

# OPENDOORS INTO YOUNG LIVES

Story by Margot Bass  
Photos by Gary Meek



A \$20 bill becomes a classroom illustration.



Manny Collazo, senior pastor at CC McDonough, GA, conducts a mentoring workshop at a public library in suburban Atlanta. Manny also teaches sexual abstinence courses in several public high schools and is asked to speak to youth in varied situations. This allows him to be a role model for youngsters and later share his faith in Jesus Christ outside of the school setting.

Despite popular perception, public high schools are not off-limits to God and His people. Two Calvary Chapel pastors have successfully, and in distinctly different ways, pushed ministry “outside the box,” as they have creatively impacted the lives of hundreds of high schoolers in suburban Atlanta.

Manny Collazo, senior pastor of CC McDonough, GA, often turns a \$20 bill into a classroom illustration. Standing in front of an auditorium full of public high school students, the energetic pastor holds up a \$20 bill and asks the assembly, “Why do you want this?”

“It’s valuable,” they reply.

“Marriage, sex, you ... all have value. What value would you put on them? How much?”

“You can’t do that. A dollar value would only cheapen them,” some respond.

Nodding his head, Manny emphasizes, “You are priceless.” He crumples the bill, but the students understand it is still valuable—just as they are, even if they’ve been involved in premarital sex. As he straightens the bill and replaces it in his pocket, he reminds them that just as the bill’s condition has been restored, the same can happen for them.

In a separate ministry headed by Zach Adams, 65 high school students choose to spend the last hour of the school day, five

days a week, studying the Bible for elective class credit. It’s not a class about church history or the Bible as literature. Zach, youth pastor of CC Stone Mountain, GA, legally and unashamedly teaches the life of Jesus, His work, His salvation, and even His presence in the Old Testament. And many students have accepted Christ as Savior. Zach’s goal for all of them is “to fall in love with Jesus.” If he has his way, this class will one day be in every high school in Georgia.

### Tough Lesson

The roots of Manny Collazo’s ministry go back 13 years. He and wife Denise are a living picture of God’s grace, redemption, and transformation of a moral failure into a significant ministry. When Manny was 21 and Denise 18, Manny was an intern in youth ministry at CC San Jose, CA, when the unmarried couple found themselves in a crisis pregnancy. He immediately stepped down from ministry.

“We put ourselves in a compromising situation,” he admitted. They went to a crisis pregnancy center and ultimately decided to marry. That might have been the end of this story—and of Manny’s youth ministry. Three years later, however, he was reinstated into youth ministry at CC Monterey Bay, CA. Manny received a call from a crisis pregnancy center in Monterey, CA, asking him to speak to a high school health class about sexual abstinence. By then, the Collazos were happily married and expecting a second child. “We were the exception to what usually happens,” Manny said, noting that crisis pregnancies usually tear relationships apart. He agreed to share his story with the students. As uncomfortable as it was to recall that time in his life, Manny realized he had an important message for the students. He served as a volunteer speaker for the crisis pregnancy center for four years in the Monterey Bay area before accepting a job at CC Gwinnett, GA, as a youth pastor.



Young women react with laughter as Manny uses humor to communicate God’s will for them on delicate subjects.



Manny speaks with a school representative about his upcoming presentation at Union Grove High School in McDonough, GA.

*“... I have a message of hope for young people, a message of second chances—that they can make different decisions.”*

Manny Collazo, CC McDonough

Now, 11 years after that first invitation, Manny is a paid abstinence educator in four public school districts in suburban Atlanta, awaiting approval from a fourth. He is also the senior pastor at CC McDonough in southern Atlanta. In 2008 he taught over 5,000 students at 20 different schools, workshops, and conferences.

### Employment and Ministry

Manny needed a paying job when he left his youth pastor position in Gwinnett to begin CC McDonough in southern Atlanta in 2003. “I started marketing myself as independent speaker,” he explained. Eventually he was contracted as a paid abstinence educator for the public high schools for both junior and senior high. That work has continued to sustain his family of four (including sons Manny, 13, and Jonathan, 10).

Manny’s energy and relatable interaction with the students make him popular. His past has fed his passion for this unusual ministry. “It helps me to realize I have a message of hope for young people,” he explained, “a message of second chances—that they can make different decisions and choices.”

