

A VISION FOR REACHING A MISSING
GENERATION

Make It Real

Presence over production. Fathers over programs. Depth without pressure.

THE VISION IN ONE IDEA

Make it real. Make it relational. Make it deep.

01



REAL

Presence over production

A weekly rhythm built on the
table, not the stage.

02



RELATIONAL

Fathers & mothers, not programs

A mentoring culture that
structures belonging.

03



DEEP

A safer room, not a smaller truth

Real depth, delivered without
pressure.

Rivers Edge Church
August 2026

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

A Shared Picture of Where We Are Going

This is a vision document that looks honestly at why our current approach is not reaching Gen z (14-30 years olds), draws a lesson from a movement that did, and lays out a simple, three-part way forward that we can actually begin this season.

Read it slowly. The aim is not a program to launch but a shared conviction to hold — one we can begin living out, in a small and faithful way, within the next ninety days.

THE MOMENT WE ARE IN

Why This, and Why Now

Every week our doors open, and a particular group of people does not walk through them — or walks through once and never comes back. Older teenagers (18s and 19s) who have outgrown the youth-group performance. Young single adults navigating work, loneliness, and a thousand open questions. Young couples building a life together who have quietly concluded that church is simply not for people like them. They are not, for the most part, hostile to God. Many are aching for something true. But what we have been handing them is not landing.

The instinct of the last 30 years has been to win this generation with a better experience — brighter production, tighter music, a more polished show. For a season it worked. It is working less and less, and it is failing most clearly with exactly the people named above. This is not a generation that can be entertained into discipleship. They have been marketed to since birth, and they can sense a produced experience from across the room. A better show is not what they are missing.

What they are missing is precisely what the show was never able to give them: **a place to Belong before they Believe, people who know their name, truth with enough weight to build a life on, and permission to come exactly as they are.** This document is about becoming that place.

A Lesson From the Carpet

In the late 1960s, a California pastor named Chuck Smith — who eventually founded the Calvary Chapel movement - watched the counterculture of the late 1960's and early 1970's wash up on his doorstep — barefoot, long-haired, burned out on drugs and disillusioned with nearly everything the establishment had promised. When the new carpet at Calvary

Chapel began taking a beating from all those bare feet, someone proposed a sign at the door. Smith's response became legend: "tear out the carpet before you turn a kid away."

"Tear out the carpet before you turn a kid away."

That single instinct — that people matter more than the institution's comfort — helped set off one of the most remarkable movements of the century. Tens of thousands came. They were baptized by the hundreds in the Pacific. And they were reached not by lowering the bar, but by a handful of things worth naming:

- **Radical welcome.** Smith did not require the counterculture to clean up, cut their hair, and assimilate before they could belong. He met them in their actual condition.
- **Substance, not spectacle.** His signature was verse-by-verse teaching straight through books of the Bible. Kids who had burned through every alternative were hungry for something solid, and he handed them the real thing.
- **Their own language.** Worship took the form of the music those young people already loved. The content never bent; only the packaging did.
- **No theater, no hype.** A conversational tone, an ordinary shirt, zero manufactured emotion. The counterculture's finely tuned radar for phoniness simply never went off.
- **Spiritual fatherhood.** They called him "Papa Chuck." A rootless, often fatherless generation found a steady and affectionate father — who then released them into real ministry instead of holding them back.

One honest caveat travels with the story: a genuine move of the Spirit is never something we manufacture, and that era had its own failures and excesses. The goal is not to re-stage 1970. It is to clear away the obstacles and tend the soil — to do the things that, in any generation, make room for God to work.

OUR VISION IN ONE IDEA

Make It Real, Relational, and Deep

The modern instinct is to make church more impressive. The lesson of that movement — and our conviction for this one — is to make it more real. Humbler, deeper, more honest, and more willing to let people belong before they have everything figured out.

That single conviction works itself out in three ways, which are really one idea seen from three sides. We want to walk people from Belonging, to Believing, to Becoming — and to shape a community where that journey is the most natural thing in the world.

