

# THIRD PLACE COMES TO CHURCH

*by Lois Swagerty*

## **Article Summary**

Today's churches are strategizing in ways that are innovative, intentional and missional to reach a group of people who might not be churchgoers, but who are attracted to a nonreligious venue for coffee, lunch, play dates, workouts or concerts—where followers of Christ are also hanging out.

Ebenezers is a fully functioning coffee house, open seven days a week, that serves the community on Capitol Hill in Washington DC (<http://www.ebenezerscoffeehouse.com>). Owned and operated by the National Community Church, it serves up the Bible along with fair trade beverages during two Saturday night services that actually meet in the coffee house. All profits go towards community outreach projects.

For many people, the idea of Third Place conjures up a picture of their favorite coffee shop, café, or pub. The ingredients are standard: good food and drinks, comfortable friends, casual conversation and free Internet. This is the place, after home and workplace, to which people gravitate.

Recognizing this shift in culture, churches today are becoming increasingly strategic about providing a Third Place to meet a growing need for community contact.



Every Saturday night Ebenezers is transformed into a place of worship and reflection.

Today's churches are strategizing in ways that are innovative, intentional and missional to reach a group of people who might not be churchgoers, but who are attracted to a nonreligious venue for coffee, lunch, play dates, workouts or concerts—where followers of Christ are also hanging out. As Pastor Mark Batterson says, “the key to Ebenezers is that it’s not a church with a coffeehouse, it’s a coffeehouse where a church happens to meet on Saturday night.”

According to Ray Oldenburg, an American sociologist who first coined the term, “Third places are distinctive informal gathering areas that make one feel at home and allow people to relax and unwind after a long day at work.”<sup>1</sup> They nourish relationships, promote companionship and help create a sense of place and community. The concept of the Third Place is not new. In bygone eras it happened naturally in the social patterns and community centers of small-town America.



Friends gather for fellowship at Ebenezers coffee shop in Washington DC.

In recent years, suburban sprawl and the increased isolation of individuals in the technological age have contributed to the need to revive community contact. “Life without community has produced, for many, a lifestyle consisting mainly of a home-to-work-and-back-again shuttle. Social well-being and psychological health depend upon community.”<sup>2</sup>

### Third Places Attract the Unchurched

Healthy churches with Third Place facilities are more likely to attract the unchurched, according to a recent survey for the Cornerstone Knowledge Network. And not only does a third place facility attract the unchurched, it remains important to them after they join the church. “Increasingly people utilize the Third Place area, such as a coffee shop, to break up their long commute to work and back in order to reduce the stress of their daily routine”<sup>3</sup>— so churches are jumping in to fill the gap. “It is no wonder that most new churches and lobby designs in the last five years have incorporated Third Place concepts to attract and retain churchgoers. The church has moved from the private and sacred space toward the Third Place model. In doing so, it has required the fellowship area to be moved to the front door.”<sup>4</sup> In some locales the Third Place fellowship area is taking on the form of retail space, such as coffee shops and cafés.

### Coffee and Cafés

Michael Trent, owner of Third Place Consulting in Birmingham, AL (<http://www.thirdplaceconsulting.com>) works with churches worldwide to design coffee shops for churches and businesses alike. He is

passionate about coffee. “It’s the number two commodity in the world,” he says.

“Jesus had a Third Place,” observes Michael, (although technically, he didn’t have a place to lay his head). For him it was a matter of going away to a quiet place—at the shore, spending time with the Father, or hanging with the disciples.

Although the Third Place is not a new concept, it is being newly defined today, according to Trent. In recent years coffee shops have brought recognition of the Third Place back to America. “God is bringing the church back to the center of town,” says Michael. “The church is a normal, integrated part of the town, not on the outskirts, but in the center of town. I am begging churches to have downtown retail spaces.”

