

PRODUCING SUCCESSFUL YOUTH ACTIVITIES¹

INTRODUCTION: The following information is presented to try and insure—as much as is humanly possible—that the activities that are planned by any of us involved in youth ministry will be successful, enjoyable, and spiritually profitable. Years ago Pastor Wayne Golson shared with me “**8 P’s & a T**” regarding producing successful youth activities (*Actually I count nine...and a bunch of other constructive thoughts as well!*). I hope they prove to be as helpful to you as they have been to me!-mwe

I. PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITY.

a. Coordination. Make sure that your activities do not conflict (*as much as is possible*) with anything inside or outside of the church that might draw the young people away from you (e.g. large school activities such as a Christmas concert, major sporting event, Sunday school class banquet, etc). The surest way to kill a youth activity is to schedule it on a night when no one can come. That will guarantee a disaster.

b. Frequency. The frequency of an activity will be very important in determining whether it is successful or not. If you have activities too often you will burn the youth out and will lose numbers due to the fact that it’s running them into the ground. On the other hand, you don’t want to let the young people sit idle or be the ones who are always initiating things &/or asking when they’re going to have an activity. Nor do you want to go two or three months without something special planned. There is no “inspired” interval of time you must have between activities. Generally speaking, unless there is a lot of dissatisfaction with what is being done, don’t change everything just for the sake of change. One important point: If you are having an activity on a very regular basis (e.g. weekly) then you must keep it “*low key*” and spiritually oriented, or it will tend to fizzle out over time. An example of this would be the “*Gym Days*” we used to have at Bible Baptist during the winter months. We used to hold them once/week on Saturday mornings from November-March. However we later we changed that to once every fortnight (i.e. every two weeks) since weekly seemed too often and it lost some of its attraction. Either interval was probably ok because they were kept low-key, and were comprised simply of doing such things as playing basketball, volleyball, indoor soccer, plastic baseball, etc. They were enjoyable times that were not pushed nearly as hard as we would promote a “big” monthly or bi-monthly activity. The reason we wanted to keep such frequent activities low-key was because if you don’t, you end up putting yourself in a position of trying to “top yourself” every week, and you will end up with a problem. The problem is this: If you keep trying to outdo yourself, eventually there will come a time when you are unable to do so and then things will fall flat. So the suggested frequency that I am giving here for “big” activities (based on the advice of some individuals I have spoken with) is at the most monthly, but probably one “big” activity every **6-8 weeks is better**.

c. Miscellaneous. A few general thoughts concerning the planning of youth activities:

1. Any time you have a question about whether or not an activity is acceptable with the church, be sure to check with the pastor before going ahead with it.

2. Print a youth group calendar. Today, such things can even be done via computer & distributed via email, internet, facebook, etc. However there are some important advantages to printing out hard copies for your young people. Calendars will help to build enthusiasm for your youth ministry. Print out calendars that will cover 2-3 months at a time. If you have a calendar that is more than 3 months long, usually there are so many conflicts that have come up and changes that have had to be made, that the calendar is obsolete and thus of very little use. On the other hand, if you only print a calendar that covers a month at a time, the youth can’t plan ahead and leave their schedule clear for big activities they would have like to have attended or have been involved in. Again, there is no “inspired” calendar interval. Three

¹ I remain deeply indebted to Rev. Wayne Golson (my wife Debbie’s former youth pastor) for the vast majority of the thoughts, points and ideas contained here. Many years ago I sat down with him in his church office, and for the following two hours he shared with me everything he could think of about how to conduct a successful and biblical youth ministry. When I began my ministry as youth pastor at Bible Baptist Church in Madison, Ohio, his advice in such areas as philosophy of youth ministry, how to produce successful youth activities, etc, saved me from innumerable mistakes and failures. –Mike Edwards Email: mike.edwards876@gmail.com. Originally compiled October, 1981 & made into a Word document, March, 2009. (revised 3/2011) .

month calendars worked well for us, but you may find that something else works better for you. But definitely have a calendar and get it in your young people's hands.

