUR NEIGHBORS COMMUNITY IMPACT ASSISTANCE REQUEST

CHILD'S NAME:

PARENT'S NAME:

ADDRESS:

CITY, STATE, ZIP:

PHONE:

EMAIL:

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> School Supplies | <input type="checkbox"/> Groceries |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Clothing | <input type="checkbox"/> Car Repair |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Utility Bill |

- I would like advice or someone to speak with

What is the due date for your need?

This information will be shared with PVSEA and Calvary Nexus to assist in meeting your request.

LOVING MY NEIGHBOR

Thank you for volunteering to fulfill your neighbor's need. Please be sure to contact your neighbor within 48 hours of receiving their request.

NEIGHBOR MAKING REQUEST:

TYPE OF REQUEST:

DUE DATE OF NEED:

NEIGHBOR FULFILLING NEED:

EMAIL/PHONE:

2. Assistance Guidelines

Love Our Neighbors Community Impact - Schools Assistance Guidelines

Dear friends,

A special thanks to each of you for adopting one of the Assistance Request forms we received from our local school families. I am delighted that you have volunteered to show the love of God to our neighbors in this way.

As you reach out to contact the neighbor who submitted the request, here are a few thoughts to keep in mind:

1. Please try to initiate contact ASAP, and ideally by Tuesday. Phone calls are the most personal and usually the best start.
2. Please try to assist with the need by Saturday (essentially within a week of us receiving the request).
3. Gift cards for Target or a local supermarket are usually better than trying to select clothes or groceries for a family.
4. Try to deliver the assistance in a way that is most comfortable and convenient for the recipient as possible. You can invite them to meet you at the church, but we never want to imply that assistance is conditioned upon joining Calvary Nexus.
5. If there is a language obstacle, seek to discover whether there is someone in their home who can assist in the conversation, or try to find assistance through your contacts.
6. Please be sure to offer to pray for those whom we are seeking to help; and if they don't already attend a church, please feel free to invite them to Calvary Nexus. Encourage the recipient(s) that God loves them and that the gospel offers them hope.
7. Once you've fulfilled the request to the best of your ability, **please email Mindy@calvarynexus.org and cc Bruce@calvarynexus.org to let us know how it went.** That way we will be able to track that the needs were met and that they don't slip through the cracks.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to let us know.

I'm confident that we will show respect and love, as we seek to assist, as humble ambassadors for Jesus. Thanks, in advance for your willingness to enter into this good and noble effort. If you

need assistance, please feel free to contact me, Pastors Roger, Chris, Jeremy or Mindy, and we will try to help.

Much love and gratitude,

Pastor Bruce + Calvary Nexus Team

3. Planning Matrix

Additionally, we have developed a supplemental planning matrix detailing steps from start to finish. We use these tools for large-scale programs (events) such as the back-to-school supplies for students, back-to-school service day(s) to help teachers, Christmas gifts, etc. We are blessed to have an amazing church administrator, Mindy Palmer, who created these resources, and are happy to share what we've learned with you. Also, we would be willing to answer questions, share ideas, best practices, and any pitfalls that we discovered with you to help you on your journey of churches loving schools. Please direct requests or inquiries to info@calvarynexus.org.