

## Seeing the Parish Through Fresh Eyes –

### Unveiling the ‘Third Places’

It’s a familiar story in Melbourne parishes: ‘This place used to be the centre of the community’s social life!’ There were dances, picnics, fetes, bake-offs, breakfasts, lunches and dinners! People from the community used to gather at church events, regardless of whatever spiritual or religious associations they made with those events.

This history of the parish being at the centre of the local community’s social life is an example of what sociologist Ray Oldenburg called ‘Third Places.’ People had the privacy of their home (the first place), the public responsibility of their work (the second place) but they frequently met socially and communally somewhere else – a third place. The parish church as a ‘third places’ sits in a long line of the Church providing this central community role. The monastery in the medieval era was a third place, even when the home and work were often combined into one place. The monastery was a place of care and concern, of feast day celebrations, of community and refuge for travellers who had neither first or second places!



Life in contemporary Melbourne no longer operates with ‘religion’ as a gathering point for community, so the natural connection between the parish centre and a ‘third place’ has been lost. Our communities are not interested in using religion as an excuse to connect with each other! Opening our eyes to see our parish afresh however, will reveal that the third places still exist, and they are still the ideal place for Christian mission. Where are the current third places in your parish neighbourhood? Does your parish centre have the capacity to become a third place?



COTA are an Anglican community in Seattle, USA who have recovered a derelict church building in a marginalised neighbourhood and self-consciously set about reinstating it as a third place. They started by running a coffee shop in a more suitable venue across the street. Connections were made and the Christians began to learn how to live as a missional community in that place. When they gained use of a large church building in the centre of things, the renovation commenced with couches, coffee and open doors. This led on to the creation of a creative space which local artists and community groups could use. The church gathered here for worship also, but as one gathering among many. The generosity in sharing their resources (their third place) is the foundation of their mission. They call their centre and ‘abbey’ and model their missional lifestyle on the monastic third places of old.

St Luke’s in the High Street is part of a multi-centre parish in Walthamstow, east London. St Luke’s identified that the people or their neighbourhood gathered at the local farmer’s market of Sunday mornings. It was a vibrant third place that the church could not ‘compete with’. So they moved their Sunday gatherings out of the church building and set up a stall at the farmers market on Sunday mornings to participate with the rest of the community in the stuff of life. Bible study takes place in local cafes, worship and prayer which require a more particular space takes place elsewhere, in partnership with the wider parish.



## Rediscovering Third Places for Mission

Mike Frost (*Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian culture* (Massachusetts; Hendrickson, 2006)) describes the third places in the following way:

- They are distinctive informal gathering places.
- They make the citizen feel at home.
- They nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact
- They help create a sense of place and community.
- They invoke a sense of civic pride.
- They promote companionship.
- They allow people to relax and unwind after a long day at work.
- They are socially binding.
- They encourage sociability instead of isolation.
- They make life more colourful.
- They enrich public life and democracy.

In inner city Melbourne, this is often one or another cafe - we are a cafe culture and we study, do business, meet friends or find solace there. In outer Melbourne, this is frequently a large sporting club. There are pubs in Sunshine, RSLs in Lilydale and wine bars in Hawthorn that all function as third places.

### Where are the current third places in your neighbourhood?

Key ingredients for a third place to work effectively include:

- They must be free or quite inexpensive.
- Food and drink, though not absolutely essential, are important factors.
- They must be highly accessible to neighbourhoods so that people find it easy to make the place a regular part of their routine.
- A lot of people should be able to comfortably walk to the place from their home.
- They should be places where a number of people regularly go on a daily basis.
- They should be places where a person feels welcome and comfortable, and where it is easy to enter into conversation.
- A person should expect to find both old and new friends on each trip to the place.

### What characterises the current third places in your neighbourhood – why do people go there?

Some parish centres (i.e. sites) fulfil some of the criteria for a potentially effective third place by virtue of their location in the current 'centre of things'. Some parish centres have the capacity to host a range of activities (by virtue of their size, availability of parking, flexibility of space, etc.) which would enable them to become a third place through a full schedule of community activities. Other parish centres may be in such a state of disrepair, or so isolated from the present hub of community activity in their neighbourhood that the site does not lend itself easily to the creation of a third place.

### Does your parish centre have the potential to become a third place?

### Is this the best missional strategy for your parish?