

Calvary Church Grand Rapids

A Model of Holistic Benevolence Ministry

by Krista Petty

Church Name:

Calvary Church

Location:

Grand Rapids, MI

Web site:

www.calvary-church.net

Compassion Ministry:

Community Ministries

Church size:

4000

Key Audiences:

Churches wanting benevolence ministry to be more holistic
Churches seeking to integrate local and global missions work
Suburban churches seeking to partner with others

Key Lessons:

Move from short-term assistance to long-term solutions with benevolence guidelines
Synergize local and global missions for more effective decision-making
Let the people you serve tell you what they need

Close the revolving door and open up opportunity

Benevolence ministry can feel like a revolving door of individuals and families coming in and out of the life of the church, asking for financial assistance. How does a church leader know when to say yes and when to say no? Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, MI had a desire to do more effective work with their benevolence dollars than simply give away money to meet short-term needs. The church desired for families in their congregation and in the community to overcome the systemic issues related to their financial problems. One of the main problems leading to financial hardship was the lack of planning and budgeting. By setting up guidelines and accountability, the church is now assisting families with long-term financial solutions and is better positioned to more

effectively help those experiencing the true emergencies of life—such as medical problems and unemployment.

In a revamp of their missions, outreach, and pastoral care ministries, Calvary Church took two important steps to closing the revolving door and opening up opportunity for real-life change. First, they decided to focus their benevolence dollars and energies on relationships, rather than continuing their traditional “first-come, first-serve” monetary donations. By assisting those who had a connection to the church, they could better connect good will and good news. Second, they synergized their local and global resources and teams to effectively assist individuals across the street and across the world. By developing numerous global and local ministry partners, Calvary actually has built a large network of people connected to the church who now receive holistic care through financial help, budget counseling, and the food pantry/clothes closet onsite at the church.

Ministry Context

Grand Rapids is the county seat for Kent County, Michigan and is the second largest city in the state (following Detroit). The city has a population of almost 200,000 people with 75% white residents, 14% African-American, and 12% Hispanic. The workforce in the city is relatively equally distributed among professional, sales, production, transportation and service occupations.

Once a thriving center for the furniture and automobile industries, the Grand Rapids community has had to overcome an economic downturn in those industries. On the brighter side, the area has attracted new economic growth through the health sciences industry. It is also home to several colleges and universities. Still, poverty exists and approximately 15% of families in Grand Rapids live below the poverty line.

Calvary in Brief

Calvary is located in the suburbs of Grand Rapids and was founded as Calvary Udenominational Church in 1929. Within a few years, church services were broadcast over the Michigan Radio Network (WMRN). Today, the church is a thriving multi-generational congregation under the leadership of elders, staff and senior pastor, Dr. James G. Samra. A Senior Pastoral Team (made up of the Senior Pastor, Associate Pastor, Worship Pastor, Shepherding Pastor, and Executive Pastor) provides leadership to the staff and congregation. They have four worship services on Sunday and a Saturday evening, seeker-oriented service. Most parishioners are commuters to the church and are middle-age adults with families.

Calvary on Mission

“Our church is a missions church, not a church that does missions,” affirms Claire Walker, Director of Community Ministries for Calvary. Whether you are talking about

benevolence, global trips, financial support, or local engagement in the community—it's all missions at Calvary.

In total, there are five integrated teams that organize the global and local externally focused ministry. All teams are lay-led with staff support:

1. **Mercy Team**—The church has a food pantry and clothes closet on-site and offers financial coaching and education for those in need. Approximately 25 families come through their doors each week needing assistance.
2. **Evangelism Team**—This team helps with training and special church-wide evangelism efforts. They build relationships with people who are exploring spiritually and lead prayer efforts for the lost.
3. **Granting Team**—Money is set aside to give to local and global mission work in the form of grants and volunteers for special projects. This team oversees the grant process for both local and global initiatives.
4. **Care Team**—Calvary supports 68 global and local missionaries. This team offers personal care to the missionaries as well as monthly financial support. There are 16 local missions receiving monthly financial support. The church also offers training before missionaries go on the field (locally and globally) and communicates with them regularly.
5. **Strategy Team**—This team helps facilitate planning the annual community service day, evangelistic follow up with Festival of Lights (Christmas effort), and global and community events.

