

HOSPITALITY: OFFERING A THIRD PLACE TO GATHER

The emergence of a novel coronavirus has led in some regions to measures such as social distancing guidelines and prohibitions against physical gathering. Whether meeting in person or online, church leaders can still plan with hospitality in mind. By exploring new models for gathering, paying close attention to relationships, and even redesigning physical space in some cases, the church can become stronger and more welcoming than ever.

What Is a Third Place?

For Ray Oldenburg, a sociologist, Americans have become too isolated, and “public life is populated with strangers more than ever before.” The stress of work life, including long commutes, has driven individuals to the privacy of home to relax and be entertained. What’s needed are more third places, beyond the home (first place) and work (second place), where relationships, shared experience, and belonging can offer renewal. In the past, the post office, the barber shop or beauty parlor, the tavern, and the drugstore lunch counter served this purpose.

Now people need places where they are encouraged to linger and talk with others, and where visitors are easily assimilated with the regulars.¹ In recent years, national franchises like Panera and Starbucks, as well as hotels, movie theaters, and fast food restaurants have responded to Oldenburg’s call by redesigning their businesses to offer a third place.

New Congregations Offer a Third Place

Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon describe several new models of the congregation that make informal gathering central. These include the **Simple Cell** (or house church) where people come together to do things weekly or monthly, such as watch a movie or study a book together. In the **Dinner Party**, groups share a meal, a few simple rituals, and conversation.

The **Community-Based Enterprise** brings people together through operating a business such as a coffeehouse church or bakery. Working can raise money to support the group, but primarily it serves as a gathering principle. The **Pilgrimage** draws groups together to faraway places such as the Iona community in Scotland, Israel, or Palestine. Likewise, in the **Same Time Next Year** model, church-based summer camps, yoga retreats, art immersions, or family camps become the occasional or annual destination for groups wanting to share their faith with each other. The **Community Center** is not a building, but a project or program developed after a series of meetings with neighbors, nonprofit organizations, and small businesses who identify common interests and pledge to collaborate.²



WE WANTED AN INFORMAL, SHARED EXPERIENCE
WHERE POTENTIAL MEMBERS WOULDN'T BE INTIMIDATED...
THIS MONTH'S BOOK IS, "THE CAT IN THE HAT".

Relationship First, Then Worship

Common to each of these models is the desire to build relationships with those who have little or no experience with the church. Informal gathering places offer the space to build a friendship with someone new and share stories of one's faith in a manner that highlights the give and take of a mutual relationship. This might include a mission trip serving the local community or a small group where everyone takes part in invigorating conversation. Contrary to popular belief, this relationship-building does not typically begin in a large public worship gathering on Sunday morning. If a new person comes to worship at all, this does not usually happen without a specific invitation (naming the date and time), and an offer to pick the person up. In most cases, the relationship with a trusted friend has already been developed well before the guest walks in the door.³

Hospitality at Worship Time

If a guest were to arrive with no prior connection to anyone in the congregation (a rare occurrence), what is the best-case scenario? Exterior signage makes the church easily identifiable from the road, and building entrances should be well-marked. A parking attendant helps the guest find a parking space, and a greeter says hello, offers a warm word ("Good to see you") and their name ("I'm -----). If the person responds with their name, the greeter writes it down. It is important not to be too intrusive, however, so asking "What's your name?" is not recommended. If a system for recording names is in place, the guest can write down personal information on the attendance pad or a bulletin tear-off. Then, one person, designated the connector, gets to know the person and makes sure their needs are met, whether it's finding the nursery, locating a good seat, or sitting with the guest. During the meet-and-greet (which lasts no more than two minutes), this connector stays with the guest, and after the service introduces them to the pastor. By the end of the day, a gift has been delivered to the guest's door. Follow-up is critical to making the person feel welcome to attend again.⁴

Church Buildings Can Hold Third Places

Church buildings can be designed or renovated with third places in mind and designed for "zones of connection" which allow for a variety of styles of con-

necting. **Nooks** provide space on the fringe of the crowd where individuals can duck out for a private chat. **Clusters**, which can be chairs arranged to face one another, serve to break up large spaces into zones for smaller groups. **Edges**, which are neutral zones at the periphery of a large space highlighted by a change in design materials such as different flooring, ceiling, or seating, offer someone entering the room a vantage point to view what's going on. **Hot Spots** offer space to hold a quick conversation, and **Perches**, such as high-top tables with tall stools, or seating along the wall, are places to stay a while, hold a conversation, and watch what's happening in the room from afar. Through simple renovations, churches can increase the opportunities to gather, share experience, and build relationships.⁵

Hospitality Can Be Life Changing

Hospitality usually brings to mind the business of providing lodging, food, and drink. The word originally had to do with the treatment of guests (Latin, *hospes*). In fact, church has been in the hospitality business a long time, as attested by the story of Abraham and Sarah providing a meal to travelers in the heat of the day and receiving the divine promise that Sarah, despite her age, would give birth to a son (Gen. 18:1-15). In changing times, hospitality can be adapted to new forms, including the livestreaming of worship services. Whatever the format, when we offer a place for strangers and friends to gather, the effect can be life changing.

1. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Boston, MA: De Capo Press, 1999), xvi.

2. Beth Ann Estock and Paul Nixon, *Weird Church: Welcome to the Twenty-First Century* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2016), 84-156.

3. Bob Farr, Doug Anderson, and Kay Kotan, *Get Their Name: Grow Your Church by Building New Relationships* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013, 1-25.

4. *Ibid.*, 83-91.

5. Derek DeGroot, *Creating Third Place Spaces at Church*. Aspen Group, undated. <https://info.aspengroup.com/creating-third-place-space-for-churches>