

A portion of the article

"Jesus With An Iced Latte" by Steve Lawson

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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.

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.

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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.

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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."