

A PRACTICAL THEOLOGY OF...

A MAGNETIC YOUTH ROOM

IN OUR LAST ISSUE WE OFFERED CREATIVE MAKEOVER IDEAS FOR YOUR YOUTH ROOM IN THE ARTICLE "TOTAL MAKEOVER: YOUTH ROOM EDITION."¹ In this issue we explore home base from another angle—a practical theological angle. This is the fourth in Walter Surdacki's six-part series on the theological foundations for everyday youth ministry challenges.

BY WALTER SURDACKI

Not long ago I visited a friend's youth room—it couldn't have been more typical of the *adolescentius hangoutius* species. I sat down on one of several thirdhand couches pockmarked with rips and tears. The walls were decorated with posters and cutouts of slightly less-than-current Christian music groups. And slumped in the corner there was a broken TV tethered to an Xbox.

On this day, for some reason, I asked myself: "Is this what a youth room is supposed to be?" I had no quick answer, and that meant I couldn't let it go.

At my first two churches, I had the luxury of *not* having a dedicated meeting space for our youth ministry. Yes, I said *not*. Sure it's challenging to make a common space work for youth work, but it's *more* challenging to think through a theological foundation for decorating and furnishing a dedicated youth room. My current church gives generously to our youth program, so I'm wrestling through some basic questions. Is our youth room a recreation zone? a sanctuary for worship? a home away from home? a mini Starbucks? a graveyard for freebie Christian music posters?

Here's what I think: Like everything else in youth ministry, theological guiding principles come into play when we design, decorate, or even build a youth room from scratch.

MAKE IT POWERFULLY...HOMEY

Over and over New Testament writers describe the body of Christ as a family.² We're brothers and sisters in a deeper, truer family than our own family of origin. That means the place where our youth ministry family meets should feel like home. A real home confirms, over and over, that you are an integral part of a loving community.

In that light, a youth room ought to resemble a family room—complete with throw pillows, warm lamps, cushy rugs, coffee tables, comfy couches, coffee makers, and a refrigerator. A family gathers to debrief their lives in a place that reflects their lives. Kids are looking for a place where they can relax, be themselves, unburden their hearts, and fill their thirsty hearts. >>>

¹ If you missed the "Total Makeover" article and you're a group subscriber, you can read all about it in our archive. Just go to www.groupmag.com and click on the Back Issue Archive link on the left. Then enter your subscriber number (found on your mailing label) and you're in. Go to the May/June 2005 issue and click on the article.

² For more on the family imagery that infuses the Bible's description of the church, go to Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 3:15; and 1 Peter 4:17.

»» ● **Display lots of photos.** Buy or scrounge big collage photo frames so you can display lots of youth group photos—both fun and serious.

● **Showcase kids' creativity.** Ask kids to donate their artistic efforts to decorate your room. Build a shelf to display their objects, replace CCM posters with their paintings and drawings, and hang a large bulletin board to tack up their photographs and poetry.

MAKE IT OBVIOUSLY... HOLY

When Moses was up on Mount Horeb, God told him to take off his sandals because he was standing on "holy ground." Likewise, when teenagers walk through our youth room door, we're hoping something holy and sacred happens. Many of our kids show up at youth group because, deep down, they're hoping to encounter God. They're hungering to dive into something bigger than themselves. They're searching for how they fit into God's bigger story.

How can your youth room subtly communicate "holy ground"?

● **Have kids take off their shoes.** Post a sign outside your youth room door that tells your kids to remove their shoes as a sign of respect for the holy ground inside. Include the passage from Exodus 3:5 on the sign. After you first post the sign, teach about that passage prior to your worship time. You're aiming to change the way your teenagers experience the four walls of your youth room. It's not just a place; it's a holy place—set apart by God.

● **Decorate with iconography.** I grew up Catholic, but I'm on staff at a Protestant church. One thing I miss from my upbringing is all the iconography most Protestant churches exclude from their décor. Icons serve to direct our thoughts toward God, and remind us of his greater story and our connection to it.

● **Do a Google search for images of stained glass, crosses, and other religious symbols (or search on Amazon.com for CD-ROMs of religious symbols).** Print them on glossy photo paper and use spray adhesive to mount them on foam-core shapes. Then attach them to your walls or hang them from your ceiling. Or simply print large words such as "grace," "forgiveness," "sacrifice," and "redeemed," then mount and hang them in the same way.

All kids get distracted—why not surround them with images and words that remind them of God's great truths, one of Jesus' parables, or God's created beauty.

MAKE IT WARMLY... INVITING

First impressions matter, and your lighting, background music, and furniture telegraph your ministry's emotional climate to your kids.

● **Get creative with your lighting.** Install dimmers on your lights, bring in lamps and turn off your overhead lighting, string Christmas lights, or set up floating candles around your room to set a tone that's warm, conversational, and relaxing.

● **Arrange every piece of furniture to fuel conversation.**

Arrange chairs in a circle so kids can face each other, or remove your chairs and replace them with beanbags or large pillows.

MAKE IT A SAFE... REFUGE

God had Moses stand in the cleft of a rock so that he could witness some of God's glory as he passed by (Exodus 33:18-22). The cleft was a sanctuary—a safe place to experience God as he really is. It's easy to forget how our young people get beaten and bruised throughout the week by harsh words and experiences at home, school, and on the playing field. When's the last time you sat in a high school desk for six hours, disciplining yourself to pay attention 90 percent of your day? When's the last time someone threatened you or conspired to ruin your reputation?

When your kids enter your youth room, they're looking for a sanctuary—a cleft in the rock that can enclose them and help them experience God's grace.

● **Create a prayer corner piled with carpets, pillows, Bibles, and journal pages.** Encourage your kids to arrive early and spend alone time with God before youth group—it's like visiting an oasis in the desert.

● **Buy wallpaper that's made out of whiteboard material and create a "prayer wall."** Pile a few dry-erase markers so teenagers can scribble prayers on the wall. You could divide the wall into separate sections: "lamentations," "cries of help," "needs," and "praises."

● **Set up a mailbox for "warm fuzzies."** Ask your kids to write encouraging notes to each other and put them in the box. Hand out the notes after youth group so your teenagers leave on a positive note.

MAKE IT INHERENTLY... FUN

A youth room is a place for fun. Jesus said he came to give us life—abundant life (John 10:10). Recreation is integral to a healthy, balanced Christian life. You don't have to mount *Napoleon Dynamite* or *Spongebob Squarepants* posters on your walls to communicate fun. But your room must have the space (and the stain-resistant carpet) to accommodate general wackiness. Quality time happens in the context of a quantity of time spent together having fun and laughing—your room can either help or hinder fun.

When your youth room is empty and quiet, sit down in the middle of it and soak in the environment. Is your room theologically balanced? Ask God that question, and then see what he shows you. ■



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