He doesn’t go into the classroom as “pastor” and doesn’t mention faith. But Manny often sees students outside of the classroom, and they remember him as “the guy who gives the sex talk.” Those meetings give him an opportunity to share Christ—which he has done several times—with students and their parents. When the students learn that he also leads a church, “they are surprised that a pastor is so open and honest about sex,” Manny said.

### Motives for Abstinence

Students easily remember Manny’s “rules” for living an abstinent lifestyle: keep your hands off, keep your clothes on, and don’t lay down. “It’s so simple the kids will start laughing,” he stated. “I don’t sugarcoat it with them. They understand what I’m saying.”

The definition of abstinence—waiting until you’re married to have sex—is usually negative, he explained. He asks the kids to consider his definition and its implications: “Choosing to have sex only with your spouse.” This encourages them to save sex for marriage and then to be faithful and committed to their spouses. Manny doesn’t tell teens to

avoid premarital sex because of STDs and pregnancy because most teens have heard that before. He feels that approach simply communicates that what makes the behavior wrong is the consequences.

Manny views his calling as pre-evangelism, removing obstacles that often prevent people from hearing the Gospel. “It’s so easy to get isolated and in a bubble when you’re a pastor. I love being in an environment where I can be a witness to unbelievers. It drives me to fulfill the Great Commission,” Manny said, speaking of Christ’s command in Matthew 28 for believers to make disciples in all nations. In the future, he hopes to speak more often in Christian settings, “where I can actually talk about the solution.”

***Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.*** 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

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Classroom participation is encouraged. A student writes character qualities needed to live an abstinent lifestyle.

*“I love being in an environment where I can be a witness to unbelievers.”*

Manny Collazo, CC McDonough



Manny speaks to several classes a day in a public school. He talks about the benefits of sexual abstinence as part of the students’ sexual education program required by the school. Above right: Students give Manny their full attention.



Pastor Zach Adams, CC Stone Mountain, GA, teaches an accredited course on the Bible for public school students. The law requires the class to be off campus.

### The Bible Class for High Schoolers

In contrast to Manny's ministry, Zach Adams can openly share the solution.

The 25-year-old youth pastor is also the CEO of a non-profit organization—Gwinnett Christian Learning Center—which is dedicated to getting God's Word into public high schools under Georgia's "released time education" provision. Zach spends every week-day afternoon teaching what's called The Bible Class to students at his alma mater, South Gwinnett High School. Covering several different topics over a two-year period, The Bible Class has been well received. "I'm more popular there now than I was as a student," Zach said, laughing.

For 45 minutes a day, he and several other teachers, usually associates or youth pastors from other area Christian churches, present the truths of Scripture to more than 250 students in six different Gwinnett County high schools. "Kids have given their hearts to the Lord. We're seeing tremendous

things, and the kids get class credit for it," Zach explained.

Under released time education laws, junior and senior high students may obtain permission from parents and educators to take daily, off-campus elective courses. Specific restrictions vary by state. Other Calvary Chapels in the U.S. are also ministering to elementary-aged children under the released time education allowance.

"This is constitutional, legal. ... We have every right to do what we're doing—putting education in the hands of the parents," he said. "Why not be able to teach the Bible to public high school students and still maintain separation of church and state?" Under released time education, students are released from the campus for the first or last period of the day for special classes. Students earn two credits per semester for the class.

Registration forms for The Bible Class are sent to area churches and youth groups, who share them with their unchurched or unsaved friends. Zach collects the forms, which

as a Bible college class, Zach explained. As with other electives, students are graded for their participation. The textbook is the Bible, provided by Gwinnett Christian Learning Center. Zach gives to each student who doesn't own one a Bible to take home. Rather than tests, students receive random open-book Bible quizzes and several short writing assignments on personal application. "We want the Bible to come alive," he said. "These are 65 kids who come to me that I would never otherwise see." Whatever their reasons for taking the class, Zach said, "I want them to know answers are out there."

Sandy Adams, Zach's father and senior pastor of CC Stone Mountain, said he is "overjoyed" with what God has done through the classes. "At a minimum, The Bible Class is exposing unchurched kids to a biblical worldview. Where else could this be done?"

