

Calvary South Denver

Story by Christmas Beeler
Photos by Geraldine Wilkins

Calvary South Denver in Littleton, CO, was a few blocks from Columbine High School when a shooting tragedy rocked their town and the nation in 1999. As believers ministered to their community, many came to know Christ as Savior. Today, the church has active ministries to law enforcement officers and their families, as well as outreaches to share the Gospel with those involved in the occult.

First Responders

Officer Manny Hays was not prepared for the scene he found at Columbine High School on that mild Tuesday afternoon—April 20, 1999. Among the first responders, he and his partner Mark helped lead shell-shocked students who had fled for their lives from two crazed gunmen who were moving through the school, shooting down their peers at random.

Some students were pulled out of broken windows; some escaped in staggered spurts through the gymnasium or other exits amidst gunfire inside and outside the building. The veteran policeman paused for a split-second to take in the chaos around him and its impact on everyone, including his fellow officers. Men who had seen violence on a regular basis were visibly shaken—some were fighting back tears. *Without You, Lord, there is no hope*, he thought.

Manny didn't know that his pastor, Gino Geraci of Calvary South Denver, who was a chaplain with the South Denver Police Department, had also been one of the first responders at the other end of the building—helping students evacuate, offering support to officers, and praying with distraught students and family members.



Assistant Pastor Manny Hays

Pastor Gino opened the church's doors to the community for a prayer service that evening. He reminded the group that God was with them and encouraged them to lean on Him for comfort. As people stood up to share with each other or to pray amidst the sounds of weeping, Manny silently made a vow to the Lord who had changed his life: "Jesus, You are my Savior, but tonight I acknowledge You as Lord of my life. You take control of my life. I want to live for You; I want to live Your way." He felt God's peace.

From that point on, Manny applied himself to learning God's Word. He boldly shared Christ with fellow officers. "I wanted them to know what Jesus had done for me, and that He could do it for them too," Manny recalled. He began serving at the church. After 31 years as a police officer, Manny retired in 2004. He later became a chaplain with two local police departments and an assistant pastor at Calvary South Denver.

Loving Amidst Tragedy

The whole town was deeply wounded by the tragic event. "Many of the kids in our youth group went to Columbine," Gino remembered. "We had a family whose child was shot and injured, one who was killed, and another who survived the experience."

"Many of the principal police officers at Columbine started coming to our church; their families saw the love and commitment we had to them," Gino said. Though he never sought media attention for himself or the church, his close involvement in the tragedy opened many doors to share. Gino got to meet, talk to, and pray with former President Bill Clinton; he was invited to be a first responder and minister at Ground Zero in New York in 2001 and at nearby Platt Canyon High School after a similar tragedy in 2006; he has been a guest speaker and teacher at Columbine High School every year; and he led the prayer at the nationally televised Columbine Memorial Dedication in 2007.



Senior Pastor Gino Geraci and his wife, Mary, fellowship with Cathey Chen-Quian after a service. Gino is also a chaplain with the South Denver Police Department.

"Because his face became so familiar—being on TV, talking to President Clinton—even more people started coming and listening to the radio to hear what he had to say," Manny recalled. "A lot of them stayed and got saved."

Spreading the Gospel

Ever since Gino planted the fellowship in 1991, he has shared the Gospel through the venue of radio. "I have a daily, two-hour program in the afternoon that's a live, call-in show," Gino explained. "The Lord has used it in a tremendous way to make a personal connection with the community."

To share the Gospel, Gino often uses three questions: "First, I ask if they have any spiritual beliefs. Then I ask, 'Who do you think Jesus is?' Then I ask what they believe about heaven and hell," he said. "People love to talk about what they believe. Then, if I feel they are ready, I ask them the hard question: 'If what you believe isn't true, would you want to know?' If they say yes, then I share the Gospel with them."

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Believers read along in the Bible as Pastor Gino teaches.



Criminal investigator Michael Williams and Gino encourage one another.



Believers begin Sunday morning worship with song. Many congregants work in law enforcement, and the church hosts a ministry to police officers.

Choosing Faith Over Fear

Personal Testimony: Mary Geraci

Story by Christmas Beeler



Mary Geraci

Mary Geraci lay in a hospital gown waiting to be wheeled into the operating room. She was still processing the fact that doctors had discovered and removed cancer in her breast. She had gone through radiation treatments for several weeks, and now they were going to remove some of her lymph nodes to see if the cancer had spread. If it had, her chances of ever being cancer-free were slim.

Unafraid of death, her greatest fear was leaving behind her husband and three boys—ages 5, 6, and 11. *Father*, she prayed silently, *I want to be there for my boys and watch them grow up. You gave them to me.* She felt the Holy Spirit speak to her heart through a familiar passage: “Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Joshua 1:9b). Before going into surgery, she saw her husband and their longtime friend Pastor Skip Heitzig from Calvary of Albuquerque, NM. She told them, “The Lord has told me that He’s going to take care of me.” To their delight, the cancer had not spread to her lymph nodes.

Mary first discovered her cancer when she and her husband, Pastor Gino Geraci, had decided to answer God’s call to start a new work in Denver, CO. Because they would be leaving Calvary of Albuquerque—where Gino was on staff—and losing their health insurance, Mary had insisted that everyone in the family have in-depth physicals. A mammography showed a distinct lump. She was told she had a slow-growing form of cancer that might have gone for years undetected.

“If we hadn’t been preparing to move, I probably wouldn’t have gotten a mammogram,”

she reflected. Though shocked that she had cancer, Mary continued to trust in God. “I would cry out to the Lord daily as I was going through my radiation treatments,” she recalled. Weak and shaky, she focused on the Bible. One day she was reading Romans 15. In verse 4, she saw that the Bible was written so “that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.” She felt that God was telling her to hope in His Word, that He was trustworthy and wanted her to put her confidence in Him.

