

The Peace Palace

A Congregation That Could

by Kelly Chatman

Recognizing the acute need for safe, nurturing after-school environments in their neighborhood, a church in North Minneapolis transformed a boarded-up confectionery shop into a welcoming intergenerational enterprise.

I am an African-American male who has been involved in faith-based youth work for nearly thirty years: ten years in Washington, D.C.; two years in St. Louis; eight years in Portland, Oregon; and five years in Chicago as director of youth ministry for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. I administered programs for 50,000 high school-aged youth from 11,000 congregations across the United States and the Caribbean. Last June, I chose to return to the front lines of neighborhood/congregational ministry and youth work.

My passion for working with young people began early. I grew up in Detroit as the third of thirteen children. With a 13:2 ratio, I soon discovered that there just wasn't enough parent time and attention to go around. I learned by experience the critical role that partnerships between family, church, and neighborhood organizations such as Boys and Girls Clubs and 4-H play in healthy youth development. Local youth-serving agencies provided what many

have described as the "village" to raise my twelve siblings and me. When it mattered most, I experienced church and civic organizations as safe and nurturing places to explore my identity and develop a healthy sense of belonging.

Today, I know that churches, synagogues, and temples must help families and neighborhoods to raise healthy children and youth. Strategically located in every community, they are time-honored institutions with tremendous resources. In the late 20th century, many people viewed churches as if they were simply museums of moral good, divorced from society's need to shelter, feed, and educate children in our communities. In reality there is no institution in America that has consistently provided more assistance in raising children by defining family in the broadest sense: an intricate network of church, family, school, and community.

Which brings me to my role as pastor of Redeemer Lutheran Church in North Minneapolis, an urban congregation that has

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experienced declining membership in the past thirty years. The church is three blocks from a public school (grades K–8) where as many as 95% of the students are eligible for school lunch because their families live at or below the federal poverty line.

Not long after I arrived at Redeemer, I noticed a confectionery shop across the street that had been closed for more than a year. Neighbors told me that the ice cream and popcorn store had been closed due to insufficient business. I decided to approach the owner to explore the possibility of the congregation renting the shop. Today we operate the “Peace Palace” confectionery as a neighborhood outreach, a place where children and adults experience safety and belonging.

Entering the Peace Palace, you find a bright, cheerful space with gospel music playing. You see teenagers making popcorn and mini-donuts, scooping ice cream, and working the cash register; adults tutoring children; and a display of Peace Cards made by the neighborhood children and youth.

The Peace Palace is a grassroots social and entrepreneurial enterprise. The goal is to run an after-school program as a business venture in a neighborhood sorely in need of meaningful activities for young people. We are teaching teenagers the importance of being on time, being accountable, and being responsible in ways that they may not be experiencing at home or school. Children and youth at the Peace Palace learn what it means to be a leader. They have fun being productive and learning new skills. They have the chance to apply what they learn in school by measuring quantities, handling money, and using good communication skills to interact with customers.

The program is a vision with an emerging design! Our core “staff” of three underpaid professionals and the dedicated congregational volunteers constantly respond to real needs and new possibilities.



It is at least as beneficial for the congregation as it is for the young people it serves. In February, the Peace Palace hosted a membership drive for the Bone Marrow Donor Program. On most weekends, local and suburban church youth groups use the Peace Palace

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for meetings, make and package popcorn for fundraisers, and join in discussions about peace and diversity.

What's next? The storefront next door has been acquired to expand the Peace Palace and open a cyber café to help local residents learn about computers and to "cross the digital divide." A volunteer crew of parishioners

began the renovation in April. In addition, the congregation hopes to raise enough money to hire trained youth for summer employment.

The Peace Palace is an important symbol of hope for a neighborhood in which there are no Boys and Girls Clubs, no 4-H Centers. Young people are coming in the door looking for meaning and starved for healthy attention. Neighborhood adults are discovering that most teenagers can be trusted and all should be respected.

Today as I work with young people, I am probably viewed more as a grandfather than a father. There is gray in my hair. I am not as cool as I used to be. I have learned that the true art in being a helpful adult in youth work comes from listening more and saying less. I spend more time in the background, supporting youth workers who have direct contact with young people and building institutional support for dreams and programs that meet real needs.

My experience in youth work and the church has taught me a lot about seeing that



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young people have assets. The Peace Palace experience has helped me to discover that neighborhoods are filled with assets too.

Perhaps there is a “Peace Palace” in your neighborhood waiting to be discovered. I encourage you to meet with the church, temple, or synagogue in your neighborhood. Together map out the resources in your community to promote healthy and productive relationships between youth and adults. ☘



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