

# A THEOLOGY OF SACRED SPACES

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Creating areas for engagement with God and others







In a world increasingly saturated with passive media consumption and much of people's community relegated to social media, the need for physical spaces that invite us to look up and engage with others and our environment has never been in higher demand. People are searching for real, tangible experiences, and what better place to find them than at your camp or conference center? ►



Since 2020, Matt Ferguson, chief innovation officer at PlainJoe Studios, has been working with churches, camps and other businesses and ministries to create innovative spaces. At the heart of PlainJoe's mission is its theology of space and the way it informs every project the team takes on.

"We think a lot about the theology of space at PlainJoe," Ferguson explained. "A good sacred space is both vertical and horizontal. It helps us connect vertically, in communing with God through the Holy Spirit. And it helps connect us with others horizontally."

We often think of sacred spaces at camp as solely based on a building or space's function. The worship center or chapel is the space designated for teaching and worship. The campfire is where we sing praise songs and share how God has moved throughout the week. But camps and conference centers have so many opportunities to turn existing spaces and new locations into experiential sacred spaces that invite guests to grow closer to their friends, family and God.

Working with their two guiding principles in mind, Ferguson and his co-designers at PlainJoe began working with Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds (Occidental, California) to reimagine the traditional camp experience. They set out to create physical spaces and experiences that would invite both believers and nonbelievers to experience the beauty of the northern California redwoods. This campaign is a prominent part of Alliance Redwoods' vision to become a place where people can escape the distractions and noise of daily life.

As Alliance Redwoods' CEO Jim Blake explained, "We want people to reconnect with their friends and family, to be still and hear that still, small voice speaking through creation. Camps are a neutral, inviting place where people who don't come from our worldview can become immersed in an experience," said Blake. "And hopefully they'll start asking questions."

With that mission in mind, PlainJoe began redesigning Alliance's dining hall in 2010, focusing on bringing the natural beauty of the surrounding redwood forest inside. They installed floor-to-ceiling windows so guests could view the forest while they were enjoying meals indoors.

For the remaining wall space, PlainJoe designed graphics of Jesus' "I Am" statements found throughout the book of John. Blake wanted to invite guests to start asking questions. Incorporating these "I Am" statements was an easy, affordable way to address that goal, even in indoor spaces.

"A donor standing in line waiting for kids to go into the dining hall overheard two kids saying, 'I am the living water? Who are they talking about?'" Blake said, "That's exactly what I want them to ask. That opens the door to talking about the creation they see all around them and the Creator."

It's a simple change — to incorporate Scripture or biblical principles into those "in-between" spaces, like a dining hall line. But these spaces are great opportunities to capture your guests' attention and reinforce the story you're trying to tell.

Storytelling is where it all starts for Ferguson. He and many of his co-designers at PlainJoe have backgrounds working for Disney. One of the most important lessons they learned there is the power of storytelling in places and spaces.

"Disney didn't invent storytelling. They just learned how to harness it better than almost anyone, and the secret is they're simply taking a page from God's playbook because God has wired us all as humans to be moved by story," Ferguson shared. ►

"Disney didn't invent storytelling. They just learned how to harness it better than almost anyone." —Matt Ferguson, PlainJoe Studios



Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds



Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds





Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds

## Big Ideas for Small Budgets *Getting creative with indoor and outdoor spaces*

You may have a limited budget, but never underestimate the difference that small, intentional design changes can make. You can leverage the beauty and distinctiveness of your location to craft moments that resonate deeply with visitors. There are plenty of ways you can rethink indoor spaces to be more experiential for campers and staff alike. Here are some ideas to get started:

