

# partners

THE CHURCH PLANTING NEWSLETTER OF THE EC CHURCH

## Has God Left the Building? Film Explores the Changing Face of Effective Ministry in America

By Kolleen Long

The church, once an integral part of American culture and communities, is struggling. Search on Google and the statistics are undeniable. Attendance is down, and many churches are closing their doors for good. Three-quarters of Americans identify as “Christian” but less than a quarter of that same population attend church services on a typical week. This disconnect between the past and present, between being a Christian and attending church, is explored in the documentary “When God Left the Building.”

When the film aired in Reading, Pa., this May, it was to a sold-out crowd. Not only did people come to watch the movie, but most stayed afterward to discuss the film and its message with those who made it. “When God Left the Building” is directed by Thom Shultz. Shultz is the president of Lifetree Café (something you’ve read about often in this newsletter), chairman and CEO of Group Publishing and

the author of books including *Why No One Learns Much of Anything in Church and How to Fix It* and, along with his wife Joani, the upcoming *Why Nobody*

*Wants to Go to Church Anymore: And How 4 Acts of Love Will Make Your Church Irresistible.*

The film explores similar themes while visiting churches that are failing today. It highlights some of the internal factors (conflicts and splits) that impact attendance as well as external factors such as perceptions by non-churchgoers in their teens to 30s. People don’t come to church for four reasons, according to



the documentary’s website, [whengodleftthebuilding.com](http://whengodleftthebuilding.com). Some feel judged by church members, others view church people as hypocrites. Some avoid church because they think they’ll be lectured, others simply don’t see the point: they don’t think God is relevant to their lives.

But while traditional, brick-and-mortar churches face these real-life challenges, other

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# Interview with Bishop Bruce Hill

## Q&A: BISHOP BRUCE HILL ON THE TRUTH – AND OPPORTUNITIES – TO BE FOUND IN REACHING TODAY’S CULTURE.

**Statistics show that the American church is on the decline. What have we seen in our denomination?**

“It is true that the majority of American churches, including the EC church, are either plateaued or are in decline. All the latest surveys by George Barna and the Pew Foundation, their research indicates that this is the reality of most denominations and most congregations.”

**So is this true, specifically, in our church-planting efforts?**

“When it comes to church planting, we’re seeing growth. It’s generally not exponential growth, but I think we see growth, particularly in some of the nontraditional church plants, things like the Lifetree cafés, Journey 53 with Rick Christman and the Gathering, which is an informal partnership but is pastored by Juan Carlos Morales, a licensed EC pastor.”

**Why the difference? Why do church plants succeed when traditional churches are struggling?**

“The experience of church planting is somewhat different because they are being much more intentional in their

efforts to connect with people who are not being traditionally served by local congregations. They’re going about their connectional ministries in new and different ways. And they’re finding success in that.”

**How can the church, and by that I mean both traditional churches and plants, combat this trend?**

“The key really is [to use a phrase from National Conference] to connect relationally with people. People today have so many choices that it’s a challenge to attract them through programs, even really good worship services. Instead, people today are attracted to genuine relationships. That’s a shift in focus for most churches, away from program-centered to more relation-driven ministries. It doesn’t mean we just drop programs or that we don’t do worship services or don’t do youth ministries or don’t do Vacation Bible School. [These type of programs] should be the results of what we are doing with our neighbors and our communities.”



**The movie ends with a ray of hope. What do you see in our denomination that gives you hope?**

Certainly, the good news is that with so many people who are not engaged in a local congregation, who don’t know the Good News about Jesus, there are lots and lots of people that we can form relationships with. That gives us lots of opportunities, daily opportunities, to interact with people that need to know the good news about Jesus. The challenge is to begin that shift into a more relational kind of ministry than a program ministry.”

**When God Left the Building** is currently showing in select theaters. A recent showing in Reading, Pa., had a sold-out crowd! If you missed seeing it on the big screen, don’t worry. The DVD will be released in the near future and will have a guide suitable for small group discussion. Once available, the Church Center office in Myerstown will have info on obtaining the DVD and/or study. Stay tuned

# Life in the Trenches: Unlikely Church Plant in Reading Pub

By Kolleen Long

Nathan Matz estimates 90% of the people he knows have been significantly hurt by the church. He meets with some of these people weekly at the Lifetree Canal Street Pub.

Some have been personally injured while in a church, others have been hurt through the sense that the church does not want them and, in fact, judges them and finds them wanting. One woman, a non-Christian but regular Lifetree attendee, shared her one-time experience in a pew. As she sat there with visible tattoos, she told Matz, "I felt like a daughter of Satan in the house of God."

These are exactly the people Matz, his wife Janelle, and others who organize this Lifetree want to meet. This desire led the Matzes several years ago to consider Lifetree Cafes, all of which were held in coffee houses. "But," Matz explains, "My friends don't drink coffee. They all drink beer."

To discuss the possibility of a pub setting, Matz flew to Colorado to meet with Thom Shultz, president of Lifetree, and his wife, Joani. The decision was made to try the pub format and a friendship developed between the Matzes and Shultzes. Matz emailed regular updates to Shultz on what God was doing and how lives were being changed.

"And things are going very well," Matz says, noting they've been meeting for about 18 months. "We have a steady attendance of between 20 and 30 people. We have people that have been coming from the beginning, and we have some that come just because of a special topic. Lots of people really open up and we have some amazing conversations with people."

