



"Doing life. Doing good."

INSIDE LIFETREE CAFE

Amy called herself spiritual, but not necessarily religious. She said she believed in God. She prayed sometimes. But she yearned to sense God's real presence in her everyday life experiences.

Amy heard about a weekly event called Lifetree Café. She decided to try it. When she stepped inside the door, she said she immediately felt welcomed and comfortable.

During a get-acquainted activity, Amy and the others at her small table raced to build a house of cards. When the Lifetree host called time, a table of guys across the room bragged they'd built the tallest house. Just then, Amy's house of cards collapsed. Everyone laughed, and accused the guys' table of cheating.

The host then guided the room through a conversation on overcoming life's struggles. They watched a short documentary film on a young man who fell from a 100-foot cliff while rock climbing. The guy attributed his survival to God, and acknowledged he entered into his long recovery with a positive outlook. "We have no control over the cards we're dealt," he said. "But we can choose how we'll deal with them."

The Lifetree group then reacted to the climber's story, diving into deep conversations at their tables. Some shared difficult struggles they were facing at that time. Others related how God had helped them through past crises in their lives.

Amy shared a bit of her own experience. The environment somehow felt safe and comfortable to talk openly.

At the end of the event she and the others took home a playing card as a reminder of their Lifetree experience.

Several months went by. Then, at another weekly Lifetree event, during a typical talk time, Amy shared some news with those at her table.

"I went to the doctor and found out I have breast cancer."

The others fell silent. A woman who Amy had met just minutes before reached across the table and took Amy's hand.

"It's okay," Amy whispered. "After the doctor told me the news, I was in shock. When I got home I was going through the 'why me?' stage. I was hunting through my purse for a tissue—and found...this card." She showed the group at her Lifetree table a crumpled playing card.

"In an instant, it all came back. I remembered that first time here. The climber said, 'We have no control over the cards we're dealt. But we can choose how we'll deal with them.' God gave me that reminder and the assurance that he will help me through this ordeal. I'm gonna be okay...with whatever happens. God is in control."

The State of the Church

It seems everyone has an opinion on the state of the American church. Writing books on what's wrong with the church has become somewhat of a fad. Many writers tell personal and painful stories of wounding at the hands of the church.

We don't doubt their sincerity. But the church has always been populated with imperfect people making flawed decisions. That's not what's new. And that's not likely to change.

Besides, the church as we know it has worked quite well for a certain swath of the population. These people comprise part of the 17 to 30 percent of the population who regularly attend church services.

So, what characteristics identify these particular people? Several words that start with the letter A may help describe those who currently attend typical church services.

- **Audience-Oriented.** They appreciate a good presentation from the stage. They prefer to passively listen while the paid professionals on the stage do

- the work. Similar to theater-goers, they may judge the “performance” based on how well they were entertained or engaged.
- **Anonymous.** They often seek anonymity. They like being part of a faceless crowd. They don’t necessarily want to be noticed—or known. They appreciate churches that keep the spotlight on the performers on stage, that allow the audience to sit quietly in the dark, so to speak.
 - **Authority-Centered.** They rely heavily on authority figures for information and inspiration. So, in the contemporary church, they count on the paid professionals to communicate the insights, move them, pray on their behalf, and do the real ministry. Some view the professionals as go-betweens—a necessary filter or conduit between themselves and God. They may be less comfortable seeing value in contributions from peers or from personal discovery.
 - **Academic.** They see the church’s role as primarily academic. They come once a week to obtain information or knowledge about the Bible or God. They expect to hear an authority teach theological principles and historical data. “Teaching pastors,” as they’re sometimes called, often employ techniques borrowed from 20th Century school rooms. Among these are PowerPoint presentations and “sermon notes” or “fill-ins”—fill-in-the-blank exercises printed in the worship bulletin, encouraging the listeners to write down certain words from the sermon.
 - **Auditory.** They’re often auditory learners—people who take in and remember primarily through their ears. The contemporary church service suits them because it’s predominately an auditory experience.

Simply put, Christian church services are approximately half lecture, and half sing-along. And increasingly, sing-along has become less singing along and more listening along.

These “A” factors help to explain the slice of the population that regularly attends weekly church services. Church, as they know it, is working for them. They are content with the status quo.

But what about the growing majority that doesn’t regularly attend church services? Why don’t these same “A” factors work for them? It seems that what attracts the church-going set may actually repel or at least disinterest the majority. Let’s look at each factor again from their perspective.

Audience-Oriented. Though most people enjoy a good show, they don’t view their spirituality as a spectator activity. Even though they may long for God, they say they don’t see the need to sit in an auditorium and watch professional religious people perform rehearsed presentations.

Anonymous. Though most people seek occasional anonymity, when it comes to matters of the heart, they actually crave relationship. They want to be known. They want to contribute to the conversation. Telling their story is as important as listening to someone else’s.

Authority-Centered. Most people today have moved into the new era of information distribution, which is accentuated by the internet. Increasingly people no longer have to wait for authorities to deliver needed information. They’re comfortable accessing it themselves. What’s more, they are relying more on peers than authorities for such things as product reviews.

