

Navigating Turbulent Waters

For 22 years, Calvary Chapel Concord, CA, has used whitewater rafting to disciple believers and share Christ with those who don't know Him.

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Concord, CA

Thomas Grant, left, and Mike Tubbs, guides for over 25 and 13 years respectively, share their testimonies after lunch while the rafters rest.



Though the sky was clear and placid, the river below churned around the raft *El Shaddai*. Veronica Rocha of CC Pasadena, CA, felt apprehensive as her group approached the next rapid, nicknamed “Troublemaker” for the boulder positioned at its turn. Working as a team, they escaped the obstacle only to hit a different one at the rapid’s end. *El Shaddai* bent, then abruptly straightened, flinging Veronica into the roaring water. In her panic, Veronica let go of her paddle.

The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters. Psalm 29:3 (NIV)

Earlier that day, the boat’s guide had asked everyone to close their eyes. Forcing themselves to listen despite the chaos around them, they relied only on his voice to navigate the waves. When they reopened their eyes, he said that God often works that way—asking us to depend completely on Him while life thunders around us. As Veronica’s husband reached into the water to pull her to safety, the guide’s illustration took on a new dimension.

Veronica’s trip in August 2010 was part of the rafting ministry of CC Concord, CA. The team takes about seven groups of no more than 50 people each down the South Fork of the American River every summer. The group sees their trips as a unique mission field where God brings people closer to Himself and to each other.

Rafters from CC Concord, CA, maneuver through rapids down 21 miles of the South Fork of the American River just east of Sacramento. Teams from the church take groups of up to 50 rafters, usually from West Coast churches, on the two-day journey, encouraging the groups to invite unbelievers to be among the teams. Bible study, worship, and devotions are held along the way and at the overnight campsite.



The group participates in one last exercise of fun and teamwork as rafters massage each other after completing the two-day rafting adventure.

Church on the Water

The ministry began 22 years ago after Pastor Joe Pratchard realized that four CC Concord congregants possessed, together, 40 years of rafting experience. Remembering the refreshment he felt after a pastors' rafting retreat years prior, Joe organized a small trip. The fellowship that group experienced inspired them to share the opportunity with their church, and word soon spread to nearby fellowships.

Now the two-day river trips include West Coast Calvary Chapels and the friends and family they invite. The team desires about one-third of each group to be unbelievers. Twenty-one miles of rafting provides many opportunities to share the Gospel, which is reinforced by devotions, worship, and Bible study at the overnight campsite.

"I've been surprised by the variety of people God has allowed us to reach," Joe related. Letters from previous participants tell of being rescued from the brink of doubt and despair. The team finds stories of refreshed faith to be equally valuable. Kathy Kopp of CC Pasadena, CA, remembered, "For me it came at 2 a.m., looking up at all those stars. It reminded me of His power, His creation."

Pastor Ray Carter of CC Lake Havasu City, AZ, had participated before, but this summer's trip was particularly meaningful. In fall 2009, two of the church's youth had died tragically within three weeks. On the river, Ray found healing and restoration after the grief. "It was like God inviting me to come

aside and rest a while, as Jesus did in Mark 6:31," he explained.

Bringing Down Walls

Long-time team member and river guide Britt Van Baalen plans the trips. She said that much of the ministry's effectiveness stems from its non-traditional setting. Though some rafters won't enter a church, she said, "We bring church to them!" Moreover, self-sufficiency disappears on the river. People are dependent on their boat-mates and their guide's instructions. The atmosphere of trust and teamwork opens doors to receive spiritually from each other—and the Lord.

Britt's 20-year-old Swedish niece, Celine, recently experienced her first trip. Britt was excited to see Celine, who has had little exposure to Christianity in her homeland Sweden, enjoying conversation and fellowship with Christians. Later, Celine wrote on her blog that though she still didn't understand Christians, she couldn't explain their joy. Pastor Joe commented, "By the time the trip's finished, walls are stripped away. Being served disarms people."

Poured Out for Christ

Servanthood defines the ministry. There are shuttle drivers, clean-up crews, and prayer warriors who intercede over the excursions and over the letters that stream in afterwards. Guides use their personal vacation days, spend long hours in prep and clean-up, and offer constant service: on- and off-river. From distributing poles and marshmallows to cooking a hot meal topped off by Britt's



Pastor Joe Pratchard, CC Concord, shares God's Word at the campsite. After a full day of rafting, everyone came together for a time of reflection.

famous pineapple upside-down cake, guides are always on the go. "It's a demanding ministry—physically, spiritually, emotionally," said Joe. "This is the most challenging ministry I've ever done."

However, added Britt, "It bears so much fruit! It's exhausting, but by the end I'm thanking God for the privilege of serving. It's such a joy." Believers, she added, "see the teamwork we do as guides. Watching how we work together, they're encouraged to go back and be more involved in their churches."

Expanding Circles of Ministry

Over the years, the ministry's impact has stretched to others of the 80,000-100,000 rafters traveling the South Fork American River each season. People glimpse a boat name like *Koinonia*—the Greek word for fellowship—and want to know its meaning, or gather out of curiosity to watch a baptism. The team's years of service have also built a solid reputation with the river guides, outfitters, and government officials of the rafting community. Evening Bible studies and worship services draw some of the 500 other guests using the same camp. After a worship session, one such camper exclaimed to a CC



Mike Tubbs, left, Joe Pratchard, and David White, CC Concord rafting guide, lead the evening campfire time with praise and worship.

Concord shuttle driver, "That was awesome! When are you doing it again?"

Many of the commercial outfitters originally viewed the Concord team as a threat to business. The group earned their trust by rescuing stranded boats and ministering in times of need. Many conversations later, Joe is confident that "they're watching us on the river—and receiving a picture of Who the Lord is."

The long-term effect on people's lives, Joe and Britt agreed, is the most encouraging thing about the rafting ministry. Recently while hiking with trip participants from previous years, they saw change in these peoples' lives and heard them explain how the trip had affected them. Joe concluded, "We know the impact is real since it's still there, years later. None of it is because of us, but because of the Lord." 🙌



Rafters pray for God's provision and safety. Once per year, CC Concord hosts a trip for their fellowship. Last year, 40 believers enjoyed the excursion.

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