“We care for everyone, from neighbors to the nations,” says Claire. Calvary is committed to extending help to all in a very holistic way—assisting with long-term solutions through relational connections.

Setting Guidelines for Benevolence

Like most churches, Calvary receives a lot of financial requests. “We can't open the door for every request. We want to really help people, not enable them,” shares Claire. If they gave money to every request, it would financially limit their ability to help families who really want to take action to improve their situations. The benevolence team is the group responsible for interviewing people in need and making financial aid decisions. “The entire team helps with interviewing individuals and families who come in for assistance,” Claire explains. “The men interview men/families and the women interview women.” They meet weekly as an entire team. They decided, with the approval of the deacons, to limit assistance to the following people:

- members of the church
- regular attendees that have been attending three months and are involved in a small group
- people who are significantly connected to the church in some way, whether it be through a member or through a community partner

While they were limiting their financial assistance in some ways, they also opened their doors in new ways. Their new policy allows them to help in more significant ways—up to \$1500—and to make relational connections. By deepening their benevolence ministry to individuals connected to their community partnerships, they are still meeting needs in the community. Claire explains, “We have a woman from Calvary teaching a Bible study at Mel Trotter Ministries (a partnering agency of the church’s community ministries). One of her students has a financial need. Our teacher from Calvary is able to help her with life essentials—like housing, utilities, medical expenses or food—from our food pantry, clothes closet, and benevolence funds, because of relationship.”

As noted earlier, the Calvary mission and outreach ministry recently integrated their local and global missions work. So, along with opening up benevolence to individuals related to their community partnerships, they are able to assist people connected to their global missionaries and short-term trips as well. “We recently received a request from a missionary to help a widow in Kosovo with housing,” says Claire. Calvary wants to follow the Scriptural mandate to care for widows and orphans, whether they are local or global. Once again, there is always a relational connection with a member of the church helping to facilitate the assistance.

Offering assistance with accountability

“Benevolence and financial ministries work closely together, since we often ask those receiving help to go to budget counseling,” Claire reports. The church has a team of 30 budget counselors with at least 20 of them active at any given time. Both Benevolence and Financial Ministries fall under the umbrella of Mercy Ministries, which Claire oversees. “In addition to the budget counseling, we teach *Good Sense* (a required class for those working with a budget counselor), *Dave Ramsey Financial Peace*, and *Crown Financial*,” she adds.

When someone is working with a budget counselor the family has access to the food pantry once a week and then for an additional six months while continuing to work with a coach. “This saves them at least \$50-60 a week on groceries,” Claire explains. Along with those in the budget classes and counseling, the church opens the food pantry and clothes closet to single parents.

Through these ministries, the church body and friends of the church are strengthened to better serve others. Calvary is so serious about people getting financially healthy that they are even asking their entire church staff to go through the *Good Sense* classes. “*Good Sense* is a great curriculum we use that comes out of Willow Creek Community Church,” Claire says.

Building Effective Teams

Making the decision to go narrow and deep in a benevolence ministry can take courage. At Calvary, they were able to make this shift in large part because of the strength and practical wisdom of the Mercy Ministry team members. “One of our volunteers is very

connected to housing issues and that really helps in meeting needs,” reports Claire. She has also found it is beneficial to utilize businessmen and women. “Our meetings are more efficient. They help set up agendas and reminders of meetings. We try to really empower this team to make decisions and move forward;” Two deacons always approve additional assistance, such as long term illness. The team is made up of lay volunteers. Claire serves as the staff liaison to the team.

Retirees are also great to have on the team, for at least two reasons. Often requests for help come in during the day, and issues or needs must be addressed during working hours. Retirees often have the flexibility in their schedule to handle this. Second, these older folks have much “life wisdom” to draw from their own diverse life experiences.

Along with building a good benevolence team, Calvary has put the right people in place to oversee their food pantry and clothes closet. Lynnell, the benevolent facilitator, oversees both and really understands the issues facing the people she serves, because she was herself once a street-wise single mom. “She understands the families who come in and knows what they *really* need. She doesn’t have the food pre-bagged; she lets them shop,” says Claire. Having been there herself, Lynnell knows what it feels like to have to ask for help and what other resources are available in addition to the church. Lynnell’s life experience and heart for others helps fill more than a grocery bag with food—she helps fill a relational and spiritual need, too.

