



Buck Dopp/Special to Today's News-Herald

Calvary Baptist Church Pastor Chad Garrison is shown in his office.

# On a mission from God

## CALVARY BAPTIST CHURCH PASTOR CHAD GARRISON HAS A 10-YEAR TRANSITION PLAN FOR LAKE HAVASU CITY'S LARGEST PROTESTANT CONGREGATION

By **BUCK DOPP**  
SPECIAL TO TODAY'S NEWS-HERALD

**C**had Garrison leads Calvary Baptist Church, the largest Protestant church in Lake Havasu City. Calvary is also one of the fastest-growing and most generous churches in the area when it comes to giving time, resources and financial support to the local community.

In the previous five years, Calvary contributed about \$460,000 to help local families from donations received after communion services and an additional \$171,191 from its benevolent programs, according to church records.

Last year alone, the church gave \$142,000 to individuals and families in Havasu and Parker and over \$900,000 to mission work in the U.S. and



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**Pastor Joe Donahue speaks with church members at Calvary Baptist Church in between services. Donahue has been selected to help lead the church when Pastor Chad Garrison eventually retires.**

overseas.

The congregation sponsored 70 wells in Mozambique, Africa, which provide clean water to 55,000 people.

Each year Calvary purchases \$50 Staples gift cards for Havasu teachers and \$50

Walmart cards for Parker's educators so they can buy school supplies for their students.

In fact, Calvary gives

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20% of the donations it receives, according to Garrison.

However, the church's leaders want to help people build better lives, not just pay their bills. They strive to make Calvary a place where people can worship God without the legalism. They take the work of the church seriously, but not themselves.

Garrison observed that the word "joy" is mentioned so often in scripture that God clearly wants his people to smile and laugh. He said God created smiles and laughter, so humor is a good thing, but like all of God's creations, humor can also be used in bad ways.

Garrison is a staunch Southern Baptist because "we do missions and education better than anyone else. We have six seminaries and three of them are the largest seminaries in the world."

He added, "My goal isn't to turn anyone into a Baptist. I want people to become great followers of Jesus Christ. I know the power of God can change lives because he's changed mine. I want other people to know that if they're struggling, God can change their lives too."

As its name suggests, baptism is a big deal for Calvary. Under Garrison's leadership, Calvary has conducted more than 2,800 baptisms. While acknowledging that being baptized doesn't get you saved — the church believes that salvation comes from belief in Jesus alone — the church believes baptism is "a public declaration that you're a follower of Jesus Christ."

When pressed for the secret to the church's accelerated growth and abundant giving, Garrison is quick to respond. "When reaching people, mission is primary. We want to lead people to a life-changing relationship with Jesus."

Calvary offers contemporary and traditional worship services, which last no

longer than an hour. They include music, singing, prayer and a short message on how to apply the Bible to everyday life. No collections are received during the services, but there are offering boxes near the doors for anyone who wants to donate.

Garrison notices in reading the gospels that the only ones Jesus Christ gets angry with are the religious people. "It's easy for highly religious people to fall into the trap of being judgmental and hypocritical like the pharisees," he said. "We don't want to be the pharisees of our generation. They're the bad guys."

Calvary recognizes five values of emphasis: Relatable Truth, Transparent Living, Contagious Celebration, Uncomfortable Grace and Radical Service. Calvary is a non-judgment zone. People are welcomed, not judged — loved, not controlled.

"One of my favorite quotes is from a book by Henri J.M. Nouwen," Garrison said. "It's easier to control people than to love people."

Garrison said Life Groups are the "backbone" of Calvary and summed up their success by saying, "When you trust your leaders, amazing things happen." The church has over 1,200 people in 80 Life Groups, not counting children, "living out" Acts 2:42-47.

Life Groups have leaders, gather in homes, pray for people, read the Bible, and discuss questions and sermon notes. Most meet weekly from September through May, although some continue to meet during the summer.

The church founded Calvary Christian Academy, which now instructs nearly 300 students from pre-k to 8th grade. "We're unapologetically Christian," Garrison said. "We teach academics at a high level and from a biblical point of view."

While the mission, values and Life Groups have been essential factors to Calvary's expansion, there's another significant

reason why this dynamic church flourishes — Chad Garrison himself. Leading the church for the last 30 years, he is one of the longest-tenured ministers in Havasu. His heart, humor and humility have helped to create a culture of connection, radical service, and individual transparency.

Office manager Kathy Simons has worked with the lead pastor closely for 19 years and is one of only four people still in the church who were members when he arrived three decades ago.

"It's awesome working for Chad," she said. "After much prayer, he gets a vision and he goes for it. He never gives up and is a hard worker."

One time Kathy left out a page when she typed a sermon. "He came in laughing and said I forgot a page," she remembers. "Then he told people, 'Kathy doesn't make many mistakes, but when she makes them, they're big ones.'"

David Johnson is the executive director for the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention that serves approximately 470 churches across the state. He says Calvary, which has an average winter weekly attendance of 2,200, is not only their largest church, it's their biggest donor.