Academic. We live in an information-soaked world. When it comes to spiritual things, most people don’t sense they’re lacking hard data. They’re lacking the soft stuff of the soul. Their desired relationship with God seems more at home at Starbucks

than a college lecture hall. Like any relationship, they sense growth in a relationship with God comes more from give-and-take than passive consumption of someone's lecture.

Auditory. Research shows that 30 percent or less of the population is made up of auditory learners. Most of the population processes information and thoughts primarily in other ways. They tend to tune out when asked to endure a presentation that implies they should sit still and listen.

So, are we implying we need to change everything we're doing in the church to cater to a certain type of person? If some things aren't working for the majority, should we tear down the current system and start over?

No. The current approach is meaningful for a significant minority of folks. We could easily fill the rest of these pages with wonderful stories of how God has worked spectacularly through the church as we know it today. Church leaders have built a system, an environment, and a protocol that connects with many people. That will continue.

Think of it this way. What if we were tool makers? And what if we specialized in building hardware for left-handed people? We know how these lefties are wired. We know what they want. So we build a sizable institution to build hardware that left-handed people appreciate. Left-handed scissors. Left-handed can openers. Left-handed computer mice. But then we realize that less than 15 percent of the population tends to buy our products.

If we wish to grow our hardware business and serve the larger population, we may need to acknowledge that our current products will never work for those who aren't left-handed. Trying to convince them to use left-handed scissors will not boost sales. Changing the color of the handle won't work. Using different metals won't work. Getting an endorsement from a famous person won't do it. Simply put, left-handed hardware just

doesn't work—and never will work—for right-handed people.

We must admit that left-handed people and their favorite tools have brought us this far. Now we can choose to keep doing what we're doing, giving our best effort to serving lefties. That's noble. But if we care about serving the rest of the population we'll need to think differently.

Let's keep making left-handed scissors while simultaneously working on a spectacular line of hardware that may capture the attention of the other big chunk of the market.

What is Lifetree Café?

Let's think "clean slate" for a moment. If we were starting today with a desire to help more people come to know, love and follow Jesus Christ, what would we do? For just a moment, let's ignore how we and others have pursued this goal in the past.

What if we could create a comfortable place and time for people to gather weekly to explore life and faith? What if it looked and felt like the kind of place we'd typically meet a friend for food and drink and fun? What if the atmosphere encouraged conversations, questions, and personal stories? What if the conversations about life somehow led to an ah-ha of God's real presence and his genuine love?

Those questions led us to what eventually became called Lifetree Café. Now each week people gather in cozy venues to explore life and faith. The hour-long Lifetree Café experiences feature real stories of real people, guided conversation, biblical insights, time to build relationships with new and old friends, laughter, fun, and opportunities to serve.

Lifetree Café offers a casual physical environment, warm hospitality, a safe place for questions and doubts, and an encouraging

atmosphere for participants to share their own stories.

Lifetree stories dig into the big and little stuff that shapes our lives. Family. Friends. Fears. Busyness. Balance. Money. Materialism. Health. Heaven. Peace. Purpose. Through the exploration of these stories Lifetree friends discover that God is active today and looking for a close relationship with them—through all that life has to throw at them.

The Lifetree Café experience unfolds in a carefully designed space. Furnishings include small round tables and comfortable chairs—in a cozy café-like setting. Lifetree Café venues, like quality coffee cafes, are intentionally small, serving up to 50.

And the Lifetree Café experience also connects people to LifetreeCafe.com, where the weekly conversation continues online.

Local Lifetree Cafes are part of a national and international system. Similar to a chain of restaurants or shops, the public recognizes the Lifetree Café brand regardless of where they live or may travel. And each week Lifetree Cafes everywhere offer the same nationally promoted program.

What Lifetree Café is NOT

Upon initially hearing about Lifetree Café, people often try to compare it to other established ministries. But really, Lifetree Café is unique. So perhaps we should explain what Lifetree Café is *not*.

It's not a church. Lifetree Café is not a local church, as one would commonly think of a church. Lifetree Café does not offer worship services, or administer sacraments, or provide Christian education programs, or conduct weddings or funerals. Lifetree Café does not replace or replicate a church. But it is fair to say Lifetree Café is a part of the Church—the Body of Christ.

It's not a worship service. Lifetree Café does not engage in the typical elements

of congregational worship. Churches already provide worship in a great variety of styles.

It's not a Bible study or a class. Lifetree Café is not designed to systematically teach Bible history, or follow a structured academic model. Classes and Bible studies already exist in abundance for those seeking an educational regimen.

It's not a small group. Lifetree Café, though it encourages conversation at table groups, is not a church small group. Each weekly Lifetree Café event welcomes new people who interact at a table and within the larger café group. Though some people meet the same friends at the same table each week, new people are immediately integrated and sense the community of the café.

It's not a membership club. Lifetree Café friends gather for conversation, community, and a spiritual boost. There are no dues, secret handshakes, initiation ceremonies, or badges for perfect attendance. Rather, Lifetree Café is a comfortable place to hang out with friendly people who help you see God's presence in new ways.