### Engaging Outdoor Spaces

1. **Themed zones:** Designate different areas of the camp for specific themes or activities. For example, a "Creation Corner" could be adorned with natural art installations, such as sculptures made from driftwood or stones. A "Scripture Garden" might feature plants and flowers that are referenced in the Bible, with small plaques explaining their significance. Themed zones can make the camp environment more engaging while helping tell your camp story.
2. **Signature moments:** Develop signature experiences that capitalize on the camp's unique features. For example, if there's a beautiful lakeside area, consider hosting a "Sunset Reflection" event where guests gather to watch the sunset while engaging in storytelling or worship. Such moments take advantage of natural beauty to create profound, emotional experiences and provide a sense of tradition.
3. **DIY projects:** Budget constraints often mean that camp leaders must be creative. Engage campers and staff in DIY projects to build functional and decorative elements. For example, making birdhouses, painting benches or creating mosaic stepping stones can be both a fun activity and a way to personalize the space. This hands-on approach not only enhances the camp's aesthetics but also builds a sense of ownership and community.

### Inspiring Indoor Spaces

1. **Themed decor and multisensory engagement:** Bring your camp's story to life with murals, props and lighting to create an immersive experience. Engage your campers' senses to create a more holistic and emotionally-resonant experience. When people interact with their environment through various sensory channels, they are more likely to form lasting memories and emotional connections. For instance, incorporating natural sounds, tactile elements like textured walls or prayer gardens and visually stimulating decor can create a more impactful experience for campers.
2. **Cozy reflection spaces:** Create small, intimate areas within larger indoor spaces for quiet reflection or prayer. Comfortable seating, soft lighting and calming colors can transform these areas into personal sanctuaries. Even a simple corner with a few cushions, a small bookshelf of devotionals and some peaceful artwork can serve as a haven for campers seeking solitude.
3. **Interactive learning stations:** Create stations with activities such as Bible trivia, prayer journaling or artistic expression related to your camp's story or weekly theme. These stations can be rotated or updated regularly to keep the experience fresh and stimulating.

Finding those spaces where campers and guests can be still and listen for the voice of God is essential to the camp experience. And making those spaces more engaging and accessible is something any camp can do, no matter the budget.

Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds



Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds

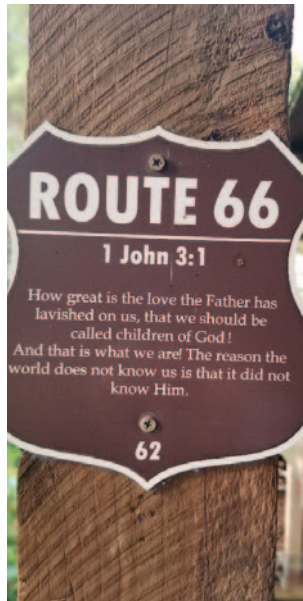


Photo courtesy of Alliance Redwoods Conference Grounds



Figuring out what story you're trying to tell is the first step to creating a unified camp experience made up of a collage of different experiential spaces and experiences. Ferguson recommends considering these questions: "What is that organization's or place's unique role in the body of Christ or the kingdom? What journey do they want to take guests on? How do they want their guests' lives to change?" Asking these questions is a great first step to figuring out your camp's story and how you want to design sacred spaces to play a role in that story.

For their Alliance Redwoods project, the story that PlainJoe designers are using to inspire each renovated or repurposed space is "Reforesting Faith." As Ferguson explained, "It's the idea that when people are immersed in the cathedral of nature, if they're in tune enough with things, they're going to realize that there has to be a divine Architect behind it all. And they're going to want to get to know that Architect."

The "Reforesting Faith" mission has informed several projects at Alliance Redwoods. In reimagining the camp and conference grounds' mission to reach more unchurched people, PlainJoe designers worked with Blake's vision to create Sonoma Zipline Adventures, a tree-top experience featuring two courses and eight sky bridges.

*(continued on page 24 ►)*





## Member Highlight

*A year-round airnasium for all climates*

■ by Jen Howver

It was during the summer of 2020, when chapel had to be held outside, that Steve Pinkley, executive director at Hidden Acres Christian Center (Dayton, Iowa), first turned the basketball court into a chapel area, with a stage, sound equipment and benches to seat 700 people.