*"We want the Bible to come alive. These are 65 kids who come to me that I would never otherwise see. ... I want them to know answers are out there."*

Zach Adams, CC Stone Mountain

*Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.* Acts 17:11b

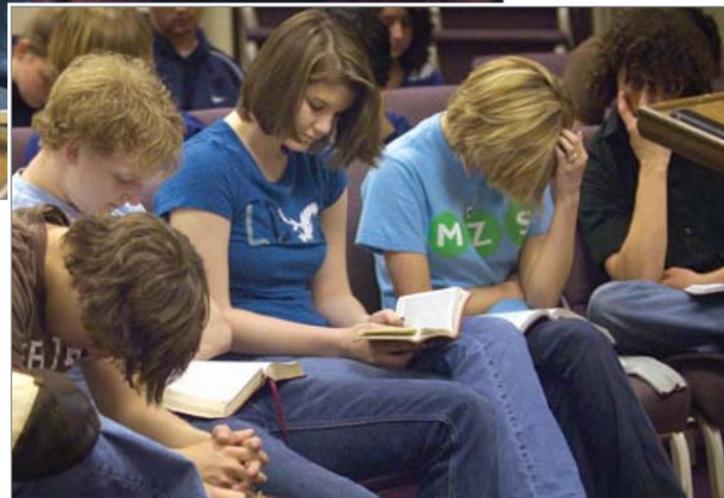
Sixty percent of the students in The Bible Class claim no church affiliation. The other 40 percent come from 23 different denominations. He believes that his vision of having kids "fall more in love with Jesus" is broad enough to individually apply to any of those

who to ask for help," Zach believes. "Cool things like this happen all the time."

The curriculum follows a two-year cycle. It begins with a detailed look at comparative religion: what religion is, the nuts and bolts of Christianity, and comparing/contrasting other religions to the standard of Christianity. The last two weeks are spent on evolution. Zach commented, "I shred evolution to bits and then send them out to challenge their biology teacher." Subsequent semesters include Old Testament Survey, A Walk with Jesus (studying the Gospels chronologically), and After the Cross (a verse-by-verse approach through the Book of Acts with a survey of the New Testament). If the curriculum isn't typical, neither is the class time. Classes utilize a lecture, small groups, and sometimes even worship teams.

*I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I have not departed from Your judgments, for You Yourself have taught me.*

Psalm 119:99, 102



Students read Scripture as an elective for the state's released time education.

require parental permission, and takes them to the schools. Then the school simply registers the students. With classes held at nearby churches, the school is risking no added liability. The school system also benefits. The classes alleviate overcrowding in one of the fastest growing counties of the U.S., and the school doesn't have to pay a teacher.

The fact that 90 students have registered for his fall semester class doesn't surprise Zach. "The kids enjoy the class," he said, adding that more classes have been requested. Perhaps it's the fact that students get to leave the campus, or that it's "an easy A" that attracts the students, Zach admitted. The Bible Class is an elective, not as intense



Zach is available for students after class. Several students that were nonbelievers have chosen to follow Christ.

I think the classes will have an impact in the lives of the students for many years to come," Pastor Sandy stated. His two younger sons have taken the class. "What a blessing to send your kids to public school, yet provide them the opportunity to take a fun, interesting, well-taught Christian discipleship class as part of the school day. This sends an important message to kids growing up in a secular culture. It reaffirms that the Bible is important." The church supports the ministry by providing office space as well as allowing Zach the time to teach classes five days a week.

*They received the Word with all readiness, and searched the*

students—from the seeker, to the apathetic Christian, to the on-fire Christian.

He remembers the impact of the class on two students. Bryant had never been to church, but said a girlfriend "made him" take the class. Zach provided him a Bible for the semester entitled "Walk with Jesus." One day, the teen arrived early to class, telling Zach he needed to be saved. The class that day covered repentance. After class, Bryant told him again, "I need to be saved." Bryant accepted Christ that day. Another student, Chris, took the class for two years, but Zach felt like he hadn't gotten through to him. A year later, though, Chris initiated contact again and still keeps in touch. "He knows

The Gwinnett Center, formed in 2002, takes no federal or state money and is dependent on contributions. Zach began his involvement with the center after he substituted for one of its teachers in 2004. In addition to becoming the center's CEO he is also president of the board.

Volunteer-driven, the center's only full-time employee is Director Micah Ballew. Its 2007-2008 budget of \$46,090 provided biblical education for less than \$20 a month per student. Zach hopes they will offer the class to all 13 Gwinnett County public high schools by fall 2009. ☞

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*Next issue: Released Time Education makes strides in CA.*