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By Pastor Susan La Clear

When my husband, Mike, and I came to Maranatha CRC in Farmington, New Mexico two years ago, one of the congregation's top priorities was to engage youth in church life. Like many other churches, they were seeing their teenagers graduate and never come back to church, and they wanted to do something about it. From the first day, Mike made a special point to try to connect with some of the youth, who made it clear by the tortured looks on their faces that they would rather be pulling out all their fingernails than sitting in those church pews. His first approach was just to get to know them, to spend time with them, and to make sure they knew that we cared about them. (He happens to be an expert in goofing around with people and breaking the ice). Within a few months, a friend of ours from Michigan, Danielle Wells, felt led to come down here to help as well. She had a

lot of experience with teaching drama, so she started a drama team. At the same time, I started a youth band, since the kids had already begun taking guitar lessons through the program that Howard and Nora Redhouse had been running. Soon, Donny Edwards took over the youth band and began to invest in them as well, and it seemed that God had heard the cry of this church. He was sending people to help who had a heart for the youth.

Last spring, it began to bother me that the only place the youth had to meet was inside the old chapel, which was completely run down and filthy, after being used as a food pantry for a few years. They had cleared a space in there for themselves

among all the old clothes and empty shelves, and they weren't complaining about it; but I started to think about how beautiful the

adult space was, and what kind of message that must send them that the space we gave them was so run down. So, as Mike made plans to take them on a mission trip for 10 days, I began to make plans to surprise them when they came back by re-doing their space. I got together with two women in our church that have a knack for design, Rachel Anderson and Beth Dykstra, and together we came up with a plan. With the help of many others from the congregation, we cleaned, painted, decorated, and added couches, a ping-pong table, and foosball table. All this was relatively inexpensive since we bought mostly used

items from thrift stores and garage sales. When they got back from the trip, we could tell they were excited. They now had a "zone" all their own.

I thank God for not only the space they now have, but the sense of belonging that they seem to feel. They now invite friends, and the youth group has grown. They are opening up and becoming close friends, and Mike has been able to begin to disciple them, teaching them how the Word of God can impact their lives. The youth that used to hang out in a corner, now are actively involved in the life of the church, doing everything from taking up the offering to leading worship on occasion, and they have even surpassed the adults in their passion for ministry in church.

I believe that all this has been orchestrated by our loving God, who works in us "to will and to do according to His good pleasure", and who cares deeply about our youth.

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