



THIS MATTERS

What is a Third Place?

By Jon Dansby

You've probably heard the term "third place" before. Starbucks used the concept in their marketing strategy. A third place was another space to frequent besides your work and your home. This third place is somewhere to find refuge and a sense of place.

WHAT IS A THIRD PLACE IN A MISSIONAL COMMUNITY?

In a similar way, in the Church, we need to create a third place. Your first place is the Sunday gathering at your campus. Your second place is your weekly missional community meeting. And now we need a third place as a way to cultivate your mission together as a community: a place to introduce your lost friends to your community.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF A THIRD PLACE?

The purpose of this third place will be to create some neutral ground. When we think including lost friends in our lives or getting them to meet our Christian community, we usually only have two places to invite them for our "first ask": our Sunday gathering or our Bible study/missional community.

Unfortunately, for outsiders who don't already value these places, the invitation is usually a non-starter. The large Sunday gathering, as great as it is, probably has the most barriers with its religious language, foreign customs, "churchy" feel and expectations and the large, non-interactive format. A less intimidating first ask is your missional community, but it still carries some significant barriers. So, the answer to your first ask is an awkward, "No thanks. Not interested." Or an insincere, "Sure, maybe." Now you're left with just trying to inject spiritual conversations on your own or hoping that one day they will change their minds and come with

you on a Sunday. Now, thankfully God can and does use this, but it completely bypasses your powerful community apologetic, arguably the most persuasive argument you have for the reality of the gospel.

Your missional community needs to create a neutral space to go to that isn't the Sunday event and not your Bible study. You want a place where you can bring your lost friends that doesn't demand that they have to scale a barrier of Christian lingo and perceived preconditions. This is informal, casual and non-committal. They need to see and relate to Christians in a natural and relaxed (though deliberate) environment. They need to feel that your group really enjoys the just pleasure of being together. Your missional community's third place is the place for this.

WHERE DO WE DO THIRD PLACE?

Your third place will be determined by your mission. You have to ask the question, "Where can I bring an outsider that will be a natural place for them to meet and enjoy my Christian friends?" As a missional community, where can you gather *regularly* and *naturally*? Is it at a park? A restaurant-pub? A fun sport? The community pool? A coffee shop? A bowling alley? A pool hall?

Wherever it is, it must be neutral ground and become a regular part of your community. And each member of your missional community should understand that coming to your third place is crucial. It is crucial to the mission, to the community and to their lost friends and to their own personal spiritual development. If we aren't pursuing our lost friends, seeking to wrap our lives up with them, then we aren't striving to be like Jesus. Jesus was so close with the lost that religious people accused Him of sinning with sinners (Lk 7:34). In fact, even the disciples didn't get it for most of the time they were with Jesus. We have to make spaces in our lives to allow for this kind of close friendship and interaction. Creating this third place is a way to do this.

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT?

One rule that is important to adopt in your third place is this: NO INSIDER TALK AROUND OUTSIDERS. Insider talk is the Christian lingo that is natural for us, but undecipherable for an outsider. To an outsider with no relational context, it is confusing, exclusive and even

intimidating. Now, it's fine if the outsider brings it up or it is a natural part of the conversation's flow. We're not pretending that we aren't Christians, after all.

One time I was at my third place with my missional community and somebody brought Don. Don was a complete outsider to the faith with few inhibitions. When I asked him whether he had watched a sporting event the night before he replied, "Well, it was on at the nudie bar last night, so I watched some of it while there wasn't any dancing." I was taken aback, but I was so happy that Don didn't feel the need to put on a churchy front.

Don was enjoying our company and the night was really enjoyable. A Christian friend who wasn't in our missional community came up to the table. He didn't know what we were doing there, so he immediately began using all kinds of "insider talk." He was disappointed about sin in some person's life, he thought somebody was a "really godly guy," his friend was studying Proverbs, etc. Now, these are all things I could get into. In fact, I hoped that Don would someday be concerned about such things, but this wasn't the place. I could feel my temperature going up as I glanced toward Don. Then something striking happened that I will never forget. Don just stood up and walked away. He never came back to the table. I was stunned. My friend went to go get him, but he wasn't interested in being around us anymore.

LESSONS LEARNED

I learned an important lesson from Don. You see, the goal was that Don would begin to like the people in the community. Then he is free to include himself into our community where we are centered on Christ, the Scriptures and our mission to make disciples. After a short while, we would invite Don to our Tuesday night missional community meeting where we "talk about life and God." He sees us, normal people, gathering around the Scriptures, striving to believe the gospel and submit to Jesus. He is lovingly and repeatedly confronted with the gospel in more than just one conversation. The community apologetic is at work, and by God's mercy, perhaps Don could come to glorify God by believing in Jesus.

WHO DO WE INVITE?

Keep in mind, having a third place isn't about reaching the people who work at and frequent your third place. It's primarily a neutral ground to bring the people you're praying for to meet your Christian friends. May God give us the opportunity to introduce the employees and regulars to Jesus, but that's not the first purpose. We are intentionally creating a place for our lost friends to discover our community. They can belong here before they believe so that they may hear the gospel from our lips, see it changing our lives and believe in Jesus at a later time.

Think about a third place or two where your community could commit to and begin gathering weekly. It could be the beginning of some divine moments for your lost friends.