It instantly became the largest chapel space on the property, since the existing indoor chapels could only hold 500 people or less. "You could hear the worship music and the gospel being shared from wherever you were at camp," Pinkley shared. "To me, this was camp!"

However, if it rained or the 90-degree heat was bearing down on you, it was less than ideal. Originally, Pinkley and his team planned to simply add a canopy to the space, making it like the southern airnasiums he had seen at camps in Texas and Oklahoma. In the years following COVID, camper and retreat group attendance increased at Hidden Acres, making the large chapel area even more necessary. As a year-round facility, Pinkley began to wonder what it would look like to make the building usable all year long.

He worked with the architect to design an 11,000-square-foot space (right where the basketball courts used to be) that included ten insulated 18' by 22' garage doors, HVAC, a stage, soundboards, storage and the capacity to hold 1,000 people. On nice days, the garage doors are left open, and the sounds of chapel can be heard across the camp. On an especially hot weekend over the summer, the doors were closed, and the air conditioning cooled the room off in just 15 minutes (keeping it cool all week). When it doesn't need to serve as a chapel space, the airnasium converts to basketball, volleyball and pickleball courts.

What started as a \$300,000 project jumped to \$900,000, but the Hidden Acres team had no problem raising \$182,000 during their Facebook Live "telethon" on Giving Tuesday in November 2023 and even more at their gala in February 2024. Chris Clark was the advancement director at Hidden Acres and was excited to help make the airnasium a reality. After his sudden death in January, Pinkley and his team decided to dedicate the airnasium to him, naming it the Chris Clark Airnasium.

Pinkley was thrilled to hear nearly 1,000 college students worshipping together at a recent retreat. He hopes the space will inspire other camps and conference centers to consider a year-round airnasium for their properties.



Photo courtesy of Hidden Acres Christian Center





Photo courtesy of Hidden Acres Christian Center



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At each zipline treetop perch, guests can stop and read small plaques inspired by the classic Route 66 signs design. They feature 66 verses — one verse from every book of the Bible — that point toward God as Creator and the beauty of His creation. And for those visitors who want a true tree-top immersive experience with a little more privacy and space to rest and reflect, they can stay overnight in a treehouse village located between the two courses.

PlainJoe also helped design a “Wander and Ponder” trail for Alliance Redwoods, a multi-sensory experiential space where guests can take a walk through the redwood forest. Benches line the path, giving campers and guests the chance to pray or reflect at different stations along the way.

Finding those spaces where campers and guests can be still and listen for the voice of God is essential to the camp experience, Blake shared. And making those spaces more engaging and accessible is something any camp can do, no matter the budget.

“God speaks to us in a whisper .... And in our camp culture, I think we have programmed out the voice of God. It’s not that God’s not speaking — it’s that we’re not listening,” Blake suggested. “A lot of our camps and conferences have opportunities to give their guests spaces set aside for a Psalms 46 experience — less noise, less busyness and activity and more be still and know. But are we capitalizing on those spaces?”

Sacred spaces aren’t just about communal worship, preaching or teaching. They’re also spaces that invite people to pause and reflect on the natural beauty around them. To grow closer to the God who creates.

The trend toward experiential and immersive moments reflects a broader societal shift toward valuing experiences over material possessions, and that’s not such a bad thing, especially for camps and conference centers. We can align with this trend by designing spaces that encourage community and the discovery of God’s amazing creation. And to complete the story, we can provide quiet spaces where campers can take a break from the noise and programming, and hear the still, small voice of the Creator. ■



*Cierra Winkler has volunteered at LaVerne Griffin Youth Camp (Wasilla, Alaska) for the past 17 summers. During the rest of the year, she lives in Franklin, Tennessee, where she writes for Ramsey Solutions. She enjoys hiking with Rosie, her Shiba Inu, reading literature and British history and spending time with family.*