

Third Place Ministry — A Missional Practice

Missional practices: cultivating new understandings, ways of being, and living Christ's mission.

Purpose: To learn to listen and pay attention in informal settings to what is happening in the lives of people in your community. This practice will help you and your congregation discern ways to respond to the needs and opportunities that surface when you pay attention to meaningful conversation.

According to Ray Oldenburg, an American sociologist who first coined the term, third places, “Third places are those environments in which people meet to develop friendships, discuss issues, and interact with others.” He points out that home is our first place, our place of employment is a second place, but the place where we most learn what’s going on in the community around us is a third place. Communities of faith have incorporated third place ministry in their missional focus. Here are ideas for disciples or congregations to start a third place ministry.

Steps:

Start by asking, “In our community where do people gather for informal conversation?” Consider some of the following: local coffee shop, bookstore, park, convenience store or other places where people sit and visit. Then go to one of these places regularly with the intent of getting to know the names of clerks and frequent visitors.

After a few visits, take a book you’re reading or your scriptures. Place the books on your table and be open to people engaging in conversation about them. Invite friends to join you and talk about issues or interests going on in life.

Be open to inviting others to join your conversation. Listen to what is important to them. Ask yourself, “What is God doing in their lives?” “What is the invitation from God about their experience?”

Suggestions:

- Visit a local school to talk with the principal or guidance staff about needs they have for their students. Do they need someone to sit and have lunch with the students? Do they need tutorial help? What is the need that God is inviting you and others to be part of in your community?
- If you have a group of people skilled or interested in knitting, do a prayer shawl ministry in a public place like a local coffee shop. This ministry could become an ecumenical ministry where knitters from different faith communities give shawls to local domestic violence shelters, hospitals, assisted living centers, or nursing homes.

Process Tips:

This practice requires genuine investment in relationships and time. This practice is not about “inviting people to church.” It is about helping us better understand what God is up to in the lives of people in the community by using an informal setting. If your community doesn’t have a meeting place, that’s an opportunity for the congregation to create and develop a third place experience for the community!