THE PATH WE WALK PEOPLE

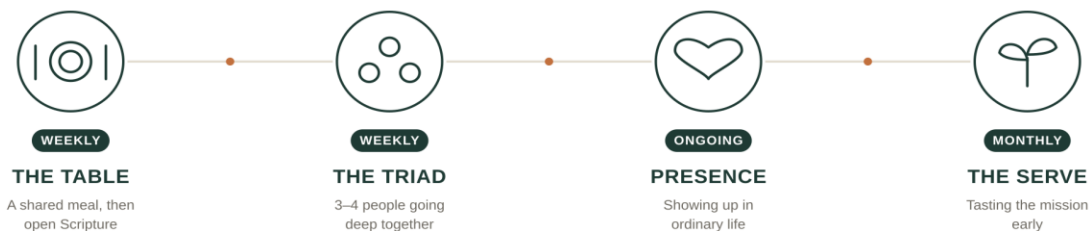


Pillar One — A Weekly Rhythm: Presence Over Production

The governing idea is that **the week**, not the Sunday morning worship service, is the true unit of spiritual formation. The attractional model places almost all of its weight on a single polished Sunday morning “experience”. Our vision will spread that weight across a few low-key, repeatable touchpoints, and let food and **genuine presence** do the heavy lifting.

THE WEEKLY RHYTHM

The week is the unit of formation



The table

One anchor gathering a week, built around a shared meal rather than a stage. We will pick an evening that fits shift work and irregular schedules better than Sunday morning often does. People eat together first — that one choice quietly dismantles the performer-and-consumer dynamic before anyone opens a Bible. Then thirty to forty minutes of real, open-Bible teaching, conversational, questions welcome, working through an actual book of Scripture rather than topical pep talks. Then unhurried space to pray and to linger. For lonely people, the surest sign of a healthy gathering is that no one is in a rush to leave.

The triad

A midweek group of three or four (triads and quads), the same people over many months so that trust actually compounds, meeting in a home, a coffee shop, a park, or a restaurant back booth somewhere. This is where depth and honesty live — too small to hide in, too consistent to stay on the surface. It is **deliberately not a twelve-person group**, which for this cohort often just recreates the anonymity they came to escape.

Presence

The unglamorous engine: **leaders and mentors showing up in people's ordinary lives** — the gym, the climbing wall, game night, changing a tire, teaching to cook or do laundry or create a budget, helping someone move a couch. **The relationship is the program.** Most of the real discipleship happens in these unscheduled hours, not in the official meeting.

The serve

A regular outward serve — monthly is plenty to begin. Get people doing the mission early, because tasting responsibility is what turns a consumer into a participant. It is the “release them early” instinct in miniature.

One structural advantage to exploit: our young couples without children and our single adults have something most of the church does not — open evenings, energy, and homes. We should not only minister to them; we should hand them the hospitality.

Pillar Two — A Mentoring Culture: Fathers and Mothers, Not Programs

The counterintuitive key: **we are not building a “mentorship program.”** The moment this becomes an application form and a matching spreadsheet, it dies, because **this cohort reads assigned intimacy as fake**. Smith never ran a mentorship program; “Papa Chuck” was simply present and available, and the relationships formed around him. Our task as leadership is to **structure the conditions, not the relationships** — to engineer dense contact between the generations, and then to notice and bless what grows. We think in three tiers rather than one flat pairing scheme:

The fathers and mothers

A small handful of genuinely mature older believers who become the settled presence of the whole community. Not assigned to anyone — they simply show up, learn names, and stay. This is the tier most missing in modern ministry, and the one this often family-fractured generation is most starved for.

The near-peer guides	Those leading the triads, just a few steps ahead on the road. Accessible in a way the older tier is not; the gap is small enough that a twenty-two-year-old can imagine becoming them. Most week-to-week discipleship runs through here.
Organic one-to-one	The deep individual relationships, left to form naturally out of all that proximity — then stewarded: a nudge, a blessing, an occasional introduction. Not force-assigned.

Recruiting the mentors

This is the genuinely hard part, and the obstacle is almost always that mature older adults feel unqualified — they assume they must be cool, bridge the culture gap, or have answers to every hard question. We must free them from all of it. **The job description is presence, honesty about their own failures, and a willingness to listen more than they talk. Their stumbles are the curriculum, not their expertise.** You generally cannot recruit these people with a sign-up sheet; you identify the few who already have the gift and the capacity, and you ask them personally.

Guardrails

- **Guard against the guru trap.** A healthy mentor consistently points past himself, to Christ and to the wider community, so that if he disappeared tomorrow the person would not collapse. This is the cautionary half of the movement's own story.
- **Keep the close work same-gender.** The genuinely confessional relationships stay same-gender, with couples mentoring couples — for the sake of both wisdom and trust.
- **Aim to multiply, not retain.** The goal of mentoring someone is to walk them to the point where they become a mentor — this year's mentee becoming next year's near-peer guide. A mentoring culture is healthy when it is visibly reproducing.