Some observers criticize Lifetree Café for not taking on more of the roles generally identified with the ministries listed above. They ask, “Where’s the sermon? Where’s the praise and worship? Where’s the strong teaching time? When do people study their Bibles? When is the altar call?” All of those functions already exist in regular church ministries. Lifetree Café does not attempt to duplicate those functions. Lifetree fulfills a different and distinct role.

What is Lifetree Café's purpose?

Ultimately, Lifetree Café is designed to help people grow in relationship with the Lord.

Lifetree brings people together to explore life, experience God, grow in relationship with Christ, and serve the community.

Through the use of stories and guided conversation Lifetree Café friends discover helpful direction for everyday life issues. And they see how God connects with these everyday life issues. Their relationship with Christ grows much the same as other relationships--through give-and-take conversation, time for questions, doing stuff together, and hearing others' stories of God's love.

In its simplest terms, Lifetree Café follows the goals of Jesus' Great Commandments: love God, and love others (Matthew 22:37-39). Both commandments use the verb "love"—a prime relational word. Lifetree Café friends love God more and more as they experience his presence and hear the real stories of how he's working in the lives of those around them. And, like a Good Samaritan, Lifetree Café loves others by providing practical help to those along life's roads.

So what are the evidences that show progress toward Lifetree Café's goals? Because Lifetree works in a relationship model, results are less about numbers than narratives. We look for the stories of how God is at work in people's everyday lives. We watch for the 24-hours-a-day, 7-days-a-week effect. That's the way real love works. It's an everyday presence that influences how we think and behave.

Lifetree success looks like this:

Sara meets a self-described agnostic at a Lifetree event. They discover they share several common interests. They get together outside of Lifetree, and engage in many long talks, usually centering around faith in God.

After a Lifetree Café event on forgiveness, Charles prays for a couple of days, then calls his estranged brother to seek forgiveness for a wrong committed seven years ago.

During a Lifetree Café event, Michael hears Darren tell how he's new to town, seeking a job, and living alone. Michael invites Darren to dinner at his house. The dinner turns into a lasting friendship.

And, after every Lifetree Café event everyone fills out a comment card that asks a couple of simple questions based on the Great Commandments: "At Lifetree today, did you experience God?" and "Did you grow closer to others?" The responses consistently rank very high.

Who is Lifetree Cafe for?

Lifetree Café is designed for the large proportion of the population that is spiritually curious, wants to talk and ask questions about life issues, and enjoys friends. Lifetree Café appeals to all ages, families, couples, singles, and students.

A typical Lifetree Café event may draw a mix of people with varying degrees of faith maturity. It's that very mix that makes the conversation rich. It allows skeptics to ask their questions, and mature believers to tell their God stories.

To better illustrate the Lifetree Café community, let us introduce you to a few real Lifetree friends:

- Linda and Dan, middle-aged married couple. They do not attend church, but possess a real interest in spiritual things.
- Teri, divorcee and suicide survivor. She struggles with depression, and says Lifetree Café is her "favorite time of the week."
- Josh, high school junior. He's somewhat familiar with basic Christian beliefs, and enjoys hearing and being heard by the adults he meets at Lifetree.
- Barbara, professional woman. She frequents a noontime Lifetree Café because it fits her schedule, and "always seems to address issues I'm going through."

- John, 65-year-old retiree. He talks about God but is skeptical of the deity of Christ. He comes to Lifetree because the Christians there “aren’t judgmental.”
- Carol, 29-year-old mom. She’s active in her church, finds Lifetree events helpful for the life issues she faces, and prays for those she meets at Lifetree Café.
- Nancy, 40-ish career woman. She says she was “burned” by churches in the past, and comes to Lifetree Café to “keep my spiritual life nourished.”

In short, Lifetree Café attracts the non-churched, the de-churched (those who formerly attended a church), the churched who desire what Lifetree uniquely offers, and the churched who wish to share their faith stories with others, including pre-believers.

The people who come to Lifetree Café often describe it as a safe place. These are people who yearn for a sense of belonging. They want to participate in the process of finding meaning. The Mayo Clinic describes this yearning majority this way:

“People want to feel respected, worthy, whole and accepted. They need their closest relationships to be safe and comfortable. They need places where they are accepted and not judged.”

This is the Lifetree audience. The entire Lifetree experience—the physical environment, the atmosphere, the intentional hospitality, the content of the hour—is tailored for these regular people who, whether they know it or not, yearn for the “peace the passes all understanding.” They yearn for God—and the people of God.

The Lifetree Advantage for a Church

Establishment of a Lifetree Café offers a church multiple unique opportunities to pursue its mission. Let’s look at some of those.

