

Re-thinking Youth Spaces for Millennials

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Today's youth are just as important to the current and future church as ever before. This significance continues to be understood by most congregations as a critical link in continuing a vibrant church family.

Admittedly, how youth interact with each other has been impacted by social media and Smartphones. While many have hundreds of "friends" on Facebook, in some cases, their actual time spent together with close friends "hanging-out" is much less than in the past. With these social changes, both the program and facilities in churches are also adapting to today's students in middle schools, high schools, colleges, and beyond as young adults.

New technology itself does not eliminate the basic human need and the value of interacting face-to-face. Youth leaders recognize the necessity of youth connecting, both with each other (horizontally) and with God (vertically). The balance of this interaction, strengthening each connection, and how this is achieved are the keys to the success of church youth programs. A building facility can assist or hinder these youth programs.



As a recent example of a successful facility related to a strong youth program, Faith Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania, replaced numerous modular trailers with a three-story addition containing ministries for the youth on the top floor, children on the middle floor, and nursery/toddler care on the ground floor.

The youth floor focuses on an open "industrial-like" space with a "stylish" cafe area to one side and a lounge with a game area on the other. Students relate to these spaces and thoroughly enjoy them with their friends. While there are small-group break-out rooms (classrooms) in one corridor, this space

also connects directly to a large worship space. With their own praise band, the youth worship together. Fellowship and worship are the focus of this youth program, and the facility itself promotes these functions.



While the existing gymnasium in the original building also gives the youth an opportunity for athletic interaction, sports is not the focus of the Faith Church youth program. For many years, simply adding a gymnasium structure for sports (which would also have multi-purpose use for banquets, break-out classrooms, morning coffee, etc.) was a typical method to strengthen/build youth programs. With the familiar motto of "Build it and they will come," sports facilities have had success and still do. However, expanding youth programs to focus more fellowship and age-based praise worship has been the more recent, successful trend.



Another example, Highland Presbyterian Church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, added a new gymnasium space that provided not only a beautiful sports facility but was also designed, aesthetically and acoustically, for use by worship bands, providing an elevated A/V room to one side, and floor space for the set-up of a portable stage. Connecting to this gymnasium, the youth room includes a snack bar area, game space and an instructional area with a large screen. Allowing this room to open to the exterior with a patio space landscaped with a partial amphitheatre also provides opportunities for the youth to connect outside.

Sometimes buildings simply provide space. But, when planned appropriately through intentional architecture, re-thought youth spaces can promote and enhance the experience for church youth. Ultimately, the key to the success of attracting more students and changing their lives eternally is a strong program and leadership focused on youth.