

# partners

THE CHURCH PLANTING NEWSLETTER OF THE EC CHURCH

## Lifetree Café CONNECTS with Community

by Kolleen Long

**E**VERY MONDAY NIGHT, the Lazy Dog Coffeehouse in Minersville, Pa., is transformed into LifeTree Café. Free and open to the public, the evening focuses on a different “hot topic” and includes a video presentation, opportunities for discussion and yes, even, some coffee.

Topics cover a wide range of issues, from dealing with difficult people or questions of life after death to tattoos and faith in America. The point of the evening? Not to make a strong evangelical push so much as to open a dialogue. The key, notes Jeff Byerly, is simply to make a connection.

Byler is pastor of Bethesda EC Church in Schuylkill Haven, Pa. The church pays for the use of the coffee house, including refreshments, and volunteers coordinate several teams to make sure each week’s event runs smoothly.

“We have a friendship team that greets at the door,” Byerly explains. “We have people that sit at the tables and show people where the coffee is and “let them know what’s going on.” And another group collects data and comment cards and returns them to the host group.

LifeTree Café is actually a nationwide movement, based out of Loveland, Co. No matter the location, each Lifetree Café focuses on the same weekly topic, watches the same DVDs and follows the

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# REINVENTING THE CHURCH IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY

**A**ROUND THE WORLD – from China and sub-Saharan Africa to Eastern Europe and Latin America – the church is growing faster than the population. “Where the church is growing the fastest around the world it is lay-led, under-resourced and very restricted or persecuted,” says Dr. Tom Clegg. “Where it is professionally-driven, well-funded and [free], it is struggling.”

When researching his book *Missing in America*, Clegg found that – at best – one church is lost for every one planted in the United States. “We run into a problem when Christians do not reproduce Christians. That forces the church into the Christian reproduction enterprise.” The resulting evangelistic efforts may indeed bring people to

Christ, “but at an abysmally slower rate. What that does is force networks or denominations into the church reproduction business. What we end up with is this woefully low spiritual reproduction rate and equally low congregation rate.”

In a world where people look to Oprah Winfrey, not Billy Graham, for spiritual guidance, the future of successful Western church planting lies in efforts that often fall under the radar. This means meeting “prechristians” in neutral places, like a coffee

house. It means taking the time to build honest relationships. It means staying true to the Gospel message while finding ways to relate that truth to those we meet.

“People are looking for a spiritual connection but they’re looking right past our churches,” Clegg says. “The obstacles are formidable, but God’s people are able to see that not as bad news but as a golden opportunity. The church can be reinvented.”

Clegg references Ecclesiastes 3:11: *He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end* (NIV).

In other words, Clegg says, “there’s

an eternal message written in the heart of every man that they cannot understand, but their soul craves the interpretation.”

That aching need for God is a good starting point for reaching the lost. Once a relationship is established, Clegg says, we have opportunity to open a

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“If we live our relationship with Jesus Christ, our lives become salt. And salt does amazing things. It melts frozen hearts, gives traction on slippery slopes, kills any sin, and awakens the spiritually dead.”

## PRAYING FOR CHURCH PLANTING

DAY OF PRAYER FOR CHURCH PLANTING, THE FIRST SUNDAY OF EACH MONTH

**PRAY FOR OUR CHURCH PLANTERS BY NAME** (see box with the current list of planters). **ASK GOD TO:**

- Protect their hearts from spiritual attack.
- Grant them a double portion of energy to run the race set before them.
- Strengthen their minds for clarity of vision and planning.
- Protect and strengthen their families for ministry life.

**PRAY FOR OUR CHURCH WORKS BY NAME. ASK GOD TO:**

- Use these ministries to attract individuals and families to Jesus.
- Bless each ministry with spiritual and numerical growth.
- Raise up leaders within each new church work.
- Lay a hedge of protection around each ministry.