1. **Reach unchurched people.** Lifetree Café, by its very nature, feels approachable to people who churches are not attracting. While those of us in the church may believe we offer good on-ramps for everyone, “that is not the word on the street,” according to author Doug Pollack in his book *God Space*. “For many who grew up outside the walls of the church, going to church is a scary proposition,” he says. Lifetree Café offers them a safe, small, conversational environment in a café-like setting. They hunger for God, but just not in the package typically offered on Sunday morning.
2. **Reach the de-churched.** Many people in every community are former active church members. Different circumstances led them astray. Though they’re not likely to return to what they fled, they typically value the fellowship of believers and spiritually curious people. Mary, a 60-ish pastor’s daughter, said, “At church, I’ve heard it all. And I’ve seen it all. I moved on. I come to Lifetree because it gives me what I need—reminders of God’s love from ordinary people living real lives.”
3. **Reach the PIBOs.** These are church attendees who are Present In Body Only. They may be counted as members of a church’s flock, but their hearts, minds and souls are not engaged by what’s happening at church. They are among the legion of

church attendees who, according to George Barna, never experience God at church. They attend out of a sense of duty, or to accompany a family member, or simply out of habit. For PIBOs, the church worship experience—even at grandly produced services—is a spiritual yawn. Many PIBOs find Lifetree Café experiences compelling because they're actively engaged in a different kind of personal relevancy.

4. **Meet the practical needs of the community.** Lifetree Café offers help on a weekly basis for everyday life issues. People in every community are dealing with wayward children, aging parents, worry, addictions, obnoxious co-workers, stress, personal significance, and on and on. Lifetree Café provides a church with an externally-focused mission of meeting people where they are with practical help for everyday concerns.
5. **Provide existing members with meaningful ministry opportunities.** Most churches report that only a minority of their people are actively involved in hands-on ministry. Lifetree Café offers a fresh way for church members to serve. They feel needed. And with the training provided by the Lifetree system, they feel equipped and supported. Most importantly, they enjoy seeing the results. They get to help regular people find practical help for life issues, experience God, and grow in their relationship with Christ.
6. **Equip existing members to “glow.”** Most church members today feel uncomfortable talking about their faith outside of church. The Lifetree Café system provides practical training to help members “let their light shine” without repelling others. And most importantly, it gives members a comfortable venue to actually do it, to naturally share their faith stories every week.
7. **Close “the back door.”** Church leaders know that newcomers entering the front door don't represent the whole picture. Those who eventually decide to slip out the back door and wander away can significantly dampen congregational growth. Some leave because of hurt feelings. Some leave because they're not actively involved. Some leave because they're “burned out.” Some leave because the existing ministry offerings don't connect with them. Some leave because the routine gets too familiar for them and they feel spiritually stuck. As reported in the book *Reveal*, research in several notable churches revealed that active, long-time, spiritually mature members were among those “most likely to report they are considering leaving the church.” Lifetree Café offers those tempted to leave a church a fresh way to grow spiritually—and to help others grow.
8. **Provide an easy way for existing members to invite their neighbors.** Many people fear inviting their non-churched friends to church. But they feel perfectly comfortable inviting friends to coffee and conversation at the local Starbucks. Similarly, they find it natural to invite to friends to Lifetree for coffee, conversation, and an engaging hour focused on a topic their friends may be dealing with.
9. **Grow with a scalable model.** Lifetree Café offers a path to grow—without relying on finite resources such as unusually gifted orators or musicians. With a Lifetree Café, as

demand increases, more sessions may be added. And since Lifetree uses volunteer staff, many additional people may be equipped to effectively lead additional Lifetree hours. And additional Lifetree Café locations may be added as growth occurs.

10. **Grow with a sustainable model.** Lifetree Café does not focus on personalities, who sometimes move away, get ill, retire, or fall into temptation. Lifetree Café branches are staffed with a flow of volunteers who sustain an ongoing ministry. The volunteer sustainability advantage is similar to other volunteer-led community organizations such as service clubs, scouts, and hobby groups.
11. **Achieve visibility in the community.** Sponsoring a Lifetree Café demonstrates an outwardly-focused love and service to the community. Lifetree Café's practical help with life issues, and its Out-on-a-Limb service projects provide a regular—and newsworthy—gift to the community. Local and national Lifetree Café promotion and publicity spotlights and drives traffic to each local Lifetree branch.
12. **Become part of a local and national conversation.** Lifetree Café and www.LifetreeCafe.com possess a national awareness, bringing the compelling topics of our day into a Christ-centered context. What you hear about in the news, what people are talking about at work and school, what people are talking about online—is now what people are talking about at Lifetree Café. Each week everyone from coast to coast focuses on the same topic, simultaneously helping everyone see

the presence, love, and action of the living God.

Connecting Lifetree Friends to a Church

Church leaders often ask, “How do Lifetree Café visitors get connected into my church?” To help answer that we need to return to Lifetree Café's ultimate purpose: to help people grow in relationship with the Lord. As that goal is accomplished, leaders of a church-owned Lifetree Café should hear, “Well done, my good and faithful servants.”

Now, it's important to acknowledge that different Lifetree Café participants will take different avenues to grow in their relationship with the Lord. Some will become connected to other ministries at a church. Some will grow through the individual relationships they form with believers they meet at Lifetree. Some will grow entirely through their participation at Lifetree Café experiences.