Building Partners

Locally, Calvary has at least 16 community ministry partners including men’s and women’s shelters, urban youth camps, children’s ministry, jail ministry, urban church planting partnerships, disabled adult ministry, pregnancy centers, and domestic abuse ministries. Approximately 150 volunteers from the church are engaged in serving these community ministries. To assist with communications between the agencies and Calvary, the church created a community link team, “assigning an internal liaison to each external community ministry we support,” Claire explains. “We meet quarterly for prayer, encouragement, and networking.”

Before creating the link volunteer positions, Claire admits that it was difficult to stay on top of all the work happening at all the agencies. Now through their quarterly gatherings, these agencies are able to network with one another—multiplying their impact. “One of our community partners needed help getting their mailers together. Another partner needed to give skills training and opportunities to the special needs adults in their agency. Our gathering was able to connect these two agencies,” shares Claire.

Calvary is also engaged in serving with local churches and urban ministries. “We have presently engaged in a partnership with a local Hispanic church. We are helping them implement new ministry programs in their church,” says Claire. The new programs include *Good Sense* and the Dave Ramsey financial classes, family skills, and real estate education. “Our goal is to equip leaders within their church who have a passion in one of these particular areas,” she adds.

Communicating Outreach

Calvary's on-going outreach and mission communication efforts include the weekend service bulletin, a weekly e-newsletter, and a monthly publication. Because of Calvary's missional church vision, the missions and outreach ministries get some special treatment from the top. "We get three events a year that the entire staff and congregation participate in," explains Claire. "Our plans are presented to our Pastoral staff and once approved, everyone is on board. We have found that these events go over well when there is support from the pulpit and the entire staff."

This past year, the mission ministry had two conferences called Engage: Your Community and Engage: Your World. At the global conference, missionaries were invited to a banquet and received educational support. The global conference also exposed missions to the entire congregation through meeting and mingling with missionaries.

The local conference focused on their 16 community partnerships. People were challenged to sign up for one local mission "mini-session." Claire explains, "Mini-sessions were basically informational gatherings about a particular community agency or need. We simply asked them to come and learn more. Community agencies were thrilled with the reception they received from the church."

Along with these conferences, the church recently went through a campaign called SHARE 5, which focused on local evangelism. The SHARE 5 asked parishioners to answer the question, "Who are five unbelievers you could pray for over five weeks in five areas of need?" Participants were asked to pray about the person's spiritual, health, activity, relationship, and employment/educational needs. "Our goal was that people would see God's hand at work in the lives of the people they prayed for," says Claire. Following the Share 5 campaign, the church is developing neighborhood and family share teams to continue the prayer efforts.

Sustaining the Outreach Arm

The funding for the Benevolence Ministry comes through special offerings and donations. Every time the church participates in communion, they also take a special offering for benevolence. "If the benevolence offerings run low, we will take other special offerings to raise the funding to meet the needs," says Claire. The Mission and Outreach department, which includes Community Ministries, receives a percentage of the general fund.

Challenges

While they are enjoying success in this new way of funneling and filtering benevolence requests, Claire admits, "It can be hard to say no." Their policy of helping only those connected to the church can be challenging because the needs are so great and always

seem urgent. Although challenging, the relational connections with those they help are critical to real life-change taking place.

Another challenge to offering successful benevolence ministry, especially to parishioners, is assisting people without them becoming embarrassed. “People that like to give can sometimes find it very hard to receive,” shares Claire. That is why the benevolence ministry, food pantry and clothes closet are located at the “Yellow House,” an out-building not connected to the church. “People do not have to walk through the church offices or lobby to get assistance,” she says.

Knowing what the community needs

The Calvary teams have learned a lot over their years of serving in the community and assisting their community partners. “Our experience has taught us that it is better to allow the community to identify the needs and then we try to equip them to meet those needs,” affirms Claire. They have tried it the other way and found it unsuccessful. “We planted a garden in an innercity complex without asking them what they’d like. We have discovered we need to find out what the leaders in an area deem essential rather than try to impose our ideas on a community,” she says. Networking with other agencies provides a good platform of information on what the real needs are. “On a series of Sunday evening, we brought in community people to share their experiences and to offer ideas,” Claire continues.

