

Jesus With An Iced Latte

Neil Cole traded his pulpit for a patio table at a trendy California coffee shop—and started the first of his unusual churches.

Neil Cole has a saying: “If you want to reach this world for Christ, you have to sit in the smoking section.” This planter of postmodern congregations has a way with words. He also has a way of acting on his pithy maxims and seeing dramatic results in the form of changed lives.

In 1999, Cole jettisoned his traditional pulpit ministry in Alta Loma, California, to launch Awakening Chapel—founding it literally in the smoking section of The Coffee Tavern in Long Beach, an urban beach town southwest of Los Angeles. In a little more than four years, the crew he gleaned from the smokers’ ranks on the patio at The Coffee Tavern has ballooned into a movement of 400 churches in 16 states and 12 countries. Almost four new congregations started up each week in 2003 under Church Multiplication Associates (CMA)—the umbrella organization Cole leads and started simultaneously with Awakening Chapel.

When Cole, 42, landed in Long Beach from Alta Loma, his initial brainstorm was to birth a coffee shop—à la the Jesus Movement—in a storefront he had rented on busy Cherry Avenue. He said God had told him: “‘Why don’t you just go to the coffeehouse where the lost people are already?’

“Instead of trying to convert them from the coffeehouse they really love to our coffeehouse so that we could then convert them to Christ, we just went and hung out at the coffeehouse where they were already at,” Cole recounts.

Church Wherever

This taking-church-to-where-life-happens approach has been a cornerstone of the movement since a group of about a dozen people started meeting at the coffee shop, as well as in Cole's living room and in the storefront, to worship, read the Bible, pray and fellowship. Nothing too unusual about that—many congregations have been launched in homes. What wasn't normative was that the first church plant happened within months—among the smokers at Portfolios, another local java joint that has become a nucleus of outreach.

Not all the churches—which seldom grow to more than a few dozen members—meet at coffeehouses. One came together on the lawn of the art building at California State University in Long Beach, another in a parking lot in east Los Angeles and another on a local beach. Many meet in homes, but Cole shuns the classification term “house church” and doesn't apply it to those groups.

“The church is not a building, whether it has a steeple or a chimney. It is the people,” he says.

Nor are these groups defined as “cell churches”—because the term implies that the smaller, or cell, church is part of a larger organism.

“In our case we are decentralized and most of them do not have any larger celebration meetings,” Cole explains. “Usually new believers do not want a large gathering—it is just the people who were raised with that tradition who want it.”

The core of Awakening Chapel and the associated churches is called the Life Transformation Group. Usually only two or three strong, these same-gender units meet weekly for Bible study, prayer and confidential discussion of shortcomings. There is a major emphasis placed on new believers reaching out to the people in their circles of influence.

Cole comes from a Grace Brethren denominational background, but churches in his movement are aligned with many denominations. Some of the groups have started as offshoots of 12-step programs; one met in a barrio and another among a group of Filipinos.

Pastors are called shepherds. They include people from a variety of backgrounds—a former grocery produce manager, a truck driver, an ex-party girl. “The goal is to always see leaders come from the harvest,” Cole points out.

Some of the churches align themselves with Awakening Chapel, but several other groups of churches have also been launched, including The Refuge in Salt Lake City; Big Fish in Mesa, Arizona; and The Fountain, east of Los Angeles. This is all part of what Cole calls organic or natural church growth. Even Cole’s daughter, Heather, 17, has started a high school church.

“We did not plant a church. We planted a movement of churches,” Cole explains. “We want to reach young, urban, postmodern people. We want to reproduce disciples, then leaders, then churches, then movements.”

In fact, Cole would like to see a multiplying of similar movements that have no direct connection to Awakening Chapel

or CMA.

Changing Lives One at a Time

What kind of people come? All sorts—from athletes to artists to students. There have been Satanists, businessmen and musicians. Take Scott Hughes, for example. He was one of the first people Cole encountered at The Coffee Tavern.

Hughes was there to meet his drug dealer. Reluctantly he agreed to come to a gathering at Cole's house. Later, more willingly, he went to a baptism at the beach, where he snapped photos. Soon enough Hughes made a decision to follow Christ.

How did he celebrate his new life? He got high. Hughes was an addict and could not buck it. Cole tried everything to help but finally told Hughes: "You and me have got to get into the car and drive over to your drug dealer's and tell her about Jesus." This runs right on course with Cole's belief that Christians must bring light to wherever darkness exists.

Hughes laughed at the idea and said he would go alone. The next day he kept his word. The drug dealer did not accept Christ, but her son did, and he is now a part of Awakening Chapel. Moreover, since that day Hughes has not once been tempted to take drugs and is now a shepherd of an Awakening Chapel church plant.

"We value seeing true transformation of lives, not just converts and not just numbers," Cole says. "We are not afraid to go to very dark places where there is much ugliness. Church should happen wherever life happens. The church is a sent agency, not a sending agency; therefore, we must go."

And go Cole and the people of Awakening Chapel do, even if it means sitting in the smoking section.

Steven Lawson is a veteran journalist based in Southern California and a frequent contributor to Charisma.

For more information about Church Multiplication Associates, call 562-961-1962.

Church without walls: Members of a California Awakening Chapel jam in the church's "sanctuary"—a parking lot in east Los Angeles.