We believe faith is a relationship. So, we believe faith develops much like other relationships. That means it's rarely a strict linear process. So, when it comes to Lifetree Café friends, we needn't try to squeeze them all through the same sequential checklist.

Lifetree Café is carefully designed to be welcoming to both believers and pre-believers, to churched and non-churched. Many of the non-churched attendees come to Lifetree Café precisely because it doesn't feel like a regular church. If they would ever pick up a scent that Lifetree is a church's cloaked “bait-and-switch” gimmick designed to push them into regular church services, classes or groups, they would bail. And they would warn their non-churched friends to stay away. And we would lose our opportunity to help them grow in relationship with Christ.

Therefore, Lifetree Café branches approach the growth process carefully. And since Lifetree uses a relationship model, the process is best handled individually. Here's

where Lifetree’s believer attendees play a key role. Through forming authentic relationships, they help guide their non-churched friends’ spiritual walks. So, for example, after a Lifetree Café topic dealing with addictions, a non-churched attendee expresses a desire to know more, a church member may invite the attendee to the church’s recovery group. Or, after attending a Lifetree experience on life after death, a church member may invite a curious non-churched attendee to a related series at the church. Or, if a Lifetree attendee seems lonely and desires to meet more good people, a Lifetree friend may invite the person to join a church small group.

The connections between Lifetree Café and a sponsoring church often occur—naturally, through personal relationships. Lifetree Café training equips church members to be successful in forming these trusting relationships, and knowing how to best help a person grow in faith in Christ.

Eventually, some Lifetree Café newcomers will join a church, attend worship services, and participate in its ministries. Others will connect only to Lifetree Café. Either way, as they grow in relationship with the Lord, they’re members of the Body of Christ.

How Lifetree Café Works

Lifetree Café depends on a number of foundational elements for its effectiveness. Among those are the physical environment, the volunteer teams, the national support system, and “Out-on-a-Limb” service projects. Let’s look at each of these.

The Lifetree Café environment

Operators of highly successful restaurants have learned they must excel in three ways to keep customers happy and coming back. If any one of the three falters, the entire restaurant suffers. Those three

components are: great food, great service, and great environment. Lifetree Café’s success and effectiveness depend on the same three—with a twist.

Lifetree Café must deliver great food—great spiritual food. (And the snacks and drinks need to be delicious too.)

Lifetree also must offer great service. The person-to-person interaction from Lifetree’s volunteer staff will make or break the experience for guests.

And Lifetree Café must provide a great physical environment. The look and feel of the place must immediately exude warmth, friendliness, coziness, informality, intimacy, and peace. First-time guests often remark, “I felt so at home the moment I walked in the door. There’s just something about this place.”

The Lifetree physical environment has been specially designed and tested to make people feel welcome, at ease, and at home. All Lifetree Cafes across the country communicate the same comfy feel. This consistency helps people know that wherever they see a Lifetree Café they can count on the inviting atmosphere they appreciate.

Many elements combine to create the Lifetree Café look and feel of hospitality:

Special place with a special look.

The familiar Lifetree Café look, with its specified furnishings and appointments, can be adapted to fit many different locations. A few examples:

- Within an existing church property, perhaps occupying a previously underused space.
- At an existing coffee café, within a church or in the community.
- At a storefront location in the community.
- Within a corporate building.
- On or near a college campus.

The Lifetree Café national home office offers assistance as well as signage, equipment and furnishings to transform a

qualified space into an inviting environment that is welcoming to the entire community.

Small size. The Lifetree Café space accommodates a maximum of 50 people. That size helps to convey intimacy and makes it easy to converse. Think of the size of a quality café or coffee house, such as Starbucks. Part of the reason those places work is their small size. The look and feel would be destroyed if those places held 500 people. And Lifetree Café's small size makes it conducive for individuals to share from the heart not only at their tables but within hearing distance of the entire room.

When it comes to Lifetree's promise of exploring life in a spiritual context, people aren't looking for a crowd. They crave the closeness and sense of belonging that comes in a smaller room. After experiencing a recent Lifetree Café hour, a first-time guest asked, "Is it always this size? I loved it. I don't think I could have shared what I did in a larger group."

Many in the American church assume big is better. The pastor of a California church said, "People like it small, but leaders like it big." The "big" for a Lifetree Café comes through conducting multiple hours during the week, or by planting multiple Lifetree Cafes in a community.

Small round tables. Lifetree Café tables invite conversation. They're designed for four people, which is the ideal size for personal interaction. Any larger and people feel hesitant to share from the heart. Each Lifetree Café has four to 12 of these small tables. They're designed to feel comfortable for 2, 3 or 4 people. And their circular shape discourages people from the temptation of pulling two tables together, which would form an uncomfortably large group for "safe" sharing.

Snacks and drinks. As soon as guests arrive, Lifetree Café volunteers offer complimentary light snacks and drinks. That's how you'd treat a guest in your home. So that's how Lifetree Café treats its guests.

