

## Is It the Future of the Multipurpose Building?

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By Ken Dean

Many creative multipurpose buildings have been built and used to combine worship, dining, education, recreation, fellowship, youth, children, performance and conference functions. The buildings vary a great deal in look and feel. Jerry Halcomb, chairman and CEO of Dallas-based HH Architects, describes the first multipurpose buildings as simple “gymnatoriums” with basketball courts and side stages, which gained popularity in the 1970’s. “And in the 1980’s, our firm designed a large number of nicer multipurpose buildings that combined interim worship with dining and education,” Halcomb adds. “These types of structures have often been the first-phase structures for new multi-phase master-planned campuses.” However, a different strategic use of multipurpose buildings has begun to emerge — what Ray Oldenburg, author of *The Great Good Place*, calls a “Third Place.” The first two places in a person’s life are home and work, he writes; however, great cities and civilizations have always had Third Places where people go for informal community, conversation and connection. Oldenburg cites as examples the neighborhood bistros in France, the bier gardens in Germany, the piazzas in Italy and English pubs as informal public spaces that play a critical role in culture and to the individuals who frequent them.

Oldenburg suggests we have a “problem of place” in America. “The automobile suburb had the effect of fragmenting the individual’s world,” he writes. “As one observer wrote, ‘A man works in one place, sleeps in another, shops somewhere else, finds pleasure or companionship where he can and cares about none of these places.’ ” Randy Frazee, senior pastor of Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas, agrees, saying we discovered the power and need for the Third Place backwards. “We committed to the 100-acre-megachurchcampus- off-the-freeway strategy only to discover that we were contributing to the problem,” he explains. “Our mega-church was just one more contrived place that fractured people’s lives. [W]e built the mega-structure that became just one more commute.” “We need to stop trying to manufacture community within a church and instead go do church in the community,” he adds. “The ideal church structure of the future will be churches with many locations of multipurpose/community center buildings in the middle of neighborhoods.”

### **Exhibit A: Community Christian Church**

Frazer's vision for the future is exactly what Community Christian Church in Naperville, Ill., has been doing. Community Christian is a multi-site church with several locations, including a community center — built in partnership with a developer — in the middle of a multifamily residential community that acts as a hub of activity for the neighborhood. Inside the YC, groups can meet over coffee at this café, which is open for business 16 hours a day. Community Christian's building at the Highpoint development in Romeo, Ill. is a community center with living room settings around fireplaces, a learning center for after-school tutoring, coffee shop, gym, fitness center and mailboxes for the residential community. Pastor Dave Ferguson illustrates the power of using a Third Place multipurpose building by telling a story about a resident who showed up Sunday morning in his gym clothes with a basketball in hand, only to find the gym set up for "some kind of meeting." The man decided to see what was going on, so he sat on the back row, put his basketball under his chair and stayed for the church service. He listened to a discussion about getting to know people in your neighborhood by joining a small group, and signed up. The man started attending the small group and brought his brother. A few months later, they both became Christ-followers. Community Christian Church's Naperville, Ill. facility is "version 2.0" of a Third Place — where a church also happens to gather. This facility is a yellow multipurpose building on seven acres in a residential community. It acts as a commuter lot for public transportation, has a café/coffee bar that stays open 16 hours a day, a gym, a cyber café with a wireless internet network, a few hard-wired terminals and an after-school program offering music and art lessons.

### **Exhibit B: Joshua's Crossing**

Certainly, Starbucks-type coffee bars and Barnes & Noble-style bookstores have been a growing trend in new church spaces for some time. However, a few churches are taking the strategic step to create those types of environments in public places to connect with and serve in their communities. Joshua's Crossing Church in Fort Collins, Colo. is one of them. Leaders here created a not-for-profit coffee shop in a downtown building they leased for worship but decided it needed to be used during the week to serve the community. So began "Everyday Joe's" coffee shop. Its goal: Make the church's presence in the community relevant to the community. "We make an effort not to be a 'Christian' coffee shop," said church board member Daryl Dickens in a recent Coloradoan magazine interview. "We just want to be a good coffee shop where believers and non-believers feel comfortable." The popularity and impact of a Third Place is directly related to the human need and desire for community. "Building community is what everybody is looking for today," explains Mike McMahon of Leadership Network. "They long for the place that connects their lives to the lives of others." And Frazer describes the successful Third Place as "the place where worlds converge" — the worlds of the church, family and neighborhood. "It can be as simple as your front yard if you're always out there inviting

others to hang out, come and go on a regular basis with no set agendas,” he says.

### Looking Ahead

What will our churches look like in 10 to 20 years? Some Christian futurists believe younger generations will have no use for the 3,000- to 5,000-seat worship centers baby boomers are building today. Many churches believe the future is our past — going back to our residential communities, but with a new twist: as public spaces. Perhaps the multipurpose churches of the future will be many sites instead of one, and they might look more like cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, recreation centers or even hair salons than the churches we’re used to seeing.

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