

The awesome potential of coffeehouse ministry:

some tips based on 30+ years of experience

by
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First, some background.

My wife Dawn and I are both Baby Boomers. Sad to say, both of us grew up in churches that were full of ritual and tradition, but had very little preaching of the Gospel, evidence of the Holy Spirit, or strong Biblical teaching. We are part of a huge generation of Americans that was largely turned off by “organized religion.” As teens and young adults, Dawn and I fled the church.

Then came the original coffeehouse movement in the late '60s and '70s. As a young bachelor building a career in Chicago, I would take the elevated train to a delightful secular coffeehouse in the city. I could come for a much-enjoyed, laid-back evening of food, beverages, games, and tunes. No pressure to perform or impress. In this simple, casual atmosphere, I was free to be myself. The coffeehouse was a wonderful oasis in the midst of my hectic career and challenging city life.

Meanwhile, Dawn had begun to question the purpose of life. After a live performance of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in Worcester, Massachusetts, Dawn was invited to come to a church coffeehouse. She came, heard the music and the preaching, and trusted Jesus Christ as her personal Lord and Savior in 1971.

Years later, I met Dawn and we began dating. At the time, she was a Christian and I wasn't. Largely due to her influence, I trusted Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior. A year later, we were married! After we married, we began to worship regularly at Grace Bible Baptist Church in Vernon, CT, where I eventually served as Sunday School superintendent, teacher, deacon, and the organizer of our monthly men's fellowship meetings. With my passion for coffeehouses, I deliberately organized these men's meetings with a coffeehouse theme, feel, and content. I ran these men's coffeehouses for several years, with heartwarming results.

Then, the Holy Spirit led Dawn and me to the Wesleyan Church in Ellington, CT. In early 1995, I approached Pastor Norm Mesel with a detailed proposal for a new coffeehouse ministry in Ellington. The name the Lord gave me, "Jacob's Well," was based on Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-30. She had come for physical water, but Jesus nourished her with physical *and spiritual* water from the Holy Spirit. As a result, she was saved. She then told all the townspeople about the Lord, and many of them were saved. *Maybe the Lord could use Jacob's Well Christian Coffeehouse to similarly evangelize the town of Ellington!*

The mission of the coffeehouse would be to serve as an "oasis," just like I had felt at the coffeehouse in Chicago years earlier. The café-style format would be very casual, gracious, hospitable, and lively. Guests could drink coffee, tea, water and soft drinks; munch on snacks; play nonviolent, nonphysical games that encouraged creativity and thinking; enjoy live and taped Christian entertainment; pick up Christian literature; hear the Gospel and inspirational testimonies of everyday Christians; receive one-on-one counsel and support. Admission, snacks, and beverages would all be free. The coffeehouse would be financed by freewill offerings and staffed by Pastor Norm, myself, and a group of dedicated church volunteers.

The church endorsed the proposal, and formed a committee to give birth to this new ministry. After several months of preparation, our first Jacob's Well Christian Coffeehouse was held in October of 1995. The coffeehouse was held at Ellington Wesleyan Church for 12 years. Then, we went through a transition to Union Church in downtown Rockville, CT. As of summer 2014, we have hosted about 225 coffeehouses. We believe the Lord has used the coffeehouse as an "incubator" for a ministry that He wants to multiply elsewhere. Over the years, we have helped over 30 organizations across the USA and overseas to organize, book talent, budget, promote, host, follow up, avoid some of the mistakes we have made, and bear much fruit.

**Thank you for the opportunity to minister to
you by sharing this document!**

**Ask the Holy Spirit for confirmation that this is His will
for *your* church and *your* community.**

The very fact that you have contacted us, and received this document, gives evidence of His prompting. Test the concept informally with several of your Church leaders, and keenly tune into their responses. If you and a small nucleus of leaders share a zeal and passion for coffeehouse ministry, then keep moving forward! If no one seems to grasp onto the concept, give it time to “percolate.” The Holy Spirit will confirm when the timing is right.

Pray for a *clear vision* about your coffeehouse ministry.

Assuming that you believe it is God’s Will to move forward, pray for clarity of vision regarding the coffeehouse relevance, setting, and potential to impact lives. Write the vision down so others may comprehend it, be inspired by it, and run with it.

Conduct a “vision meeting” with members and friends of your church.

Invite all church members and friends to a meeting when the vision can be presented. You may have a few naysayers, but don’t let them discourage you. If there is a general consensus to proceed, then proceed!

