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Refresh Community Church, with "Starbucks aesthetic," debuts in Chesapeake

By Phyllis Johnson  
Correspondent  
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Phyllis Johnson | For The Virginian-Pilot

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Pastor Thomas Ondrea, right, and his wife Christine stand in the welcome center at Refresh Community Church on Burns Street.

The word refresh brings to mind revitalization, restoration and energy.

In the case of Refresh Community Church, at 1313 Burns St. in Chesapeake, it means receiving hope and a renewal of spirit.

The long-unused church building has been remodeled and given new life for a budding congregation pastored by its visionary leader, Thomas Ondrea, 43, who likes to be called Pastor Thomas. The first service was held Jan. 28.

“The name Refresh was the name of our Wednesday night service from our church plant in Pittsburgh back in 2012,” Ondrea said. “I really liked the name, and my brother Dave and I have a heart for community so we named it Refresh Community Church.”

Ondrea’s brother designed the logo and used the verse from Jeremiah 31:25, “I’ll refresh tired bodies, I’ll restore tired souls.”

Ever since he was 13 years old, Ondrea remembers having the overwhelming feeling that God wanted him to do something big.

Growing up in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, church attendance was a major part of his life and led him to earn a bachelor's degree in ministry from Amridge University while serving as a youth minister and raising a young family. He then earned his master's degree in church planting and evangelism from Liberty University Theological Seminary.

Over the past 14 years, Ondrea has served in a number of churches in Virginia and Pennsylvania. Now he is happy to be part of a seed church located near Greenbrier.

"A network of churches developed the idea of planting one that would be revitalized and have the same aesthetic look inside of Starbucks and Panera Bread, appealing to the unchurched, including millennials as well as other age groups," he said.

Originally built in 1967, the church has had a complete renovation that took place over several months, with new carpeting installed, walls knocked down, roof replaced and many coats of paint applied. New sound and light equipment offer a unique and immersive worship experience.

Ondrea is proud to note that the church is not only remodeled, but also debt-free.

Rounding out the church's team are the pastor's brother, 31-year-old Dave Ondrea, who has a degree in music ministry and works remotely from California with technical details, and audio visual director Jonathan Michalak, who works in the sound booth.

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The church's worship team includes Travis and Priscilla Faulk, and Ondrea's 14-year-old son, Seth, who plays the drums.

Ondrea's 13-year-old son, Tyler, sometimes helps run slides and the media presentation system. It's a real family effort. Ondrea's wife, Christine, is a big supporter and shares his vision.

Ondrea is excited about the new church and its possibilities for reaching people in the community. The goal is to have 300 to 500 regular worshipers within the next five years.

"We're doing our best to use the internet, word of mouth, local community events, social networking and other low- or no-cost ways to reach people in the area with our message," he said. "We're doing all we can to make church relevant. It's less about tradition. We're trying to reach people who don't know who Jesus is. It's a 'come as you are' situation."

When one enters the foyer, a look at the big letter R hanging on the cheerful golden yellow wall is a reminder that you've come to a place to be refreshed. A comfortable looking sofa, coffee, snacks and a 55-inch television screen with rolling announcements are nearby. If you arrive early, you might hear the Faulks tuning up.

The sanctuary is dimly illuminated with lighting that changes colors. Architectural design has captured the mega-church look inside a smaller, traditional church building. With the service underway, praise tunes fill the air. Following these, children and teens are ushered into classrooms for their own lessons as the pastor prepares to give his message to the adults.

"We've been running a series called 'Burning Questions,' including 'Is God Real?' and three services on the afterlife," Ondrea said.

Maria Gonzalez has been attending the Burns Street church for 17 years.

"It's been revitalized," she said of the Refresh takeover. "I've seen the whole transformation."

She's excited about a ladies' group that will start meeting there once a month in the spring.

"We are relevant, but also biblically sound," Ondrea said. "We want to make this a place of hope – one that is warm and inviting."

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Phyllis Johnson, [pjwriter7@aol.com](mailto:pjwriter7@aol.com)

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