Hospitality experts know that food and drinks have a way of bringing a sense of community. They help people feel instantly comfortable. And they encourage good conversation. It's even been said that few people can sit across a table and eat with their adversaries and remain enemies. That may be one of the reasons the wide variety of people, Christ followers as well as non-believers, can gather at a Lifetree Café and talk about some difficult issues in an atmosphere of love and respect.

Jesus himself knew the value of eating and drinking together, including with non-believers. Many of his key ministry moments happened around a table.

Inviting décor. Everything, from the warm colors, to the comfortable seating, to the refreshment station, to the lighting, to the signage, to the background music, is carefully designed to create the welcoming atmosphere of Lifetree Café. It's all intentionally created to ooze hospitality.

Chip Arn, president of Church Growth Incorporated, conducted research on the critical factors for attracting and maintaining church attendees. The most important time? It's not the initial moments with the smiling greeters before the service. It's the 10 minutes *after* the service. That's when guests can determine the true care and friendliness of a congregation.

At Lifetree Café, all elements work together to say, "Stick around, have another cup of coffee, and enjoy the company of your friends." And that happens every week at Lifetree Café. At the end of the scheduled hour, most people don't move. They continue the conversation with their friends around the table.

The Lifetree Café volunteers

Lifetree Café is designed to be staffed with trained volunteers. In addition to not burdening paid staff with additional duties, Lifetree's volunteer concept provides strategic benefits. When Lifetree guests are welcomed by volunteers, and the Lifetree hour is actually

led by a lay volunteer, the experience unfolds with a true authenticity. Guests relate to the volunteers on a peer-to-peer relational level.

Volunteers serve on Lifetree's friendship team, communication team, and as the upfront leaders of the hour-long experience.

Friendship team members come early, prepare the refreshments, and then welcome guests and help them get comfortable at a table. Typically, two to four friendship team members serve a Lifetree session.

Communication team members handle behind-the-scenes duties, such as compiling guest information and uploading it to the Lifetree home office.

We call the upfront leaders "hosts." These volunteers lead participants through the hour-long experience, using a printed leader guide supplied by the Lifetree home office.

In addition, approximately 10 to 12 "seed group" members typically come to Lifetree experiences—to simply enjoy the hour and "pollinate" the tables with their friendship and spiritual "salt and light." They're not identified as seeds. Guests simply view them as fellow participants.

All of these volunteers receive thorough Lifetree Café training before serving. They're equipped with the practical skills they need, as well as special training for relating with people who may not share a developed Christian faith. This training helps them build friendships, respect others, and "glow" their faith without repelling those who do not yet have a relationship with Christ.

Sometimes church leaders wonder if these lay people can be trusted to handle interactions with those who have little or no faith in Christ. "What if they say the wrong thing?" they ask. It's kind of a funny question when you think about it. The volunteers are the very people the church has urged to go out and share their faith in the everyday world. Well, Lifetree Café simply brings in people from the everyday world to talk.

The trained volunteers do a wonderful job naturally talking about how God is a part

of their lives. They're regular people, chosen to serve God in a very fulfilling way. Our experience shows that after serving their committed Lifetree Café term, the vast majority of volunteers choose to renew their commitment and keep on serving. "I love the chance to meet people, make new friends, talk about important things, and share what God does for me," said one volunteer.

The Lifetree Café national system

Local Lifetree Café branches receive all content and support services through a special license from the Lifetree Café national home office. Lifetree Café is a national system that provides tested weekly programming materials, national promotion, LifetreeCafe.com marketing and social networking.

Each week all Lifetree Cafes offer the same nationally promoted program. The home office sends weekly colorful emails to Lifetree attendees in each area, alerting them to upcoming topics and stories. And LifetreeCafe.com promotes the weekly programs and engages online followers in the conversation throughout the week on lively discussion forums.

Creative teams at the home office research, produce and test all content. Then local branches receive Lifetree experience kits that include leader guides, media components, participant take-away items, and program tools. Lifetree utilizes writers and filmmakers from Group Publishing, the nation's largest independent resource provider to churches.

The Lifetree Café license agreement requires all branches to present the nationally distributed programs during their scheduled weeks. This makes the national marketing work for the local branches, akin to motion picture releases: "Now showing at a Lifetree Café near you."

It is not practical for local branches to deviate from the scheduled line-up of programming. If people at a Lifetree Café across town were to start inventing their own programming, perhaps exploiting their own

particular perspectives, it could damage the Lifetree Café name and ultimately harm all Lifetree Cafes in the area.

Lifetree Café films and other programming are produced exclusively for use in Lifetree Cafés. This exclusive use helps to build a loyal following to each local Lifetree Café. Licensees may not use the programming for other purposes without written permission from the home office.

Out-on-a-Limb service projects

Lifetree Café uses a tagline of “Doing life, doing good.” The “doing good” part offers Lifetree friends the opportunity to serve their community and world in a variety of ways. Lifetree Café organizes occasional “Out-on-a-Limb” service projects that address real needs.

Some “Out-on-a-Limb” projects invite Lifetree Café attendees to donate items, such as children’s books for Lifetree’s “library in a box” outreach to remote villages around the world. Other projects direct aid to help community causes, such as growing produce for local food banks.