### A Place with a Purpose

In Michael’s opinion, a church’s café should exist for three groups: the body who needs to be connected, guests who need to feel welcomed, and the world which needs to be changed.<sup>5</sup> He lists three C’s that an intentional café can provide: *conversation*, *connection*, and *cash* that can be leveraged to impact people, communities, and faraway countries.<sup>6</sup>

To accomplish this goal, churches need to be intentional about their strategy. “You must align your café’s vision with your church’s vision and DNA, he advises. “A café with a genetic match to your church is one that has been birthed and conceived from your unique vision and mission. How is your church unique? What is scarce in your community? What about your church would the community miss if you closed your doors tomorrow?”<sup>7</sup>



The café at Community Christian Church in Naperville, IL not only offers wireless but also supplies a few computer terminals.

### Coffee with Computers

Community Christian Church in Naperville, IL kicks it up a notch in their Ground Level Café by serving up computers along with their brew (<http://www.communitychristian.org/glc>). They offer not only free wireless for people who bring their own laptops and handheld devices, but they also supply several computer terminals specifically designed for public use. This creates one more draw to the church as an inviting third place where people from the community can hang out.



### Things We’d Do Differently if We Did it Again:

- Wait a little longer to announce the project. We weren’t prepared for the huge response and couldn’t plug people in right away. – *Kim Swyden, Edmond, OK*
- Build more children’s ministry space. For every seat in the main worship center, there needs to be more space in the children’s space. – *Joe Franz, Canton, OH*
- Make it bigger. – *Darren Embree, Mosaic Café*
- Enlarge the work surfaces in the café and change the layout to make it more intimate. – *Dan Lacher, Journeys Café*



Journeys Coffee shop in Midland MI offers the community a place to gather and one of the best cups of coffee in town.

### Cups for Commuters

When Dan Lacher tells people he’s a church bartender their ears perk up. “Barista and bartender come from the exact same word,” he explains. “That’s why I’m called a church bartender.” He is the manager of Journeys Café (<http://www.journeyscoffee.com>) at Messiah Lutheran Church in Midland, MI.

“Today’s coffee house is the modern-day equivalent of a cool cup of water in the name of Christ,” says Dan. “A few years ago a group of us at Messiah Lutheran asked ourselves what we could do to reach the next generation. A coffee house was the obvious choice. It’s a nontraditional setting to draw people in.

“And we have a drive-through. We’re at a nice crossroads for people heading into the city in the morning. Drive-throughs allow the people who are still freaked out about church to get the best cup of coffee possible. They are starting to form a relationship without stepping inside.



Ordering a cup of coffee in the drive-through is a non-intimidating way for people to take a first step toward getting to know Messiah Lutheran.

“We’re not aiming for a conversion with every cup. We don’t say, ‘come in and be saved.’ It’s ‘come in, enjoy the best coffee you possibly can,’ and then conversations will happen.

“We don’t mind if the drive-throughs never come in, but they try our

coffee, love it, and eventually, it happens. A person thinks, ‘there’s something different about this church.’ People hurt by churches in the past might give it a chance again.”

Drive-through patrons can develop into drop-ins and regulars. Dan tells the story of a woman who came in daily for coffee, and after several months opened up to Dan about a particular hurt in her life. “I asked her if I could pray for her,” he says. “I may never know the outcome, but at that moment she knew I cared.”

### For Moms and More

Where can young moms bring their kids to play in the middle of winter in the Midwest? Where can business people sit down and meet for coffee and consulting? Where can church members connect with people in the community? All these questions and more were answered when First Christian Church in Decatur, IL (<http://www.firstdecatour.org>) turned their old fellowship hall into a huge foyer with a café and an indoor play area, and called it Mosaic Café.

First Christian decided to follow the model of a newly reconfigured McDonald’s to create a “linger zone” complete with flat screen TVs, computers and couches. “With WiFi, fireplace, sofas, and seating for 45, it opens right up into our lobby,” says pastor Darren Embree. “The play area is adjacent, separated by glass doors. Mom can watch her 2-year old through the glass.”

