

Fostering Connections in Church Spaces

By Abbie Mantor, Aspen Group

My house buzzes with activity every Thursday evening as my Bible study girls trickle in. Ignoring my doorbell, they open the front door and trudge up the short flight of stairs to my living room, which is occupied by a used-a-bit couch, recliner, and five mismatched kitchen chairs. Impromptu snacks, purses, books and their endless chatter fill the snug quarters.

“How is work going?”

“Did you get settled into the new house?”

As the leader of this small group, I was torn. I wanted to encourage socialization, but I also knew that the purpose of small groups is to develop intimate relationships with each other and God – and everyone knows that intimacy requires revealing deep secrets, a box of Kleenex, and lots of tears.

Quite frankly, after a year of meeting together our group still wasn't there.



The numbers weren't in decline; we started with five women and now have ten. We consistently hang out together; helping each other through new babies, moves, and garage sales. But according to my definition of intimacy, we were lacking. I felt like I had failed.

Or had I?

The Spaces of Belonging

Joe Myers, author of [The Search to Belong: Rethinking Intimacy, Community, and Small Groups](#), believes we need to make meaningful connections in four unique spaces: public, social, personal, and intimate. Overlooking the importance of any of these spaces can create unrealistic expectations in any organization, which can lead to a disconnection between the group and its members.

Myers' first area of belonging is public space, where we “connect through outside influences.” At church, this is the relationship many attendees have with greeters and probably even many members of the pastoral staff. Common courtesies are shared every week, there is a sense of belonging to the same cause, but no close ties are ever developed.

Despite the tendency to consider them superficial or shallow, the largest number of an individual's relationships fall into this category.

The second area of belonging is social. This is the "small talk" arena of life. These are the small groups that can drive a leader insane. Members would rather munch on appetizers and discuss the likelihood of the Cubs having a winning record than divulge how their childhood has affected their spiritual journey.

They are important connections, though. Myers mentions three functions of social connections. First, they provide an opportunity to create "neighbor relationships," or acquaintances that can carpool kids to soccer. Second, social spaces provide a safe setting to determine which relationships to develop further. Third, they help us define who we are; which is why the ladies in my Bible study, all recently married, enjoy discussing life's adventures every Thursday night. They are discovering commonalities.

The third type of belonging is personal. These are the relationships we invest more time into; more vulnerability. It is not the goal to move all of our relationships to this level, but everyone needs a small group of close friends – people to share the ups and downs of life with. These connections need smaller, more private spaces to be fostered.

Finally, the deepest connections fall into intimate space. These are the relationships where the true self is openly revealed. Very few relationships ever reach this level because people simply do not have the time, energy, or need for more than a small handful of intimate connections.

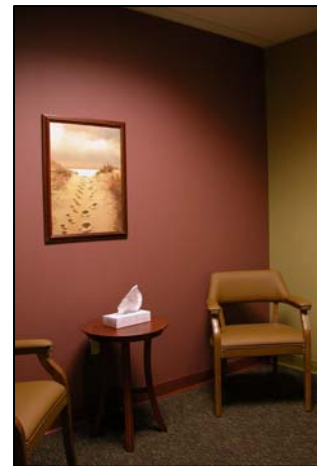
Belonging within the Church

Disconnection between church and the four spaces of belonging can begin when churches start prescribing community; determining at which level each person "should" connect.

In his follow-up book, [Organic Community: Creating a Place Where People Naturally Connect](#), Myers uses the example of building cars. Henry Ford was a genius – assembly lines are a great way to create safe and profitable cars, but it's a lousy way to foster relationships at church.

All too often, churches devise an assembly line that shuffles visitors in the door, into the worship service, into a prescribed small group, with the expectation that they will develop a deep personal relationship with Christ and their fellow Christians.

The problem is that relationships take time to develop. Additionally, members simply cannot connect intimately or even personally with more than a small handful of people



they trust. And sometimes those relationships are fostered outside of the church – in the family or another small group.

Additionally, public and social relationships in a church are critical. This may be the only arena for a member to connect in these spaces (the stay-at-home mom for instance). Members in these spaces are as valuable as those connecting intimately with each other in small groups.

Listening to the language of the church will point to the most valued spaces in that congregation. For example, some pastors will announce that “The best way to get involved at this church is by joining a small group,” which affirms personal and intimate relationships and demotes public and social connections.

To encourage every member and visitor to feel welcomed and valued, churches can create an atmosphere that fosters relationships at all levels – inviting public worship settings, smaller gathering areas, and quiet prayer rooms that are available whenever congregants need them.

Spaces that Foster Belonging

One church in the Chicago suburbs intentionally included a prayer room in their new facility that can accommodate a small handful of people. Members of the church can access this room via electronic card reader whenever they need it – before or after church office hours. The space has a living room feel, cozy chairs, soft lighting, and those boxes of Kleenex needed to connect intimately.

This space allows members the opportunity to connect on their time, at their pace. The church realizes that the Holy Spirit doesn’t have office hours and not everyone will connect in church-prescribed groups. They are simply providing the space for connection as the need arises.



Additionally, this church has a café that is open for lunch throughout the week, giving members and visitors the opportunity to connect informally. Right inside the front doors, the space is bright and inviting with small round tables that encourage patrons to chat through lunch and beyond.

This space serves a different function than the prayer room. Understanding that all members are not ready to meet in small groups for prayer, the church provides a non-threatening environment to “hang out,” to relax and be real without any formal commitment. The café is meeting a need that members and visitors alike have – to connect socially and personally.

A lack of intimacy does not equate with failure. In small groups and churches alike, meeting the needs of individuals right where they are is of paramount importance. Providing physical spaces for members to meet their unique relationship needs validates them as a person and as a member of the body of Christ, whether they enter the front doors seeking the intimacy of a small group or small talk in a non-threatening, inviting social space.

The Aspen Group website, www.aspengroup.com, can help your church design spaces that foster belonging. View examples of intimate prayer rooms, inviting social places, and beautiful public worship facilities. There you can also read more information about creating culturally relevant spaces that enhance ministry and encourage connection among members.