3. Alternative Activities i.e. always have "Plan B." Always plan an alternate activity in case something comes up that stops you from doing the activity you originally planned to do (e.g. the building or sports field has been unexpectedly taken over by someone else; a rain storm has occurred and ruined the original venue; the electricity goes off; the bus driver doesn't show up; etc). ALWAYS have a "Plan B" ready so that you don't have to cancel an activity. If you cancel very many activities the young people may stop coming &/or will tend to not be enthused or excited about anything you announce. That's because they wonder if anything is really going to happen. There is nothing much more discouraging than coming for an activity and then something like rain comes, so instead of doing something else, everybody just turns around and goes back home. That has to be one of the fastest ways to kill enthusiasm for future youth group activities.

Obviously, having a "Plan B" will entail extra planning that must be done ahead of time, extra equipment that must be readied, alternative games lined up, etc, *which very likely may never get played!* And your young people will never even know about all the extra work that you put into it. But that's part of the price of being a good youth pastor/youth leader. You do things that people don't know about, so that things are always enjoyable and run well. The youth will probably not appreciate it until many years later when they get into college or have gotten married and are working with youth in their church. Then they'll look back and realize that a lot of time and effort was put into what was done to ensure that they had a good time.

II. PROMOTING SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITIES. Here are a number of thoughts in regard to promoting activities:

a. PRICE. Check out where the youth department/youth group is in the church budget...*if you are in the church budget at all.* If money is available in the budget for youth ministry, and if the church is in good shape financially, use that money from time to time to help ease the cost of a large activity. Personally speaking, I think it's good to charge the young people something for some activities, since if they cost something (whether its for food, gas, or anything else), I believe the young people will appreciate it more-even if they only pay a dollar. On the other hand, be careful as youth leader not to "price yourself out of the market," so to speak. Young people, (especially the younger of them) often don't have any income and so are dependent upon their parents or guardians for money. And even youth who do work do not typically have a large amount of "disposable" income. So as a youth leader you need to try and keep a reasonable balance in this area. One general goal we had in our past youth ministry was to try to have a big activity one month that cost money, then the following month we would have an activity that did not. Then the following month we would have another activity that cost money, then another one that did not, etc, etc. We didn't always achieve that goal, but we tried. But if every youth group activity or event always costs \$10-\$20 dollars, you are going to lose some youth.

b. Be creative in the use of different means to promote youth activities. There are many ways to promote activities.

- **Place notices on the church bulletin board** (notice board), and in **church bulletins & newsletters** (if your church has such?). Make **announcements from the pulpit** (by the pastor, youth pastor or youth leader).
- **Start promoting an activity 3-4 weeks ahead of time.** It has been my observation that in many of our churches we are not good at announcing and promoting activities for the various age groups, Sunday school classes, etc. We seem to think that if we've said it once from the pulpit, or if it's on the bulletin/notice board, then that's good enough. It's *not* good enough! I would suggest in youth ministry that if you don't publicise and "talk up" upcoming activities, it's likely you may not get a large number of youth to turn out. Ideally, we shouldn't have to promote and push things in order to get people to come to an activity. They should want to come of their own will. But while that may be the ideal, it often isn't that way in the real world. So we may as well face that fact, and do all we can to get a good number of youth

to come out. Generally speaking, the more youth you have at an activity, the more fun it will be. After all, it's not real exciting if you come to an activity where there are only five young people.

- **Additional ideas.** Golson suggests that one thing you can do to help promote and generate interest and enthusiasm for an upcoming activity is to talk to some of your key young people before you even announce it to the youth group and get them to commit to coming. You can then mention at youth group that “*Andy, Jonique & Walter are already signed up! Who else is planning to go?*” Sometimes once young people find out that other kids are going, they will want to go too. **Take photos of activities** (or even videos). Then post the photos on notice boards in high visibility locations. Occasionally put together a simple “*Powerpoint*” computer generated presentation, and then announce ahead of time that you’re going to show it during next Friday night’s youth group meeting, or after an evening church service for all those who wish to watch it (including parents & other church members).