## CHURCH PLANTING LIST OF MINISTRIES

- Bethlehem, PA - **Sonrise** – Richard Sergi
- Ephrata, PA – **House of Blessing** – Abimael Montanez
- Lehigh Valley, PA – **Horizon** – Bud Daneker
- Philadelphia, PA – **Comunidad Biblica** – Rolando Diaz
- West Hazleton, PA – **Buenas Nuevas** – Edwin Mieses
- York, PA – **Iglesia Cristiana** – Carlos Kelly
- Gratz, PA – **The Dwelling Place, Restart** – Robert Stoner
- Slatington, PA – **Trinity, Restart** – Brian Kern
- Tallmadge, OH – **New Direction, Restart** – Timothy Ream

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same basic format. "There is a script that we follow, and it's pretty much designed to facilitate a dialogue, not to present a position," Byerly explains. "There's a discussion that ensues [and] people are free to share whatever they want."

To make sure discussions don't escalate, a sign is posted at each meeting. It states: "You're welcome just as you are. Your thoughts are welcome. Your doubts are welcome. We're all in this together. God is here, ready to connect with you in a fresh way."

Word about the café at the Lazy Dog is spread through advertisements in local papers as well as via social media like Facebook. The café is also part of a local group that spreads word to educational, medical and other county agencies. Once people attend a café, their email is added to the host group's email list, and they receive weekly video trailers for future topics.

Byerly notes that in today's culture, many people perceive the church as standing against something. Through Lifetree, he says, they learn "what we stand for. We let them know God is with them and for them."

His group has had the chance to make that kind of connection with people through the café. A discussion on autism drew in parents dealing with the disorder; one on the afterlife brought in a young woman grieving the loss of her mother.

"The hope is that you have people

that continue to come back over time," Byerly says. "You develop a core group of people that come regularly and develop a deeper relationship."

Attendance at the Minersville café varies from 15 to 25 each week. As the core group grows, Byerly notes, they have the option of adding a second café at a different time. And, once the

group reaches around 60, the opportunity to begin a church plant is there.

Is LifeTree Café a hint at the future of church outreach? Other EC congregations, including Community Evangelical Church in Sinking Spring, Pa., and Mohn's Hill EC Church in Reading, Pa., are starting similar efforts. Stay tuned to **Partners** for more details.



*"You're welcome just as you are. Your thoughts are welcome. Your doubts are welcome. We're all in this together. God is here, ready to connect with you in a fresh way."* LIFETREE CAFÉ SLOGAN

**T**he concept of Lifetree Café is straightforward: find a neutral location, provide refreshments and encourage people to join a discussion about things that matter to them. In the process, people may just see how God can meet them where they are.

Lifetree is part of Group Publishing, an award-winning resource for church publications. For more information, check out [lifetreecafe.com](http://lifetreecafe.com) or call (970) 292-4138.

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dialogue about Scripture and finding the path to God. "Those kind of conversations are happening less and less one way," he notes. "The church's [traditional] conversation is a monologue: a sermon from the pulpit." By



adopting a conversational approach, not unlike Jesus' approach to many he met, we can move away from a program-driven approach, breach the barrier

of "Church culture" and find ways to create new churches, or communities, for Christ.

"I'm optimistic about the future," Clegg says of church planting, "but I'm also convinced that the future will look very little like the past." Or, rather, the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century may well look like the church of the first century: communities of believers gathered together for fellowship, dialog and worship.

**DR. TOM CLEGG** has worked evangelistic crusades and medical clinics in East Africa, leading to the establishment of churches in the early 1980s. He returned to the States – and to a very different cultural challenge – to plant churches near Chicago and in the Virginia tidewater area. He currently leads a consulting ministry, the Missional Transformation Network, and is also involved in local church planting. He spoke at the 2010 EC National Conference on missional living and will lead a conference at Riverhill Evangelical Church in Shipperville, PA, on October 23 and 24. For more information on this seminar, call (814) 226-5414 or go to <http://riverhillevangelicalchurch.web.officelive.com/pcoming.aspx>. Additional info on Dr. Clegg is available on his websites, [www.missionaltransformationnetwork.com](http://www.missionaltransformationnetwork.com) and [www.tomclegg.com](http://www.tomclegg.com).



The **PURPOSE** of the Church Planting Commission of the Evangelical Congregational Church is to know Christ and make Him known.

The **MISSION** of the Church Planting Commission of the Evangelical Congregational Church is to help churches plant healthy churches that proclaim Christ to a hurting world.

The **VISION** of the Church Planting Commission is that the Evangelical Congregational Church becomes a Church Multiplication movement, realized when churches plant healthy churches that plant healthy churches.

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