

(Y)OUR PLACE

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Recently, our church embarked on a hugely ambitious capital campaign to purchase the first of several ministry center facilities in Manhattan, one of the most expensive real estate markets in the world. Why are we doing this?

It has become increasingly clear that this effort represents good stewardship. Hospitals and colleges in major cities have learned that it is considerably less expensive to conduct programs in owned facilities than in rented ones. For long-term stability and financial stewardship, we should acquire our own facilities.

Ultimately, however, the most exciting reason for purchasing a building has little to do with money. The most important reason for seeking to secure space in the city is gospel hospitality.

“THIRD PLACES”

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg has shown the importance of what he calls “third places.” In this terminology, our homes are “first places” and our jobs constitute “second places,” while third places are informal gathering places, such as cafés, pubs, main streets, town commons, and other hangouts.¹ In poor neighborhoods, many street corners serve as third places.

These are places you go to relax, read, eat and drink, meet people, discuss, and develop and maintain relationships. Actually, the theme song of the old TV sitcom *Cheers* said it all. In these spaces “everybody knows your name,” they are “always glad you came,” and your “troubles are all the same.”²

Oldenburg and others note that third places have been disappearing in the States. One reason for this

is the growth of the suburbs. Driven by the desire for privacy, suburbs make no provision for third places at all. Teenagers try desperately to turn shopping malls into informal meeting places, but malls are designed to be massive hallways that keep people moving, not places where they sit and visit.

There is an enormous hunger for the vanishing third places (especially among the young), and places like Starbucks and Barnes & Noble have capitalized by trying to fill that gap. Their success is evidence of the need. Many experts believe that the fragmenting of U. S. society into “them” and “us” rather than “we” is due in some degree to the loss of third places.

HOSPITALITY AND THIRD PLACES

In modern English, the word “hospitality” conveys little more than the word “entertaining” does, but in the Bible it is something important and radical (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Timothy 3:2; and Titus 1:8). Contemporary Western culture leads us to think of the home as a private enclosure, only to be shared with a few intimates. The New Testament, on the other hand, calls Christians to see their homes as neither strictly private nor public space—but as places where we routinely share our homes’ safety and comfort as spaces to nurture others.

Hospitality incorporates newcomers into common, daily household activities—eating a meal, sharing a cup of coffee, or painting a room. The Greek word for hospitality—*philoxenia*—literally means the “love of strangers.” Christians are called to an attitude of welcome, not only toward other believers but also toward those who are currently outsiders to the faith.

1. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community*, 2d ed. (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999), xvii.

2. Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name.” <http://garyportnoy.com> (March 11, 2010).

Why do this? The gospel is the reason. In the Old Testament, the people of God are commanded to show kindness to the “stranger” in light of their experience as strangers in a strange land whom God accepted (Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:34). Paul continues this theme in many of his letters (e.g. Ephesians 2:19; Colossians 1:21). God demonstrated the ultimate act of hospitality in welcoming us though we were sinners and outsiders (cf. Romans 5:8). Jesus died for us to make room in the *household* of God—a great word that combines the material idea of a house, with its shelter, food, warmth, and safety, and the idea of a family (1 Timothy 3:15). In short, Christians replicate the mission of their Father. The gospel leads Christians to turn their homes into virtual third places. (Someone has said that since Christian families still need their privacy, our homes should really be “two-point-five places.”)

NEW YORK CITY AND HOSPITALITY

Nonetheless, many aspects of city life make hospitality difficult. In New York City we have very small living spaces that can hardly fit a small group. An unusually large percentage of Christians in our church live alone. For us, therefore, buildings become extremely important, not only for deepening our relationships with each other but also with our neighbors. Our church space must be seen as our way to be hospitable to the city. What does this mean?

Owning a building means that for the first time in our history, Redeemer as a body will have neighbors. (When we rent space on a street for several hours a week we don’t really live there; the other residents of the street are not our neighbors.) By owning a building,

we finally have people to whom we can say, “How can we make this neighborhood a better place for everyone to live because we are here?” Traditionally, churches have seen their buildings as their own sacred space (i.e., a collective “first place” and “second place”)—but we want our building to be a third place for the community, a place of hospitality. That’s what the gospel calls us to be and do.

In most of the neighborhoods where we are seeking property, young single professionals live in extremely tiny spaces. They would be glad for an urban space that welcomes them without trying to sell them something, and that could perhaps provide them with quiet space, a free wireless network, a place to meet others, food, and drink, as well as offering space for family activities and cultural events. We want to say to our neighbors, “This is not just our place; it is also your place.” In a location as suspicious and tough as Manhattan that message will probably take some time to get through—but that is the message.

Jesus was constantly passing through third places—such as the temple courts (John 2) or the town well (John 4) or the pool of Bethesda (John 5)—where he engaged people in casual conversations that became life-changing encounters. How exciting to have the possibility of creating our own space for that very kind of ministry.

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