III. PRODUCING A SUCCESSFUL ACTIVITY. Here are a few thoughts in regards to the actual producing of a good activity. If you add these points to the two “P’s” mentioned above (*Promoting & Price*), you have those “**8 P’s & a T.**”

A. PHILOSOPHY. Whether you realize it or not, there is a philosophy behind why you are having activities and what you are trying to accomplish. In most (if not all) cases, you are using them as a) a vehicle to increase the numbers in your youth ministry, b) interest some new youth in your overall programme, and c) most importantly, attract some young people who will not ordinarily come to church or a Bible study, in order to get them under the sound of the gospel, with the goal of reaching them for Christ. **That is the #1 goal**, i.e. trying to reach some outside kids by getting them to come to an activity where (as part of the activity & also through individual contacts and conversations with the staff & other young people during the activity) they hear the gospel and hopefully will eventually get saved. Additionally, d) we want the young people to find out that you can be a Christian—a committed Christian—and still enjoy yourself and have fun i.e. that the unsaved are not the only people who can have fun. There are perhaps many other parts to your philosophy. But think through what you are doing and why you are doing it.

B. PROGRAMME. You ought to jot down on paper several things regarding any activity, including “*What is it?*”, “*What’s the name of it?*”, “*How is it played?*” etc. Tip: If you find that an activity is building up to a climax or is “*peaking*” too soon, then cut it off a little bit early. If you go “*over the top*” i.e. to the point where a game, activity or event starts to lose momentum, you’ve kind of missed it on timing. As far as “*pace*” is concerned, the activity should move from one segment to another without dragging. This is where planning ahead is critical. **Key point: You must tell your helpers/sponsors/assistants what is going to happen and when it’s going to happen, so they’ll know what’s going on and can help things run smoothly.** If things are well planned among the leadership, you can keep things moving through a whole series of events without “*dead spots*” i.e. without having to stop and ask a bunch of questions between yourselves, explain to each other what’s next, etc. Instead, while one game is going on some of the advisors are getting the equipment and setting up for the next one, etc.

C. Sources for good youth group activity ideas, games, skits, etc. Probably the best source that will help you as a youth leader in coming up with good, usable ideas is a series of notebooks called “**S.O.A.P.**” (Which stands for “*Surprise, Originality, Adventure & Purpose*”) They come in large 3 ring binder notebooks. There are 7 volumes in the entire series. They’re not cheap (USD\$25.00/volume), but they’re worth it. However, I would suggest purchasing at least 3 volumes, in order to get enough variety & ideas to last you for a while. Each volume contains dividers that separate the material into six different categories: a) *Indoor games*, b) *Outdoor games*, c) *Skits/Songs/Scripts*, d) “*Warm-up’s/Gags*” i.e. “*Ice-breakers*”, e) *Special Activities*, & f) *Sources/Resources* (for sports & game equipment, etc). They are produced by “***The WILDS Christian Camp & Conference Center,***” Rosman, North Carolina (www.wilds.org). The nice thing about the “*SOAP*” books is the fact that virtually every game or activity contained in them is clean, decent, and of high moral standards & character. They have also been tested and used either by *The Wilds* staff, or by youth pastors from fundamental churches across the USA before being submitted and accepted for publication (Due to the different dress standards in various countries, there may be a few games that the girls will not be able to play or which may require revising). You can go to this source with confidence and what you find in them you won’t have to screen and “*weed through.*” For several years I used to do just that, i.e. sort my way through youth ministry idea and game books (I still remember

one dubious source in California). First of all the books were expensive. But far worse, there was much in them that could not be used in the ministry due to it being morally questionable, suggestive, worldly, etc). Another handy feature of the *SOAP* books is that in the top right corner of each page they list all of the equipment needed to play each game, approximately how many can participate, what age group it works best with, etc.

D. PLACE. In having an activity, make sure of the place where you're going to have it. I don't just mean make sure you've booked it. I would add that even when you book a venue, *ALWAYS* double-check with those in authority the day before the event is to take place to make sure that: a) they haven't forgotten, b) they haven't closed since you booked it, c) they aren't going to be gone because of a holiday or a funeral, etc. People in charge of sports venues, can be surprisingly irresponsible & inept (e.g. failing to remember to inform the person working the day or shift when your group is planning to come and they thus not being there to open up, etc). More importantly, **make sure you can control the atmosphere!** Don't rent parts of buildings or venues (e.g. half the football field or half the building), since the other group may be doing things that are actually a source of temptation and sin &/or will completely disrupt your youth and your activity (e.g. blasting away with ungodly music, people practicing for Carnival-in full gear, a Karaoke place & Rum shop located across the street going full blast while you try to preach the gospel at the end of a rally, etc). Get the entire venue, so that you can control the music, atmosphere, dress, etc.

