



# \$2.5-million center pulls out all stops to attract youth

Posted by Rose Mary Reiz | The Flint Journal February 16, 2008 00:23AM

**FLINT** -- It's not your parents' youth center.

Video games, big-screen TVs, a coffee shop, sound stage, volleyball and basketball courts are all part of Peak, the latest addition to the campus of Central Church of the Nazarene in Flint.

"The old idea was that youth groups were stuck in some moldy room in a church basement," said Jerry Gardner, who heads senior high ministries at the church.

"This is the new way."

No kidding. The \$2.5-million, 24,570-square-foot center can accommodate 1,000 people in a worship service or concert. Twelve classrooms border side-by-side basketball courts. Lounging and gaming areas include table soccer, a pool table and a state-of-the-art gaming system for PlayStation 3 and Wii.

And it's not finished yet.

Also planned are a running track, media center, laser lights, video editing room and overhead walkway to connect the church to the center.

All this for the 200 or so kids who regularly attend the church?

No. Peak is all about outreach, said Andrew Arp, who oversees student ministries for the church's fifth-through eighth-graders.

"A lot of our students are from the suburbs, but our goal is to embrace the community that we're part of," Arp said. "With this, we have the ability to reach the entire Flint community."

The center is pricey, hi-tech and impressive, but still simply "a tool to draw kids to Christ, and then to the church, in that order," Gardner added.

The order is important. Christian culture is often perceived by youths as judgmental and pious, "defined more by what it's against than what it's for," Arp said.

## A peek at Peak

- The youth center Peak is located on the campus of Central Church of the Nazarene, 1261 W. Bristol Road, Flint. It is open 6-8 p.m. Wednesdays and Sundays. After-school and open gym hours are coming soon. Details: (810) 695-3859 or (810) 513-0112.

For the church to survive, the message of Christ's love must be paramount, he said. It's not a matter of compromising beliefs, Gardner added, but of returning to Biblical principles that reflect the way Christ approached his culture.

"If you look at the way the church unfolded, Jesus took the church to the people," Gardner said. "He didn't ask people to clean up first. He met them as they were, drew them in and gradually introduced them to a better lifestyle."

It's important for teens to redefine their lifestyles, Arp said.

"They need to know that their identity isn't defined by their popularity or their sexuality -- it's defined by Christ," he said.

At Peak, Christian messages abound but are presented in new ways. A poster of a defeated Satan, with the Bible verse caption, "Every knee shall bow," greets visitors. Skateboards bolted to the wall proclaim Christ's love, as do posters with messages such as "Love over hate."

Even the center's signs reflect a new way of communicating. Instead of "No swearing," one sign reminds "WWR (Words without regrets)." Instead of "Do not enter," a door intended for employees is marked "Authorized peeps only! Thank you!"

Both Gardner and Arp said they feel called to be intermediaries between Christ and the community. Teens, they stressed, desperately need both.

"In today's culture, kids don't have to interact face to face with each other," Arp said. "They've become separated, communicating with text messages. Because of that, there's a real hunger for community."

Teenagers at the church were consulted during the center's construction on everything from posters to lighting. They also chose the center's name. "Peak" refers both to the building's A-frame shape and the idea that "we're all on the way to the mountaintop," Gardner said.

"But we're not intended to stay there," Arp added. "This is a place where we encounter God to take back to the culture."

The center and the philosophy behind it are already working, said Cathy Hines, who attends Central Church of the Nazarene with her husband, Kevin, and daughters Erica, 13, and Emily, 16.

"We got to know (Gardner and Arp), and it was amazing how quickly our children embraced and became assimilated in the church," said Hines of Grand Blanc.

"It's so exciting as a parent to have kids who actually want to be here. If I'm sick on a Sunday morning, they're asking, 'How do we get to church today?'"

More than 100 teens showed up at Peak for a Super Bowl party. Between 400 and 500 people attended an open house and ribbon-cutting ceremony Sunday.

Celia Yenor, 15, of Grand Blanc, who is home-schooled, said she appreciates the opportunity to meet with other kids. She said she'd be comfortable bringing friends, Christian or not, to the center.

"It's so big, and there's so much to do there," she said. "It would appeal to a lot of different kinds of kids."

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