The setup is simple: people arrive at the pub and order their meals, then watch a short film on topics ranging from church trauma to fracking. Discussion is scheduled until 8 pm, when meals

are delivered, but it's not unusual for people to linger until 11 pm or longer. "It naturally lends itself to really good, deep conversations," Matz says.

"The biggest thing we've noticed is Lifetree deals with healing and about helping people get to the point to walk through healing. And that is quite a journey when you're dealing with forgiveness and healing."

The idea grew to start a secondary group, which meets in a home every two weeks. Matz chuckles as he recalls all the books on Christian small groups he read before deciding to once again venture in a new direction. There is no formal Bible study; instead they focus on one question: Where in your life, right now, do you need God?

"It doesn't get any rawer, fresher or more real than that question," he says. "What it really addresses is that most people have a knowledge of God and the Bible. Knowledge isn't the issue, it's getting it from your head to your heart. And standing in the way is a lot of pain."

During a recent meeting, one woman admitted she wanted to kill herself that week. "How do you not address that?" Matz asks, saying that they sat with, talked with and prayed with this woman to encourage her.

In the year since the group has been meeting, people have formed friendships outside the group. Some have started mentoring (or "discipleship," in church-speak) relationships.

When Shultz was planning his documentary, "When God Left the Building," he wanted to include Matz and the Lifetree Canal Street Pub in the film. A crew flew to Reading to set up interviews with attendees and to show the Canal Street setting. They also interviewed the Matzes in Colorado. "It was brutal," Matz recalls. "I was interviewed for six and a half hours at a time. I've never done that kind of thing before."

He admires the filmmakers' ability to take so much footage and turn it into a concise, flowing piece. He says, "I think they did a really good job of blending everything and showing what's really going on in America and the culture."

When he was first discussing the idea of the Lifetree with Mike Snedecker, lead pastor of Community Evangelical Church, Matz was confronted with a scary truth: he wasn't just opening a Lifetree, but starting a church plant.

Matz, a Reading police detective, was raised in the church and in a strict Christian home. "And that is so not the norm anymore," he says, and the lecture-style used in most services is alien to the rising, younger generation. They are used to round-table discussions, even in school settings, and this is the type of environment in which they learn, in which they engage.

Those interested in experiencing this Lifetree experience are encouraged to come any Monday night. The film begins at 7pm each week. Details (including each week's topic) are available on the "Lifetree Canal Street Pub" Facebook page. The Canal Street outreach is one of two Lifetrees cosponsored by Community Evangelical Church, Sinking Springs, and Mohn's Hill EC Church, Reading.

ministries are able to reach out to this “unchurched” or “dechurched” population. These ministries take a non-traditional approach to church, meeting people where they are and building connections in new ways. Some of these ministries are highlighted in the film, and one of them is an EC missional work, the

Lifetree Café meeting in the Canal Street Pub in Reading, Pa.

Whether we attend an established church or a church-plant, our mission as believers is the same: to tell people the Good News of Jesus Christ. The challenge is finding ways to connect with those who need to hear it and finding ways to share the message so

they actually do hear it and are willing to do something about it.

In this edition of *Partners*, we will look more into “When God Left the Building” and what this topic means for our churches and the church-planting efforts of the Evangelical Congregational church.

## PRAYING FOR CHURCH PLANTING

Day of Prayer for Church Planting, the first Sunday of each month

**Pray for our church planters by name (see the current list of planters).**

### ASK GOD TO:

- Provide the daily needs of their families.
- Protect them from unnecessary distractions.
- Provide ministry contacts in their communities.
- Protect them from Satan’s attacks.

**Pray for our church works by name (see the current list of plants).**

### ASK GOD TO:

- Provide the financial needs of the ministry.
- Protect the unity of each fellowship group.
- Provide the necessary leaders and volunteers.
- Protect the heart of the pastor, leaders and volunteers.

**Currently, we are supporting and/or encouraging . . .**

### 6 Planters and 7 Plants

- Ephrata, PA . . . House of Blessings (Abe Montanez)
- Harrisburg area, PA . . . Restore Community (Brian Parker)
- Lehigh Valley, PA . . . Horizon (Bud Daneker)
- Philadelphia, PA . . . Comunidad Biblica (Rolando Diaz)
  - Allentown, PA location
- Pottstown area, PA . . . Journey53 (Rick Christman)
- York, PA . . . Iglesia Cristiana (Carlos Kelly)

### 2 Restarts / Revitalizations

- Slatington, PA . . . Trinity (Brian Kern)
- Tallmadge, OH . . . New Direction (Tim Ream)

### 2 Informal Partnerships / 4 Missional Works / 0 Potential Adoptions

- Lancaster, PA . . . Iglesia De Dios Ven A El (Luis Ramirez)
- Millersville, PA . . . The Gathering (Juan Carlos Morales)
- Palmerton, PA . . . Gaming Grotto (Chris Bronico)
- Reedsville, PA . . . LifeTree Café (Jeff Byerly)
- Sinking Spring & Mohn’s Hill, PA . . . Two Lifetree Cafés (Jerry Artz, Mohn’s Hill & Mike Snedeker, Sinking Spring)
  - “Off the Avenue” and “Canal Street”