E. PERSONNEL. You need to sit down well ahead of time and figure out a) *Who do I need?* b) *How many workers will I need?* c) *What will each one do?*, etc. Write it out on an 8 & 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper (and have a notebook or clipboard to hold it). If it's an activity that involves a large area (especially outdoors), if you have an Overhead projector you may want to draw an overhead transparency of the venue and project it on the wall and go over it with your youth staff (much like the military plan an operation). The bigger the activity is, the more precise and well-planned it must be if it's going to come off properly!

F. PREACHER. You need to determine who is going to be preaching/teaching the Word at the activity. A few thoughts in regard to who you should get to do the speaking:

- The person **must be a blameless individual**.
- **He must be one who can communicate with youth.** Some men are good preachers but they are not good at communicating to young people. Make sure you get someone who can get the point across to young people. That doesn't mean you get some "groovy" guy who is just a comedian & entertains the youth. The person needs to be biblically solid, yet someone who is dynamic and can relate to young people and keep their attention.
- **Make sure you take care of a special speaker's expenses.** This would definitely include covering his traveling expenses at the very least (e.g. gasoline, bus fare, meals, etc), but more properly give him a love offering as well.

G. PERSONAL WORK. It would be a good idea to have some New Testaments, tracts, pencils, pens, etc, in a container (box/bag/pouch/backpack) that can be zipped or snapped shut, and which can go with you on most any activity. That way if you or another staff member or young person leads someone to Christ during the activity, or counsels a Christian who needs help, you have materials to give him/her right then and there. I would add that in this area of counseling, **it is very important that men counsel with the young men and the ladies counsel with the young ladies**, almost without exception! If you as a male youth pastor or youth leader counsel girls, you're going to end up with false "decisions" due to them having a "*crush*" on you (*regardless of how ugly you are!*), along with all the other problems that go along with that scenario. So to avoid such unnecessary headaches, if a girl comes to you as a man and says she wants to talk to you, turn her over to your wife or another woman. If she's serious about wanting to find answers to her problem, she'll be glad to talk to a lady. And if she just wants to flirt, that will get rid of her. Do not play with fire in this area! And if a young man is insistent on talking with your wife or one of the female youth leaders you should step in and see that they talk with a male youth leader.

H. TRANSPORTATION. When I was engaged in full-time youth ministry, our church's transportation policy was pretty simple and clear cut (**Tip:** I took this issue back to our deacon board & senior pastor, and let them help

me formulate a workable transportation policy and solve some problems that we had been experiencing in that area, and would encourage you to do so as well). We liked to take the youth to and from youth activities in church vehicles &/or in youth leaders/sponsors cars, etc. That way we could a) control the atmosphere in the vehicles going to and from the activity, and b) insure safety on the way to and from the venue (as opposed to ending up riding on a public bus that has music with filthy lyrics blasting everyone's eardrums out, immoral "music videos" being shown to your young people sitting in front of a fold-down DVD screen, or taking your life "into your hands" by riding with a maniacal bus driver). Our church transportation policy was quite simple: If a young person came to the church in somebody's vehicle, they could ride back home with that person afterwards. If they did not come with them to the activity, we took them home...unless the parents had given us permission to let their child ride with someone else. By the way, if you are in doubt about something, don't be afraid to ask the young person-or even better, call the parent or guardian. In this era of cell phones, almost everyone is reachable and any child should/would know their parents phone number. We don't want to make a mistake in this area and have someone get injured in a car accident, arrive home 3 hours late from a youth activity, or end up pregnant because a girl's boyfriend took her somewhere else after the church activity ended, etc. As long as the young people are at your activity *you* are responsible for their safety and behaviour.

IV. A FEW ADDITIONAL MISCELLANEOUS THOUGHTS:

A. Be enthusiastic! If you're not enthusiastic then the young people won't be either! This may not be your personality but ...you need to *make it your personality*. If you don't naturally have a lot of enthusiasm, ***FIND SOME!*** And when you explain a game to your young people (especially a new one), be sure and tell them it's a "great game" that you think they're going to really enjoy!