Johnson, who has known Garrison for more than 20 years, describes him as "a visionary leader with a pastor's heart. He's driven by vision. If people can't buy into Chad's vision, he's OK with that. Then they should go to another church."

"One of Chad's favorite quotes is, 'Culture eats strategy for breakfast.' He's created a culture at Calvary that draws you in. If I lived closer, I'd go to his church."

Calvary's Executive Pastor Chet Anderson has served with Pastor Chad for 18 years and has known him for 34. He calls Garrison "a man of great moral character and unwavering dedication to the mission of leading people to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ."

Titan Gym owner Dan

Donaldson is Chad's personal trainer. "Chad has a desire to see as many people brought to salvation as humanly possible," Donaldson said. "He loves to go to lunch and really get to know a person's life story. He keeps it real. I also like the fact that I train him three times a week, and he takes a beating."

Chad has been married to Marelda for 38 years. They have two daughters, Amber and Alysa, and five grandchildren. Amber and her husband Robert are on staff. Robert is a church pastor, and Amber, who has a Master of Divinity degree, is the service coordinator. Alyssa works as a counselor in the city and her husband Brandon is a teacher.

Garrison noticed that in some cases, ministers overstay their calling in a particular church, not allowing younger leaders to take on more responsibility. He said if younger leaders aren't given growth opportunities, they will move on to other churches, and the church they leave will be in decline.

In other cases, ministers abruptly leave their churches without a blueprint for the future. "It's easier to walk away — to abdicate and let go — than to be there," Garrison said. "But when you do that, there's no succession plan. A whole lot of energy goes into transitioning and there's a lot of random blaming God for bad decisions."

Since turning 60 in June, Garrison realized, "I maybe have 10 years left — God willing. Then I will be consulting and teaching. You can see the finish line. If you're older, you realize you don't have the strength you had when you were younger. You have to let young men dream dreams."

That's why he created Calvary's unique 10-year succession strategy. The game plan is for Pastor Chad and Pastor Joe Donahue — who came to Calvary in January 2019 — to co-lead Calvary for the next five years. This structure allows Donahue to

shoulder more responsibilities and that lightens the burdens on Garrison. At the same time, Chad can mentor and support Joe, helping him grow into the role of Calvary's lead pastor.

In five years, when Garrison turns 65, he will transition into a teaching pastor role for five more years while Donahue will become the lead pastor. "At root, Joe's an evangelist," Chad said. "He has a heart for reaching people. He's biblical, and he loves his family."

Donahue said he and Garrison have been discussing the idea of co-pastoring since 2014 when they attended a conference together.

"A new pastor can come with a new vision, change everything and lose a lot of momentum the church may have had," Donahue said. "Chad and I have the same vision and mission for Calvary. We want to lead people to a life-changing relationship with Jesus. I'm just a younger guy doing the same things."

Donahue graduated from Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN, with a major in English and a minor in Secondary Education. After finishing college in 1999, he married Kristy and enrolled in a seminary in Louisville, KY. He served in student ministry for 17 years before becoming a senior pastor at a church in Arkansas.

The Donahues have been married for 23 years, and Kristy teaches math at Thunderbolt Middle School. "We have four kids and three of them have type 1 diabetes," Donahue said. "It's a daily struggle. It is what it is. We've been able to connect with other parents of kids who also have type-1 diabetes and we support each other."

Dale and Jessie LaLande have been in Joe and Kristy's Life Group for three years and say their leaders can be counted on to help couples through difficult seasons. They say Joe is kind, relatable and transparent.

Of all the people Chad Garrison has known in his

life and ministry, he's chosen Joe Donahue to succeed him. That fact should tell members all they need to know about the qualifications and calling of their new co-pastor.

A fan of chocolate and peanut butter ice cream, Garrison looks at different churches in the same way he looks at ice cream flavors. "I found out that despite the different ice cream flavors, 95% of the ingredients in ice cream are identical. The only thing that separates them is the last 5%. That's when they throw in the cherries, the bubble gum and the other stuff."

"I think biblical churches are that way. You can go to the Apostles Creed and find out that most of us agree, and that's the essence of the gospel. We have more in common than what separates us, even though we have extremely different flavors."

"When you look at it that way, you don't judge other churches. That's why I always say, if Calvary's not your flavor, fine. Tell me your flavor, and I'll tell you what church in town might be that flavor, and I'll help you find it. I don't want you to come here and try to change our flavor."

"There are at least 40,000 unchurched people in Lake Havasu. Even if every church held four services, they all couldn't be served," Garrison said. "We as churches spend too much time arguing and fighting about what separates us. In a world that is so hostile to us there is so much more that unites us."

Calvary Baptist Church is one church with four campuses. Two locations in Lake Havasu City, one in Parker and online. Havasu services are Saturday at 5:00 p.m. and Sunday at 8:00, 9:30, and 11:00 a.m. The offices are located at 1605 McCulloch Blvd. S., Lake Havasu City, 86406. To contact the church, call (928)-855-6533 or Office@CalvaryBaptistLHC.com. For more information: <https://calvaryaz.com/>