Church Cafés Aim to Reach Out

The church continues to try and stay abreast of the ever-changing technology

by Randy Voorhees

As society has changed over time, the church has worked hard to keep their members connected. From adding technology to worship services to pod casting your sermons, the church continues to try and stay abreast of the ever-changing technology that mainstream society has become accustomed to.

It is for this very reason that coffee houses and cafés have become one of the fastest growing areas in today's church. As coffee houses have grown in stature, so have they grown in popularity within today's church culture. Many churches have successful church bookstores on their premises; however, churches have sought to reach out to younger generations by adding cafés to the bookstore in order to combine both old and new, to reach out in new ways.

By adding cafés to bookstores, many churches have successfully melded together a new model that has become a viable resource for the church. The combination not only helps connect and keep people, but also leverages the use of facilities and resources in such a way that it impacts the entire church community.

Why a Café?

For years the Christian bookstore was the place for members to meet, talk about church happenings, purchase an occasional card and find just the right Christian book. Today, the same Christian bookstore has morphed into the church's own café—the same and also very different.

Starbucks, which for an entire generation changed the way people viewed coffee shops, also has helped in the growth of the church café/bookstore. Churches count on the connecting power of a cup of coffee and a conversation—the power to create relationships and to draw people who make the church their home or might make the church their home and eventually contribute to the ministry of the church. In reality, the church has tapped into the same mentality that helped grow Starbucks into a global retailing power—offering a place to sit, eat, drink a cup of coffee and fellowship.

Churches have used all types of designs to combine these two elements into one venue to provide additional traffic to both locations. Depending on the design and location of the facilities, they can be located with entrances either within the church, from the outside or a combination of the two.

There are many reasons churches have decided to add cafés to their bookstores. One of the main reasons church leaders continue to trend toward building cafés is to support their mission of reaching younger generations of the congregation and reaching out to unchurched groups.

Studies continue to show one of the biggest reasons young people move away from or never visit church is the disconnect they receive between the church and the "real" world. By offering a café that may also offer free wireless internet access (called Wi-Fi), church leaders are reaching out to a group of people that are busier than they ever have been before and are use to and need on-the-go services.

Another reason churches offer cafés is to offer a place of relaxation, fellowship and reflection. A café can be many things to many different people. For younger congregation members it might be a place to check e-mail. For older members it might just be a meeting place to come, sit down with

friends and talk. Cafés also offer the perfect place for members to meet with and attract non-members since cafes offer a non-threatening environment where everyone is comfortable in their surroundings.

> One of the most important questions they need to consider is whether or not the software fits their model and is flexible enough to grow as the facility grows.

"The reason for opening our café was to help our guests who may not feel comfortable in a church, to walk in the building and see/smell something that they found familiar," says Susan Chipman, director of retail services for Granger Community Church located in Granger, Indiana. "Most of our new guests are very familiar with a coffee shop, while they may not have recently or ever had a comfortable experience in church. It helps to let their guard down so they can actually hear the message from the service."

Finally, another main reason church leaders have looked to add cafés is simply to enhance their member's overall church experience and to offer a relevant service by providing goods and services that support spiritual growth and community development.

In the end, cafés are really just another extension of the church itself that blend in with the overall ministry and mission of the church. Many churches have full-time staff and activities going on throughout the week and cafés help to fill the needs of both members and nonmembers alike.

Software Options for Your Café and Bookstore

Having the right products on your shelf at the right time is critical to retail success. That is why it is so important to make sure you are using the correct software program in keeping track of all your café/bookstore needs. And, for church leaders who have meshed together their cafés and bookstores, today it makes more sense than ever before to have each of your facilities under the same software system umbrella.

There are many benefits to utilizing one software system to run both facilities but the most important being the simplification of the accounting process that comes with using one system, which makes it more efficient and allows churches to save money and be more aware of their customers' purchasing trends.

The single system approach also offers tools that allow café workers to better manage inventory on both a day-to-day basis, as well as on an annual basis. This allows

managers, with just a few keyboard strokes, to see what stock they may need and instantly create a purchase order. Tools that work together—from the points-of-sale and special orders to inventory ordering and receiving—everything should be seamless.

Additionally, the single-system approach also offers benefits to customers as they have the versatility of purchasing a book and ordering a food item at either Point-of-Sale (POS) station (in the café or bookstore) and also allows church leaders to permit customers to earn rewards for purchases, again from either location.

"We moved to the Bookstore Manager POS software in our bookstore approximately one and a half years ago and about three months later we rolled it out in the café," says Chipman. "Prior to that we'd used a cash register in the café that worked well, but we were limited as to what we could sell at that venue. If we were promoting a book on a given weekend, we could only sell it from the bookstore. Once we moved to the same POS, we now are able to cross merchandise and sell products in multiple locations. The biggest benefit has been that we are better able to track the individual items being sold and not relying so much on physical inventories."

And, while profitability may not be the primary concern, most church leaders believe that the café/bookstore should and can pay for itself, which influences pricing structures and stocking mixes. Again, having one system allows managers to see data for both facilities at one time.

As with all software needs, when church leaders are considering purchasing a café/bookstore management software, one of the most important questions they need to consider is whether or not the software fits their model and is flexible enough to grow as the facility grows; if it allows you to add on additional café POS's and track them at the same time or even at home.

As society continues to evolve and technology becomes more pervasive, church leaders are learning to embrace new models to provide new and exciting opportunities to reach within congregations and beyond.❖

Randy Voorhees is the president and the CEO of Bookstore Manager Inc. and Christian Databases, Inc. (http://www.bookstoremanager.com) With ever-changing technology, Randy has moved Bookstore Manager from a POS system to a one-stop technology center providing Christian retailers with a trustworthy source of innovative products and services. His vision along with a heart for the Christian retailer motivates Randy to continue providing solutions for the technology innovator of Christian retailing products at the most affordable prices. For more info, e-mail sales@bsmgr.com.