When people walk into Mosaic Café, they enter beneath awnings bearing its name, a separate entrance so that people don't have to walk through church doors to get there. Staff member Crystal Kirkman tells of one customer who came into Mosaic regularly for coffee. Eventually he stopped in on a Sunday morning, battling the church traffic, and stood in the back of the worship service to listen.

According to Darren, "Research says that an unchurched person is no more inclined to go into a church than a Christian is to go into a gentlemen's club. It's completely off his radar. Places are needed to provide an entry point with a community mindset."



The Mosaic Café in Decatur, IL offers a place for moms to come and fellowship while their children safely play in an adjacent area.

Believing that elementary kids need a Third Place too, the church also hosts an after-school program for kids in grades 4-6.

"The results so far have been an incredible success," says Darren. "At the grand opening in December of 2007, the local talk radio host came in and paid us the biggest compliment when he said, 'You guys are just so connected and focused on the community around.' We're just trying to make the walls of the church disappear."

### A Place to Play

A similar concept flourishes at First Christian Church in Canton, OH (<http://www.firstchristian.info>), where the church has built a Playland for kids. Open to the public



The Playland area at First Christian Church is a great place for families to connect.

at no charge, it offers a safe, fun place for children to play with four levels, including a super-fast slide and myriads of tubes and stairs for climbing fun. The party room is booked solid for birthday parties on Saturdays.

"In February 2008 we saw more than 1000 kids come and enjoy the playland during open hours," says pastor Joe Franz. "You've heard the phrase, 'kids bring their parents to church,' and this gives new meaning to that concept. It's been a great way for area families to connect to our church."

The church also provides other Third Place venues for the community such as a 9-hole golf course, Connections Café, and a full-service community center including a gym, fitness rooms, auditorium, and student lounge. Joe adds, "We are building a bridge to the community in a facility that's non-threatening."

### A Flair for Fitness

A gym may not be as relaxing as a coffee shop, but it nonetheless can serve as a viable Third Place. The people at Transformation Fitness Center, run by Henderson Hills Baptist church in Edmond, OK (<http://www.hhbc.com>) believe that, like Jesus, they are called to help heal people physically, emotionally and spiritually. A businessman in the church donated a fitness center to the church comprised of a 1100-square-foot full service gym. Clients pay dues



Transformation Fitness Center in Edmond, OK offers personal training, basketball, aerobics classes, and even massage therapy.

which go to support the church's free medical clinic. Fitness center membership has continued to grow rapidly, becoming what pastor Kim Swyden calls the most profitable gym in town.

### An Avenue for the Arts

Church of the Redeemer is located on the northern perimeter of Atlanta, GA (<http://www.redeemeratlanta.org/>) where its foyer is set up as an art gallery.



The Museo Arts Studio is a space set aside at the Church of the Redeemer for artist in need of a place to create.

“Using our building for an arts center has by far been the biggest bang for the buck,” says Shari Thomas, one of the church founders. “In 2007 Fringe was born, and it's now rated as the #2 musical venue in our city. We have an artists' room where they can bring their projects and run art camps—a working studio. Artists also display their work in the church foyer. In addition, the buildings are used for music lessons, addiction groups, and mothers' programs.”

Four times a year Church of the Redeemer morphs into a concert hall. A group of musicians called Fringe takes over the venue and offers a twist to the classical concert experience, blending live chamber music with a DJ spinning electronica, independent short films, and documentary-style videos on the musicians themselves (<http://www.fringeatlanta.org/>). “We wanted to see

the church used as the center of the community where all types of activities could take place,” Shari says. “These aren't programs that the church started. People came in and asked for the space. The whole purpose is not for evangelism per se; it's to serve and strengthen the community. There's no hidden agenda to convert you.”

