



The Third Place: A “Bridge” to a Lost Generation?

Eighty-one percent of all Christians came to belief in Jesus prior to the age of twenty. Seventy-five percent of those commitments came before the age of fifteen. Dr. Thom Rainer of the Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky has identified those born between the years of 1977 and 1994 as the “Bridgers”. This group is called Bridgers, because their generation is the bridge to the 21st Century. The Bridgers also represent the smallest percentage of all the generations in church attendance (20%) and confessed belief in Jesus (4%).

Winston Churchill stated that, “We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.” Building design and function can be used to powerfully reach the lost Bridger generation using the Third Place concept. Ray Oldenburg (1989), in *The Great Good Place*, identifies three “places” that should be part of every individual’s life: Home, Work or School, and Informal Gathering Areas. The Third Place, according to Oldenburg, is the Informal Gathering Area; a place to be in community. Many times, the Third Place is only applied to the adults of our congregations; however, our youth have the same needs for community and connection, arguably more than the adults.

Oldenburg believes that these Third Places are crucial to communities for a number of reasons. He goes on to state, “They are distinctive informal gathering places, they make the citizen feel at home, they nourish relationships and a diversity of human contact, they help create a sense of place and community, they invoke a sense of civic pride, they provide numerous opportunities for serendipity, they promote companionship, they allow people to relax and unwind after a long day at work (or at school), they are socially binding, they encourage sociability instead of isolation, they make life more colorful, and they enrich public life and democracy. Their disappearance from our culture is unhealthy for they are the bedrock of community life and all the benefits that come from such interactions.” Oldenburg describes what a Third Place must possess to draw people and change their lives: “There are essential ingredients to a well-functioning Third Place. They must be free of charge or quite inexpensive to enter and purchase food and drink within. They must be highly accessible to neighborhoods so that people find it easy to make the place a regular part of their routine – in other words, a lot of people should be able to comfortably walk to the place from their home. They should be a place where a number of people regularly go on a daily basis. It should be a place where the person feels welcome and comfortable, and where it is easy to enter into conversation. And a person who goes there should be able to expect to find both old and new friends each time she or he goes there.”

Today’s youth are looking for a place to call their own. A place where they feel safe, where they are fed, both physically and spiritually, and where they can simply just hang out with their friends. Oldenburg continues, “Third Place friendships, first of all complement more intimate relationships. Those who study human loneliness generally agree that the individual needs



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intimate relationships and that he or she also needs affiliation. To affiliate is to be a member of some club, group, or organization. The tie is to the group more than to any of its individual members.” As much as Oldenburg’s description of these “places” sound great for us adults, might we be missing a phenomenal opportunity by not creating these “places” for the youth, not just in our church body, but for the youth in our entire community!

Randy Frazee, senior pastor of Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth, Texas, describes the successful Third Place as the “place where worlds converge” – the worlds of your kids, your church and your community. Mike McMahon of Leadership Network, when speaking to our need for community explains, “Building community is what everybody is looking for today. People long for a place that connects their lives to the lives of others.” At the most critical time in our teenagers’ development, how true do these statements sound? How exciting could it be to develop a ministry and supply the space to reach the “Bridgers” of our community? One thing that has been understood over the years of teen ministry is that successful programs have a balance between fun times and teaching moments. The environment in which this ministry takes place either enhances or detracts from the effectiveness that the ministry actually has on the youth. An environment that stimulates community is welcoming, inviting and cool. Most importantly it is a place that belongs to the youth...it is theirs.

Youth centers of the past included most of the cast off furniture that the older members of the church no longer had a use for. Times are changing. The Bridgers, and generations to come, will continually push the envelope of space design due to their incredible need to satisfy the senses through experiences. Today’s youth facilities will include state of the art media venues, wireless internet, top of the line sports equipment and playing surfaces, multiple electronic gaming centers, pool tables, foosball, great music, great food and drinks. A facility designed to reach so many diverse interests that our youth have today is a facility that provides the opportunity to share Jesus to so many kids looking for something to fill the void in their lives that today’s world cannot. Pastor Jeff Evans of Morning Star Church in Kokomo, IN points out the progression that reaching kids has taken. “In the past, the Christian household was instrumental in bringing kids to Christ. The church was there to support the parent’s efforts. The demise of the home has now minimized the exposure to Christianity to these kids.” Evans goes on to say, “The church now must become the Connecting Point for kids that 1) Don’t look “right”, 2) Don’t “talk” right, and 3) Don’t want to step into an environment where they are instantly judged as an outsider or outcast. God does not want us to write these kids off, just because they are different”. Evans continues, “The old model was change your behavior and then you are welcome in our church. The new attitude is to welcome these kids in, accept them for who they are and love them, and then the behavior will change.”

Third Place, as a concept for facilities, is first a change in attitude to accept those who are not necessarily part of the Christian mainstream. To get out of our comfort zone and to allow our own youth to have interaction with those who are not followers of Jesus is an effort to draw them into the Christian adventure. Pastor Paul Slagle of Charity Tabernacle in Indianapolis, IN refers to their new Youth Center as a “Strategic Lure”. He shared the story of about two



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fishermen at the same lake. One sits on the bank, not knowing the lake or the kind of fish he is trying to catch, throwing out the same fake lure, catching nothing. The other is a skilled fisherman who knows exactly what kind of fish he is wanting to catch, knows exactly where to go on the lake to find them, and uses live bait, catching more fish than the other fisherman can imagine. Slagle states, “The church and the ministry must be relevant to the kids, specific, and targeted. The youth of today are entertainment driven. The facilities that we build, our Strategic Lures, must meet the youth where they are. But we cannot stop there; the church must have a “Net” in place to further minister to these kids. Systems and procedures must be used to insure that no one falls through the cracks in youth ministry.” Pastor Paul believes that the Church must move beyond the “separating ourselves from the World” approach and become true “agents of influence” for Jesus. The buildings that we build are tools to be used by ministry to build our youth. And as we create places that are safe, friendly, and exciting to be for the kids, the parents will follow.

In Jerry Kloby’s review of The Great Good Place, he summarized several positive functions of Third Places:

- 1) Third Places provide a place for our youth to get to know each other.
- 2) Third Places act as a neutral ground for new relationships to begin and develop.
- 3) Third Places bring youth together with common and varied interests.
- 4) Third Places provide a safe haven for youth to gather in a time of crisis.
- 5) Third Places provide a place for our youth and our adults to mingle and build relationships.
- 6) Third Places unite the youth to do amazing things for the Church.
- 7) Third Places provide a fun and exciting venue to invite their unsaved friends.

Ray Oldenburg’s concept of “Third Place” is right on target. We all need a place to connect. Let’s not forget that drawing those who do not know Jesus is our Commission, and that can be accomplished in a Third Place venue that fosters relationships. Our youth have the same needs. When planning for the “Gym addition” to your ministry center, think outside the box and design a Third Place facility that will draw the youth of our society to a closer relationship with our amazing, loving, fun and relevant Lord Jesus.

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Article as Published in Church & Worship Technology Magazine, February 2006
And the Chronicle Magazine, April 2006.