

Church 'Cafes' Tackling Racism, Pot Use, Abuse and More

On a recent Monday evening, a room inside Christ Community Church was transformed into a coffeehouse with fresh-brewed coffee, plenty of popped kettle corn and the thorny subject of racism on the table.

For an hour, about 20 people gathered around tables, shared personal experiences about racism, watched a short documentary and answered questions meant to stimulate conversation.

The event is called Lifetree Cafe, and it's a new evangelical tool gaining popularity with churches reaching out to potential members.

Lifetree Cafes are a fairly recent venture by Group Publishing, a Colorado-based Christian publishing company that is tapping into people's yearning for community and face-to-face connection.

"There's a cry out there," said Craig Cable, a Lifetree Cafe representative. "People are looking for hope and meaning. Lifetree Cafes create a safe place where people from all walks of life can have a conversation and talk about the struggles we deal with."

Group Publishing tested the first Lifetree Cafe in 2007 and began licensing the program in 2010. Since then, some 350 churches have purchased the program, recently at a rate of one a week.

When churches sign on, Lifetree Cafe provides them with all the materials they need to host a weekly conversation cafe. Churches are given videos, scripted questions, name tags for

attendees, and marketing and promotion tools to promote the event. Churches pay \$300-\$400 a month, Cable said.

Lifetree Cafes are open to the public and held in churches, community centers, hotels and coffee shops throughout the country. (A Lifetree Cafe in Loveland, Co., is held at a homeless shelter.)

The same topic is discussed at each cafe and sessions last one hour. Past and future topics include atheism, gun violence, domestic abuse and marijuana use. Cable said the topics appeal to all denominations. They do have a Christian message, but they don't "feel preachy" or draw conclusions.

Deric Mendes, an atheist blogger in California, said he couldn't resist attending a Lifetree Cafe in a local church when he saw one advertised earlier this year—especially since the week's topic was atheism.

Mendes wrote about his experience on his blog Vicarious Redemption. Besides some criticism of the video shown at the event, Mendes said he enjoyed the experience and found the people friendly and welcoming.

But there was something strained about the evening, he said.

"It felt like a bunch of white neighbors in the 1960s discussing the black family who had just moved into the neighborhood," Mendes said.

Casey Sabella, pastor of Christ Community Church and the weekly host of its Lifetree Cafe, said he offers the program to get his congregation talking about subjects not generally discussed during church services.

"There's no altar call, no passing of the plate to collect offerings," Sabella said. "The cafe is where people can come together to have a conversation."

While the recent Lifetree Cafe at Sabella's Connecticut church

attracted only members of his congregation, he hopes to reach out to the greater community and invite people to join in the conversation every week. A schedule of future Lifetree Cafe topics can be found on the church's website.

Bill Tooker, a Christ Community Church member, said he found the racism discussion helpful.

"When people start talking about something," he said, "change happens."