During this vision meeting, you should take an inventory of initial volunteer staff, facility, guest talent, promotional and financial resources available. Ask for volunteers to form a coffeehouse committee, and give each person specific responsibilities and the authority to carry them out:

a. Prayer

Your staff here would faithfully pray for the coffeehouse ministry, for Godly fruit.

b. Promotion

Your staff here would faithfully promote the coffeehouse by sending news releases to local Christian and secular media, creating flyers, hanging posters, sending postcards and emails, posting information on the internet and through social media, making announcements from the podium and in church bulletins, adding a coffeehouse home page on the church website, hanging banners and signs, and encouraging family and friends to come. (By the way, there is no “one” way to promote a coffeehouse; a synergy develops when you use a variety of promotional tools.)

c. Entertainment “booking”

Your staff here would faithfully seek out, screen, and book talent for your coffeehouse. Ideally, you would schedule talent several months in advance instead of scrambling every month. For example, we often book talent 8-16 months in advance. In our experience with Jacob’s Well Christian Coffeehouse, live performances draw larger crowds than videos or movies. We’ve had good results with both musical performances and theatrical performances.

We try to mix things up, instead of getting into a rut. I call it a “horizontal variety show” spread out over 12 months a year, instead of one night. Different people are attracted to different musical styles. We also expand people’s awareness of various types of Christian music. The body of Christ is a BIG body with a diverse range of gifts, testimonies, personalities, and forms of expression!

For example, we’ve had Christian musicians who perform folk, country, jazz, rock, blues, black Gospel, contemporary “Vineyard” style music...we’ve even had *drum solos*! We’ve had soloists, duets, trios, and groups (including the entire team of Life Action Singers.) Some entertainers are reserved and subdued, others are charismatic and expressive. We try to create an environment where they have the liberty to be themselves in Christ.

Make sure, however, that every performer has a personal relationship with Christ. Request that they share their testimony sometime during their performance. And it is very wise to have an altar call at the end for salvation. We share the Gospel at every coffeehouse, and nearly every evening souls are saved and saints are touched by the Holy Spirit.

d. Facility arrangements.

Your staff here would faithfully seek out and find an appropriate facility, making sure the atmosphere fits the vision. They would also be responsible for providing snacks and beverages, rounding up games, checking the sound system, bringing tapes for background music, and taking care of facility setup, breakdown, and cleaning.

In our case, we chose to use our church fellowship hall because it was free and could be easily set up to create a nice café-style venue. We obtained café-style tables, tablecloths, and stand-alone pole lights with dimmer switches so we could create the right ambiance.

We knew this going into it, but...*the biggest weakness of having a coffeehouse at your church building is that it's not a "neutral" site.* Remember, part of the awesome potential of a coffeehouse ministry is its unique ability to reach unchurched or turned-off, ex-churched people. Inviting some of these people to a church building will be an obstacle. Also, having a denominational label on the church building will hinder some people who come from different denominational backgrounds from coming. If the Lord gives you the resources to host a coffeehouse in a neutral setting, like a storefront or a community center, I would encourage you to pursue that route first, as led by the Holy Spirit.

e. Budget.

The coffeehouse ministry should be included in the church budget. For example, our coffeehouse is a "line item" in our annual budget. Our total budget for 12 coffeehouses, held on the first Friday of each month, is about \$7,000.

f. Leadership.

This is where committees can sometimes result in mass confusion and paralysis. Our Lord didn't ask his 12 disciples (ie, a "committee") what He should do. He courageously fulfilled his Calling. You need, and should designate, one person who has a passion and a vision for your coffeehouse ministry—and the gift of leadership to be a modern-day Nehemiah—to enthuse the staff and coordinate their efforts. Without this "spark plug," your coffeehouse will tend to languish.

Please understand, too, that your coffeehouse may not be an instant success. Your church will need patience, and should be prepared to persevere through challenges and dry spells. In many cases, the Lord's Work is not a sprint...it's a marathon. Your church will need to have a mature perspective, and not get bogged down in that nebulous and destructive world of "expectations." Be faithful, and God will bless the fruits of your labors in His way, in His time.

Set a target date for your first coffeehouse, and go for it!

There comes a time when the Holy Spirit will give you the unction to stop planning, stop daydreaming, stop analyzing, and put your hand to the plow! Once you host your first coffeehouse, the spiritual ice has been broken and you can now keep going. You'll learn as you go along. While you want to be faithful to the vision, don't become legalistic about the "formula." Be willing to creatively tweak the coffeehouse, and it will never become stale, boring, and dull. There's a difference between a "groove" and a "rut!" A groove is when your ministry is alive and vibrant, full of energy, passion and enthusiasm. A rut is when it becomes a lifeless tradition and habit.

There will often be a letdown after your first coffeehouse, because you expended so much energy, time, and resources into getting it off the ground. Plow through the doldrums and remain faithful with the next one...and the next one...and the next one!

Remember the parable of the mustard seed. You never know what will blossom from your faithfulness and obedience.

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