“The results have been great,” says current pastor Richard Welch. “We're noticing that Redeemer is starting to become a center of activity in our community, not just for church-related activities. We get a lot of requests now for the use of our facility, which means that the community at large is starting to see our building as a civic resource, not just a space dedicated to ourselves.”

### Back to the Garden

Some churches have capitalized on the fact that, for many people, nature brings them closer to God. These churches have created a wide variety of Third Place expressions that draw from the beauty, solace, and refreshment found in God's creation. It can be as simple as a courtyard, as elaborate as a prayer labyrinth, or as large-scale as a nature walk. For example, First Baptist church of McDonough GA bought a large tract of adjacent farmland and developed a walking park. Westridge Church in Hiram GA features a prayer garden with a gazebo. It's a popular spot for weddings and for small groups to meet. New Providence Community Church in Nassau, Bahamas, has built a nature garden for their community.<sup>8</sup>

Within a greenhouse complex, they have constructed gardens that are tended by the children and teens who participate in their church. On Sunday mornings, these children



The Sacred Space at New Providence Community Centre in Nassau Bahamas is a meaningful place for community members to come and reflect.

work in the gardens with their parents and experience reflection and solitude. They put their hands in the dirt and help plants grow through careful tending, watering, pruning and nurturing. They develop a spiritual understanding of God's creation, the environment and how it symbolizes so much about their relationship to God's design.

### Choosing a Name

One important starting point when planning a Third Place venue is the name chosen. "Are you trying to reach the community, or are you trying to create a place for Christians to feel comfortable?" asks Michael Trent. He shares some names to call a coffee shop if you *don't* want non-churched people to show up—names like He-Brews, Messiah Mocca, Jehova Java or Holy Grounds. Where would Jesus go? "Not there. You may as well call it Christians Only Café. When you have a name like that, blaring Christian worship music, with Bibles lying everywhere, it defeats the purpose."

Dan Lacher of Journeys Café agrees that the name needs to be as inviting as the food and the atmosphere. He says, "The definition of 'Journeys' on our Web site is the act of traveling from one place to another, a process or a passage." He thinks of it as a journey toward Christ.

Darren Embree from Decatur explains how they chose the name Mosaic Café. "We wanted to reflect a place where a bunch of pieces are coming together into a harmonious unit. Our community is fragmented to a degree. So this is a picture of imperfect pieces coming together and finding a place in our community."

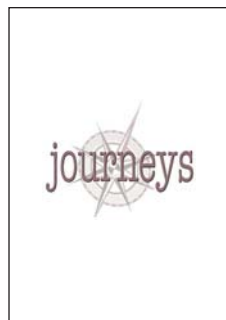
### Counting the Cost

What about the expense? "It's time to recognize that money put into a Third Place is an investment," not just an expense, says Michael. He puts a coffee house or other third space on par with a church's sanctuary space, nursery, or audio-visual equipment. "We need to view a Third Place café environment as an investment because we believe that adults need a place to gather, slow life down, and connect with one another. When churches view cafes as an expense, they are almost never happy with them and these cafes often live a short life. However, when viewed as an investment, the life of a café has a much better chance of survival and sustainability,"<sup>10</sup>

Ideally, a successful café will generate income enough to repay the initial investment and make the project self-supporting. Eventually it can become "an alternative source of revenue to pay for the building project, add to the team, plant churches, support missionaries, fight poverty, or any number of things." Churches in the US can take in money and do amazing things to leverage it nationally and globally." Michael explains, "We helped set up a functioning café in Cambodia which combined the elements of a business, an internet café and a leadership development center."

### Will the Congregation Cooperate?

Joe Franz tells about the tension created when his church in Ohio decided to relocate and build the Playland. "Some didn't see the need. But as we've



made changes over the years, we've always tried to honor the past and celebrate it along the way. People just want to know that what they've done has mattered. In the end, you will never make everyone happy, but if you focus on making God smile and bringing him glory, you can lay your head on the pillow and get a good night's rest."