Pillar Three — Depth Without Pressure: A Safer Room, Not a Smaller Truth

Here is the reframe that unlocks everything: depth is almost never what scares off the de-churched. Smith handed strung-out hippies dense, verse-by-verse Scripture, and they came in waves — **the depth was the draw**. What actually makes wary people bolt is pressure, control, certainty that cannot tolerate a question, manufactured emotion, and the bait-and-

switch of being welcomed warmly and then handed an agenda. So we do not dilute the depth; we strip out the things that trip the alarm.

- **Lead with questions, not verdicts.** Open the text and let people genuinely look at it—**“what do you see here?”** — before telling them what it means. They will lean into the same passage if they are invited to wrestle with it rather than handed a ruling.
- **Make doubt and hard questions welcome.** Nothing rebuilds trust faster than a leader who can honestly say “I don’t know,” who treats a hard question as a sign someone is taking faith seriously. And we do not sand down the hard parts of Scripture— engaging them is the depth they are hungry for.
- **Let belonging precede believing.** Do not front-load the demanding material before there is trust. The table, the presence, and the mentors create the safety in which depth is received rather than resisted. We are not lowering the bar; we are building the relationship that lets someone reach for it.
- **Be honest about suffering. A great share of the de-churched left over glib answers to real pain.** The depth they actually want includes the willingness to sit in lament without tying a bow on it — to let the Psalms of complaint stay complaints.
- **Go embodied, not just informational.** Depth is not only in the head. Ancient practices — silence, fasting, confession, the table, fixed-hour prayer — land hard with this generation precisely because they are slow, counter-cultural, and the opposite of production.

Underneath all five: no manipulation, ever. No manufactured highs, no engineered pressure. We trust the material and trust the Spirit to move people on his timeline, not ours. Don’t make the truth smaller — make the room safer.

THE HONEST COST

What This Asks of Us

We owe one another candor about the price of this. The approach in these pages is slower than a launch, harder to measure than attendance, and far less impressive from a platform. It asks more of us than production ever did.

- **It asks our presence.** The engine is people showing up in ordinary life. That cannot be delegated to a service or a screen.

- **It asks our mature members to be known.** The fathers-and-mothers tier only exists if seasoned believers are willing to sit at tables, learn names, and be honest about their own road.
- **It asks us to measure differently.** We will have to **value depth and belonging over volume and spectacle**, and resist the pull to judge this by the old scoreboard.
- **It asks patience.** Trust is built slowly with people who have been burned. We are planting, not staging — and a planting keeps a different clock.

None of this is a reason to hesitate. It is simply what it costs to reach the people we have been losing — and it is, in the end, a more faithful picture of the church than the one we have been settling for.

How We Begin

We do not need a program launch. We need a faithful start, in this order:

Phase 1 — Next 90 days	Quietly identify and personally invite the first two or three potential “fathers and mothers.” Launch one weekly table gathering in a home. Form two or three triads from the people already closest to us. Keep it small on purpose.
Phase 2 — Following season	Add the monthly serve. Begin handing the hosting of the table to the couples and singles themselves. Let the first near-peer guides emerge and take a triad.
Phase 3 — As it grows	Multiply tables rather than enlarging one. Watch this year’s mentees become next year’s guides. Resist the temptation to centralize what is working; keep handing it away.

A WORD BEFORE WE START

The Carpet, Again

The people we are describing are not a problem to be solved or a market to be captured. **They are sons and daughters who have mostly been handed a show when they were aching for a home.** We have it within us to offer them something the show never could: a table with their name on it, people who will not leave, truth heavy enough to stand on, and the freedom to come as they are.

That will cost us some carpet. Let’s tear it out.

Make it real. Make it relational. Make it deep. Belong, believe, become.

APPENDIX

For the Sunday Vision Talk — Quick Reference

A compact version for casting this from the front, once leadership is aligned. Keep it to these beats:

- **Open with the carpet story.** It is concrete, surprising, and it carries the whole vision in one image.
- **Name the people, with love.** The older teen, the lonely single adult, the young couple who think church isn't for them — without blame, and without pretending we've served them well.
- **Make the turn.** We are not going to try to out-entertain the culture for their attention. We are going to offer them something realer: a table, people, truth, and welcome.
- **Cast the three.** Real (a weekly rhythm of presence), relational (fathers and mothers, not programs), deep (a safer room, not a smaller truth).
- **Make one ask.** Invite the mature to be present and known, and invite the young to come exactly as they are — and give a single, concrete next step.