

This service is just like church ... except caffeinated

by **Monica Orosz**
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Terri Powell lifts her voice with other members of the St. Timothy Praise Band, which has begun singing at Capitol Roasters Café in downtown Charleston once a month.



Mike Greene plays keyboard, Bill Eaman plays electric guitar and James Townsend plays acoustic guitar in the band.



Members of the St. Timothy Lutheran Church congregation blend with other customers of the coffee shop on a recent Sunday afternoon, sipping coffee, eating sandwiches and clapping and singing to the praise band's music.

At Capitol Roasters coffee shop on a Sunday afternoon, there are the usual sights and sounds you'd expect: the whirring of the cappuccino machine and chatter between friends. Children sit at tables sipping sodas and playing video games.

There's also a joyful noise being raised, courtesy of the St. Timothy Lutheran Church Praise Band.

A lot about this equation may seem unusual.

Lutherans probably aren't the first to come to mind when you think of praise music, revivals and evangelism.

And a coffee shop seems an unusual place to offer up praise to God.

So let's rewind the story a bit and explain.

This is a church whose pastor long ago realized that the only churches in this country showing growth are the evangelical ones. The Rev. Richard Mahan, who was raised in the Orthodox church, came to a conclusion about changes Christian churches must make to reach out to their congregations.

"I've been waiting for this for 25 years," he said. That was when he first attended an international conference on the Holy Spirit and was introduced to the idea of contemporary scriptural songs.

"I got saved at a Billy Graham crusade," Mahan added. "All of a sudden, my faith was joyous." He's a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, an organization that plans revivals -- and he organized a successful one at St. Timothy last year.

"They're calling it the emerging church," he said of the movement. "The emphasis is on praise and worship."

At St. Timothy, located high on a hill above Corridor G, contemporary music has been incorporated into the Sunday morning service, with both a traditional choir and the praise band.

There is a separate contemporary service on Sunday and Wednesday nights, featuring the praise band, which currently has seven musicians and five female singers.

"We started out with just a few people in the band," Mahan said. "Slowly but surely, we added musicians -- we just didn't know where they were in our congregation."

The beauty of this evolution, he says, is that once the idea was introduced, it bubbled up from within the congregation.

The band first suggested adding a Sunday evening service. Even Mahan was a skeptic. "I said nobody would come," he said. Today, 80 to 100 congregants show up each Sunday night.

"I really want to lift up the praise band," he said. "They practice all the time. They're willing to play Sunday morning and for the contemporary services."

Phil Washington -- whose father was a Baptist minister -- came on as choir director at the end of 2005 and melds the traditional and the contemporary.

"We're kind of kicking it up," said Washington, who plays bass in the praise band.

Leading the band's efforts is Rachel Driggs, a young mother of three.

She marvels at how the group has evolved.

"Everything that we have needed has gradually come, and right at the time when we felt ready to go to that next step. We started talking about adding a drummer and the Lord provided a drummer.

"The Lord just took it from something very simple and made it what it is."

Songs are selected from popular Christian music and from contemporary hymnals that have been published in recent years.

The sound is uplifting and encourages singing along and clapping.

At its once-a-month gig at Capitol Roasters -- which began last fall at the encouragement of shop owners David and Tammy Durbin, who attend to St. Timothy -- church members provide most of the audience. They are uninhibited about joining in -- some standing in the back even dance a bit.

Yet regular coffee customers wander in and out, too, some of them asking who the band is. Most notable is the mix of the crowd -- from infants to seniors.

"It gives us the opportunity to leave the walls of the church," Mahan said.

The band sings for 90 minutes and after a short break, Mahan conducts a service that includes more music and a short sermon -- on this day about sin and how even small sins keep us from being close to God.

Mahan doesn't wear his clerical collar, but rather khakis and a sweater. A cross around his neck is the only hint he might be clergy.

The Lutheran faith is a liturgical one that follows a calendar that marks each season, prescribes what readings are to be used and names special feasts during each season. Currently, it is Lent, the six weeks of penance and renewal in preparation for Easter Sunday.

Mahan said his approach to preaching and the service does not abandon or forget the liturgy that is at the heart of the Lutheran faith.

"In Charleston, I usually wear my (clerical collar) every day.

"When you walk into our church on Sunday morning, there is a processional with the cross. There is Eucharist. There is a liturgy. I wear a chasuble. The choir sings. And there is a praise song. It is reverent.

"We're gonna be liturgical as long as I'm here. Yet at the same time, we want to introduce the new worship service.

"We are reaching out to people from other denominations."

The numbers prove it is working. In the past two years, St. Timothy has attracted nearly 224 new members and increased average Sunday attendance by 100 -- giving it the largest average attendance in the West Virginia-Maryland synod.

"People may be drawn here because we have a new building," Mahan said. "Maybe they visit because it's new or visible. But I believe what they find here is a true blend.

"If you're liturgical, it's here. If you're more evangelical, it's here."

And while the church has attracted former Catholics, Episcopalians and others, Mahan said it has lost its share of people because of the changes in the service, too.

"To tell you the truth, we've had some people who have left the church for that reason, unfortunately," he said.

All he has to do is scan the room at Capitol Roasters on a Sunday afternoon to know the decision was right.

"When you look around the room, this is what we thought would happen. It just amazes me the appeal of it."