“Out-on-a-Limb” projects provide additional opportunities for Lifetree people to form friendships, work together, live out their faith, and serve the community.

Scheduling Lifetree Café events

Each local branch sets its own schedule. Each licensee may offer Lifetree Café once or many times each week.

When choosing the hours to offer Lifetree Café, licensees may take into consideration target audience strategies and volunteer availability. Lifetree works in many different time slots, for example:

- Evenings—convenient for those who work or go to school.
- Early mornings—a great way to start the day.
- Noontime—a satisfying lunch hour habit for workers.

- Mid-mornings—a good break for young parents and seniors.
- Sunday mornings—convenient for church members and others.

The Sunday morning time slot can also be used to build traffic for Lifetree sessions later in the week. After previewing the Sunday morning Lifetree, church members can invite their friends to attend another session that week.

Why Lifetree Café Works

Lifetree Café connects with a wide variety of people—in different ways, and for different reasons. Some are quite apparent. Others may not be noticed at first glance. Kind of like a new car. You can’t miss the look of the exterior. But some of the real distinctives lie just out of view. So let’s take a good look at this Lifetree Café vehicle, pop the hood, and find out what makes this thing run.

Upon entering a Lifetree Café, everyone sees a prominent sign displaying some of Lifetree’s values. And the host at each week’s Lifetree experience reads the sign’s words aloud:

**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.**

From this, participants sense Lifetree’s hospitality. They realize what they think and say is respected and valued. They know it’s okay to grapple with issues. They don’t have to know all the answers. None of us does. We’re on this life and faith journey in relationship with one another. And we’re transparent about welcoming God into the conversation.

These values display some of the obvious construction of the Lifetree Café vehicle. Then as we “lift the hood,” we find what we might call “the three Rs.” Not the ones you learned in school. But three roots of Lifetree that give it life. These Rs are Relationship, Relevance, and Reality.

Relationship

Speaking of the “three Rs” as a familiar term from the school room, it’s interesting to note that the contemporary church traces much of its methodology to the academic setting. We’ve tended to view the propagation of faith much like the propagation of other subjects, such as history or math. The thought goes, if we have this great stuff to get across to people, we need to teach it, as they do in the schools. So, our church rooms echo school rooms. The people sit in rows. Those who teach stand at the front and deliver the information.

Education is a good thing. And churches that educate people about the Bible and theology bear fruit. Biblical knowledge helps to develop well-grounded Christ followers.

However, if all our efforts are academic, we may miss the bigger picture. Even when we competently and creatively teach the subject with passion, we may overlook one simple thing:

*Faith is not a subject.
It’s a relationship.*

Simply put, our Christian faith is defined as a loving, trusting relationship with God. Scripture sometimes describes that relationship in a family relationship metaphor—we are God’s “children.” Jesus used a marriage relationship metaphor when describing his relationship—“Someday the groom will be taken away from them,” (Matthew 9:15). He also described his relationship with his followers in terms of a

friendship—“You are my friends,” (John 15:14).

We often use language such as “a personal relationship with Christ.” It’s a good way to speak of faith.

So if we want a relationship, how does that work? How does that happen? How does it grow? Lifetree Café operates under the assumption that a relationship with Christ usually develops in a way similar to a relationship with another person. When you think about a relationship with a friend, spouse or family member, how has that relationship emerged and grown? It’s probably bloomed through lots of conversation, give-and-take, question-asking, doing things together, looking for examples of genuine love, listening to what others say about your friend, building trust.

Chances are your love for this other person grew through these normal relationship processes—rather than a typical academic process. Your love for the person can’t be described or pursued as a subject. It’s a relationship.

So, Lifetree Café creates an environment to grow relationships—among people and with God. Lifetree weekly experiences, as in good relationships, devote plenty of time for conversation, give-and-take, question-asking, doing things together, and hearing stories of God’s genuine love from peers in the room. Rather than seats in rows, Lifetree Café people sit at small tables—to encourage comfortable, natural conversation. That’s how relationships often start and grow. The Lifetree Café host helps to guide the table conversations with insights, scripture, and thought-provoking questions. The response? Well, let’s see what some Lifetree Café attendees said when asked what they like most about Lifetree:

“Sharing stories.”

“Being able to express myself.”

“Personal and intimate communication with others.”

“Conversation with my family about God.”

“My tablemates reminded me of God’s active comfort and providing.”

We describe Lifetree as a “conversation cafe.” It’s a place to sit, talk, listen, relax, eat and drink, and enjoy the company of interesting people. Good conversations welcome everyone’s thoughts and questions. That ambience of respect allows Lifetree Café to tackle hard questions and voice differing perspectives, yet nurture the relationships.

And the most important relationship, the relationship with Jesus, grows when we treat it as a relationship. Jesus modeled his relationship approach as he spent his flesh-and-blood years on earth. He engaged people in interesting conversations. He asked thought-provoking questions. He listened. He enjoyed sharing food and drink with friends. He encouraged others to tell their stories. Can you picture him sitting at a Lifetree Café table with his friends today? He’s there every week.