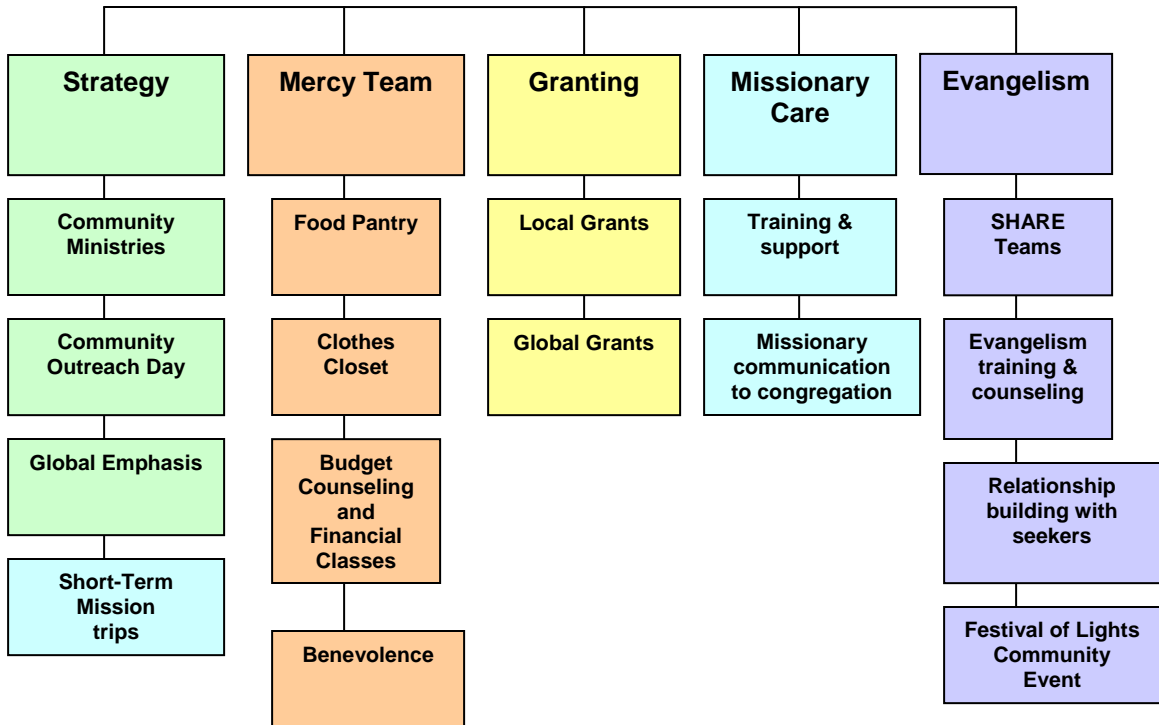
Internal Benefits of their External Ministry

By integrating local and global ministries, church staff and volunteers have streamlined several processes. “There used to be a local and a global grant team. Now one team assesses all the grant requests that come in,” says Claire. Grants for special projects are given to both local and global ministry partners.

The other benefit of integrating teams and revamping benevolence is a focus on good deeds connecting to the good news through relationship. Calvary believes success is achieved when people become new believers in Christ and they see personal change achieved in the families they serve—whether they are across the street or around the world.

Krista Petty is a coach for Externally Focused Churches and writer for Group Publishing and Leadership Network. Most recently, she served as editor of *The Externally Focused Church* (Group Publishing) and *Living a Life on Loan* (Standard Publishing). She resides in Johnstown, Colorado with her husband, Steve, and three great kids. The Petty’s are active members of LifeBridge Christian Church. Comments or questions for the author can be sent to krista_petty@msn.com.

Calvary Church Missions & Outreach



3 Views

“What is Missions?”

Ask this question to the members of Calvary Church in Grand Rapids, MI and here is what they will say:

Mercy and Benevolence

Missions is helping our friends and neighbors with the basic needs of life so they can live full lives in Christ. Sometimes our friends are across the street, and sometimes they are across the world as a friend to one of our missionaries.

Community Service

Missions means going across the street or across town to share our time, talent and treasure with others. It is partnering with other agencies of good will in our community to meet needs.

Global Impact

We are to make disciples and to see disciples of Jesus Christ raised up among the unreached, unevangelized, poor and oppressed people of our world through partnership focused on establishing and nurturing the local church.