

Nashville Church Uses Expansion Project to Build Community

The \$16 million addition, which houses a fitness center, indoor playground and coffee bar, is an attempt to help people connect

A Tennessee church hopes its \$16 million expansion will help create a greater sense of community and grow the ministry from the outside in.

Last fall, Christ Church in Nashville unveiled a 104,000-square-foot addition that includes a new gymnasium, workout room, game room, indoor playground, classrooms, fellowship areas and 128-foot prayer tower made of glass. Church leaders say half of the 1,600 health club members had not attended the church before beginning to exercise there.

Christ Church pastor Lawson H. Hardwick Jr., 73, who founded the church nearly 55 years ago with his wife, Montelle, 74, said he wanted the 3,500-member congregation to become a community center where neighbors connected with one another. He said too many Americans today don't know their neighbors' names and are missing out on the community strength and support that previous generations knew.

"I remember a time when children were raised by the whole community and everyone was there for one another," Hardwick said. "We are trying to return to at least some of that here at Christ Church."

That vision is realized almost daily as area families join the

church's on-site health club, participate in fitness classes, join an intramural sports team, play a pick-up game of basketball or have a cup of Starbucks coffee while watching their children play on the two-story indoor playground set.

Church leaders say membership has grown as a result. Recreational director Scott Hord, 35, said many people who come to the fitness center are quick to ask questions about faith. "This is why we built these facilities," he said. "What we had hoped for is coming to pass when people who have not been coming to church begin asking about church and about God."

He said these conversations happen at the front desk, in the workout room, across the volleyball net and in every other room that has been set up for people to gather, talk and have fun together.

To keep the fitness center accessible to everyone, membership fees are kept low—\$60 per year for individual adults and \$40 annually for college students and senior citizens. Membership is free to teens with a parent who is a church member. Scholarships are also available. Access to the indoor playground, which is outfitted with state-of-the-art equipment, is also free.

This summer, the church planned to offer one-day sports camps and three-day strength and conditioning camps for youth in addition to its daily summer camp for children.

Youth pastor Daniel Bell, 34, said attendance at the teen Sunday school program more than doubled soon after the new facilities were opened. In the past, more than 200 students

regularly attended Wednesday night services, but only 30 attended Sunday school.

In two months, he said, that number climbed to 75 when newcomers were able to start the morning out in the “safety” of a comfy chair or game of pingpong rather than in a more formal setting. Hardwick said the widely acclaimed Christ Church Choir, under the leadership of Landy and Joy Gardner since 1976, has drawn many people to the church through the years.

Though the new facilities are aimed at helping the church remain relevant to a new generation, Hardwick said praising and worshiping God, benevolence and missions programs, and other outreach ministries will continue to be strongly emphasized.

Renee DeLoria in Nashville, Tenn.