Lifetree Café provides the opportunity to be in relationship, and grow in relationship, with Jesus. And with others. Lifetree’s personal sharing through conversation becomes addictive. Each Lifetree experience begins with an ice-breaking get-acquainted activity or question at the tables. Even when close friends or family comprise a table, they always learn something new about one another during this time. These conversations loosen people up and create a safe environment to share more deeply as the hour progresses.

At the end of every Lifetree Café experience, everyone is invited to stick around as long as they’d like. Most people don’t get out of their chairs. They continue to talk at their tables, enjoying bonds of friendship, and continuing to talk about the hour they just experienced together.

Relevance

All of us hear a lot of buzz about this word today. Critics inside and outside the church warn against the church becoming irrelevant in our rapidly changing times. It’s a danger. Some have addressed this by carefully tracking and adapting to cultural trends. Some

clergy have jettisoned their old suits (or robes) in favor of fashionable jeans and untucked shirts. Some churches have replaced old technology with high-definition projectors. Many preachers select contemporary illustrations to help people connect with the Bible. Some use clips from contemporary movies to make a point.

Those things can be helpful. They can help a church be contextual in today’s culture. They can help a church seem familiar to the masses of society.

But here’s the thing about relevance. When people say, “Make it relevant to me,” they really do mean “me.” They thirst for relevancy for their own, personal, individual, particular, unique situation. What’s relevant to Susan right now will not be relevant to Mark sitting next to her. And what’s relevant to Susan today may not be relevant to her next week. No mass-produced approach can be truly relevant, because it’s designed for the masses.

What’s most relevant is what’s most personalized. That’s why Lifetree Café is designed to accommodate each individual’s thoughts, questions, stories, and situations. Each Lifetree Café experience utilizes true customization, so each individual plugs into what’s relevant for him or her at that moment.

Let’s see how this works. A typical Lifetree Café experience includes a story on film of a real person or situation. These are akin to Jesus’ parables—real life vignettes that make an emotional connection, lend perspective, and get people thinking. People love stories. They relate to stories. They put themselves in the stories. “That’s just what I would have done,” they may say to themselves. Or, “I would have done something else.” Already here we can see a form of customization emerging. They’re looking for relevance to their individual situation. They’re personally relating to the story and making it their own.

Jesus knew his friends would internally customize his parables. Different individuals found different meaning in the

same stories. To this very day, each of us finds nuanced perspectives in Jesus' stories that have individual, personalized meaning just for us.

Storytelling allows the Holy Spirit to work in each individual's life in a customized way. Lifetree Café is designed to open times for the Holy Spirit to work individually with each person. We fully trust the Holy Spirit to do that.

After Lifetree friends talk about the story on film they launch into their own real stories. More often than not, the stories they bring to Lifetree provide even more impact than the dramatic ones on film. Their stories of real life challenges and God's grace are riveting to all at their tables. And often the Lifetree Café host asks willing storytellers to share their stories with everyone in the room.

Each story brings new opportunities for each person to find personalized meaning. The host guides the conversations to involve each person, to help each individual make personal application of the stories and the other parts of the Lifetree experience. Everyone's thoughts are welcome. Their questions are welcome. Through all the individual interaction, each table has a unique conversation during a Lifetree hour. Each person has a unique experience. That's the idea. That's relevance.

Reality

The third R stands for reality. Now, more than ever it seems, people crave authenticity. The fake, the pumped up, the over-hyped, the too-pretty—are passé. People would rather experience an imperfect real than a too-perfect façade.

Movies that boast “based on a true story” get an extra lift. Reality television shows rank among the most-watched. Some of the most popular sites on the internet, such as Facebook and YouTube, deliver daily doses of reality. Lifetree Café delivers a weekly dose of real people, real life, real stories, and real experiences.

Every week people bring their real lives to Lifetree Café. And because their involvement makes up a significant part of the hour, every Lifetree Café experience in every location becomes a unique—and real—experience. People find themselves opening up in surprising ways, becoming vulnerable, becoming real.

Bonnie, a young mom, entered into a Lifetree conversation with a commonly heard introduction: “I've never shared this before. My sister told me years ago I should just keep this to myself. But I want to tell you what happened to me.” She proceeded to tell those at her table about her palpable encounter with God during a near-death experience in a hospital. The people at her table sat spellbound. One of them later said, “There's nothing more powerful than hearing from real people that God works.”

And for Bonnie herself, the process of being real that day brought her an unexpected benefit. “I went home that night and told my husband the story. I'd never even told him before! He was so understanding. We talked for hours,” she said. “And that night, for the first time in a long time, I was able to sleep peacefully.”

People crave authenticity. And when it comes to spiritual things, people hunger to know the real God. Many of them have heard the Bible stories. They've heard about the miracles. They've heard the doctrines. But they crave to know that God is truly real, that God is still alive and active today. These are the people who come to Lifetree to experience God. When they hear real people beside them tell how God reached in and demonstrated his love for them, they see how God's story didn't end 2,000 years ago. It continues today. It is real.