"We have had a little push-back from some church members," admits Dan Lacher when describing the journey to becoming Journeys Café "Half the congregation was excited and the other half was asking, 'What are you thinking?' We explained our purpose in two modes: 1) We want to be the best coffee house in this area, and 2) we are a ministry outreach of the church. We impact people that may not be comfortable in a church. Some people in the family of faith still don't get it."

Staffing is crucial. "Our staff have to be Christ followers, totally devoted, imperfect, willing to be trained, teachable, filled with the spirit and willing to talk to people, ready to speak when the conversation turns to Christ," says Dan. "It has to be somebody we can trust, someone who has a passion for coffee. You can't just start with the gospel when people walk in the front door. We want to offer the best product, atmosphere and staff possible."

At Mosaic Café in Decatur, planning was careful and strategic. "We brought in Kevin Ford from Virginia as a consultant," says Darren Embree. As for push-back from the congregation, he experienced quite the opposite. "People at the grassroots level wanted to be involved in the ministry."

### Creating a Successful Third Place

"The key to making a Third Place work is to create a relational space," advises Bill Couchenour of Cornerstone Knowledge Network. "One of the characteristics of a third place is that it's neutral. That is one of the biggest obstacles for churches."

"Some churches offer coffee before and after service. That's a good thing, but it's probably not a Third Place that engages the community. And it doesn't have to be a coffee shop," adds Bill. "Consider a church in a college town that puts in



A Third Place doesn't always have to be a coffee shop. Bill Couchenour encourages churches to get creative, such as providing free washers and dryers for college students.

washers and dryers and a lounge area and invites the kids to come in and wash and dry their clothes for free."

So how can a church create such a space? While there is no single recipe for success, the following factors are important:

- *Cast a vision that matches the gifts and direction of your church.*
- *Consult the experts to flesh out your plan.*
- *Communicate well with the congregation to minimize push-back.*
- *Choose a name that will attract unchurched people.*
- *Create a superior product to offer the public.*
- *Collect a staff that is passionate about Christ and the project.*

Secular trend trackers at Trendwatching.com call this kind of place a "Being Space." They challenge us to think about ways of "accommodating consumers outside the home and office, becoming a relevant and useful part of their daily lives, offering them surprise, discovery, empathy, transformation...a place to lounge, hang out, try things out, work, or relax... or all of this at once."<sup>11</sup>

Bill Couchenour muses: "Imagine that being said about churches!"



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\* Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture is taken from the NIV translation.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Oldenburg, Ray, *The Good to Great Place: Café's, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Oldenburg, Ray. "Our Vanishing Third Places" *Planning Commissioner's Journal*. Winter, 1997, p 6-10.

<sup>3</sup> Rainer Research "Researching Effective Attributes of Church Buildings" 2007 The Cornerstone Knowledge Network, p.17-19. <http://www.cornerstone.com/>

<sup>4</sup> Scott Rhodes, "Make Your Church the 'Third Place' for Your Community," *ChurchExecutive Magazine*, Nov. 2007, p. 46-48.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thirdplaceconsulting.com>

<sup>6</sup> Michael Trent, "Conversations with a Church Bartender: What every church should know about filtering their coffee plans" Third Place Consulting, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Trent, "Conversations with a Church Bartender: What every church should know about filtering their coffee plans" Third Place Consulting, p.2.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.fermiproject.com/text\\_only/cultureshapingchurch.html](http://www.fermiproject.com/text_only/cultureshapingchurch.html)

<sup>9</sup> Michael Trent, "Conversations with a Church Bartender: What every church should know about filtering their coffee plans" Third Place Consulting, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.trendwatching.com/trends/pdf/2006\\_03\\_being\\_spaces.pdf](http://www.trendwatching.com/trends/pdf/2006_03_being_spaces.pdf), p. 2.