She was declared cancer-free after the radiation and the lymph removal, so the family moved to Denver to plant a church in 1991. Then, in 1999, her breast cancer returned in the same spot. She opted for a double mastectomy.

Some of the nurses were surprised at her peacefulness about the cancer’s return. “I would tell them, ‘I’m not afraid because God told me from the beginning that He was going to take care of me.’” At the church, God brought others with cancer across her path. She would encourage them, “Don’t let the word ‘cancer’ paralyze you. Then you won’t be able to hear or see what the Lord is going to be doing in your life. Trust Him.

A year after the mastectomy, she had peace about breast reconstruction. As she and Gino had done before every operation, they asked the doctors if they could pray with them. “It was a witness to the doctors to have my husband praying that God would guide their hands. Many of them were not believers,” she said.

This year marked another 10 years without cancer. She said, “I have been praying with women who have cancer for a long time. I know that sometimes it never comes back, and sometimes it comes back in six months, and then God takes them home.” When a close friend of hers recently died from cancer, she asked God, “Why are my loved ones



Children sing and do hand movements to songs.

Erin Hesterly, center, and other teens perform a skit for kids during “Crocodile Dock VBS” 2009. The day’s theme was that God is always with us, as He promised Moses in Exodus 3:12. Two hundred eighty children attended the VBS.

dying with cancer and You still have me here?” She felt the Holy Spirit answer that He was not finished with her yet.

“So many are afraid and don’t know what to do,” Mary explained, “You cannot understand what a person is going through unless you have gone through it too. ... He constantly brings different people to pray for, and so many times they leave with a new peace. The only One who can give that peace is the Lord.” ☞

Haven for Cults

Because there are many cults and false religions in the Denver area, many people in the church have a passion for reaching the lost. One man, Bill Honsberger, founded Haven Ministries and has been sharing the Gospel with cultists for more than 20 years. He occasionally fields questions with Gino on his radio program.

For those with a loved one in a cult or false religion, Bill offered this advice: “Don’t cut off your relationship with that person; stay connected as much as you can. ... Confront the lies with truth in a loving way. Third, engage them—listen to what they believe,

and then share the truths in Scripture,” Bill said. “Finally, cover them in prayer. It’s a spiritual battle we’re fighting.” He and other believers from Calvary South Denver have shared the Gospel at various New Age or occult venues—including annual “psychic fairs” in Denver.

In Suffering

Gino reflected on the past 19 years of ministry in Colorado and how the Lord had prepared him and his family. While still on staff with Skip Heitzig of Calvary of Albuquerque, a boyhood friend, Gino felt a call to plant a church in Denver. “Two weeks after we made the decision to go to Denver, my

wife Mary was diagnosed with cancer,” he remembered. “The verse God had given me was Joshua 1:9, which says, ‘Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid ... for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.’ Planting a church and starting a Bible study was difficult, but cancer was more difficult. It was a dark place, a difficult place—a place of deep dependence and trust in God.” Mary received treatment and was cleared, so they moved to Denver in 1991 and planted the church. Then her cancer returned in 1999, just eight months after the Columbine tragedy. After a second round of treatments, she is cancer-free today (see *previous page*).



Joe Langfield, who is an ex-police officer, plays a Bible game with kids. Later in the lesson, he taught them about how God answered Hannah's prayer and gave her a son who was named Samuel (1 Samuel 1:8-20).

In heart-rending challenges, Gino said, "I think we have to ask, 'Lord, what are You doing in my life through this?' Often I'm asked why people suffer. I believe it's good to ask, 'Why is this happening?'—not to assume that you already know, but to explore the answers. The Lord has a plan and purpose, and His plans are for our good. Even if I can't perceive the good at the time, I can trust that He knows."

Ministering to Peace Officers

Before and after the Columbine High School shooting, Pastor Gino held a regular Bible study at the local precinct. Now he also serves as a chaplain for several other local jurisdictions, including the FBI branch. Manny also ministers to many officers, both as a police chaplain and as an assistant pastor at the church. He often rides with officers on some of their calls and said, "Some are more open with me because I was an officer for 30 years. I was there; I know what they're going through."

Manny added, "We have a large contingent of officers in our church." In 2006, Police Detective Michael Williams started the Centurion Law Enforcement Ministry, which aims to support officers and their families through fellowship, prayer, Bible study opportunities, and leadership development. The ministry's website receives responses from around the world.

Michael estimates that nearly 50 officers and their families regularly attend Calvary South Denver. "I consider that to be an amazing figure given the nature of our profession," Michael said. "Reaching cops for Christ can be difficult. ... Our profession has one of the highest divorce and suicide rates in the nation." He encourages spouses to attend the weekly Bible study that deals with issues relevant to law enforcement. He and other officers regularly minister to police officers from all over the U.S. who come for rehabilitation at nearby Craig Hospital. The pastors often conduct funerals for fallen police officers and counsel their families.

"Cops who do not know Christ are turning to Him; backslidden officers are returning to Jesus Christ; marriages are being healed," Michael said. "I believe God is using [this ministry] to bless the hurting in our profession." Michael is now one of the church's pastors-in-training.

Several men have been raised up to become pastors at Calvary South Denver, and some who were trained at the fellowship have planted new churches. Manny concluded, "Those in training come alongside the pastors here to share the Word and minister to people in all of life's issues and troubles." 🙌

Calvary South Denver, CO

www.calvarycsd.org

info@calvarycsd.org

303-933-8733