B. Try to get a balance in the types of games you play. Design games that are good physical activity, not just table games all the time. On the other hand, if you have played three games in a row that are physically strenuous, the next game needs to be more of a slow, sit-down type game so that the kids can get a chance to rest. If you run young people until they're exhausted physically, the activity will flop. Once they get tired they will tend to start complaining that they don't want to play anymore &/or try any more games. On the other hand, if all you play are a bunch of "sit-down table games" the youth will complain that they "*want to do something!*" Young people have energy and they need to use it up!

C. Photos/Videos. As noted earlier, images will help you to build future activities. Whenever possible, and especially when the activity is one that will lend itself to photographs, take pictures, and then post them on the bulletin board at church the next week. That way, a) the individuals who went on that activity can look at themselves (*everyone likes to see themselves!*), and b) those who didn't attend will see what they missed and will be more likely to want to come to the next activity.

D. Overcoming the one "Superstar." In designing activities, build into your games mechanisms which prevent one athletic individual (whether male or female) from dominating and winning everything for their team. **You can do that a number of different ways:**

- **Team competition** (note: keep your teams small enough that everybody gets to participate. If only a few show up you simply have fewer teams. Conversely, if a lot of young people show up you should form more teams)
- **Score events by using cumulative distances, totals, etc** (e.g. 3 teammates must throw an old tyre like a discus. Each of the three throws by the different team members is individually measured then the three distances added up, giving their team's score for that event.
- **Limit the number of events/games any one person can enter or represent their team in.** If you don't do some of the above things, a team will tend to enter their superstar every time in every game, while some kids (especially some girls) will tend not to play anything at all. *That is not what you want.* We want to see everyone participate. So we will have to sometimes almost "*force*" some individuals to play, via methods such as those above. Usually they won't even realize what we've done. In fact often those

who tend to be “non-participants” surprise themselves and end up enjoying themselves thoroughly. But if you don’t balance things out like this, the youth won’t do it themselves.

E. Emphasize and encourage the young people to give 100% in whatever activity you are playing, because that’s pleasing to the Lord (I Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:23; Eccl. 9:10).

F. Forming teams. The youth leaders/youth pastor should divide the young people into teams most of the time. Otherwise someone’s feelings are often going to be hurt. *And just being part of a team seems to automatically increase enthusiasm and interest among the young people*—regardless of whether you are playing a sport, an indoor game, doing a Bible quiz or whatever. A few more tips:

- **In dividing the young people into teams, be careful not to put all the athletic or intellectual types on one team.** The goal in sports, games, quizzes, etc, should be to try and keep it as close and competitive as possible. If one team is killing everyone else, the other teams will lose interest and want to quit.
- **Try to break up cliques and “best friends” whenever possible.** One goal of your games and activities is to help develop new friendships and relationships...not promote cliques. As a youth leader you will already have enough problems with that!
- **The youth leaders should choose the teams, not the youth!** Also: Vary how you do it so the young people can’t arrange to keep in their cliques and pet groups. For example: Have them all line up against a wall or along a line, then have them count off 1, 2, 3, 4 (if you’re making four teams). Next activity have them line up but have them count off into 3’s, or 2’s etc. Or line them up from tallest to shortest, and then divide them up. Or have them line up by age (or what country or parish they’re from...or *whatever*).
- **Once they’re divided into teams, make them come up with a name for their team right away.** To just call them “*Team 1*” or “*Team 3*” does not build enthusiasm. *However, even the silliest, goofiest name seems to instantly build identity, interest and team spirit.* If you don’t have competition between teams, young people will not want to just run up and down the field for nothing! By having teams competing against each other you build the enthusiasm for an activity. Whenever possible have more than two teams. (**Important note:** Do not allow them to use any name that is associated with the world, sin, ungodly television shows or films, movie stars, rock stars, athletes, etc. You do not want to in any way glorify the world or be a stumbling block to those who have come to your activity)
- **Attach an equal (or nearly equal) number of points to each of the games or events.** In the case of activities that involve several games (whether indoor, outdoor, or both) I think it’s important to attach an equal number of points to each of the games or events. You will often have some events which involve physical skill and others mental skill. If you give a lot of points for the physical events and only a few points for the mental ones (or vice-versa), then you are not being fair. You also may unknowingly communicate a wrong emphasis (e.g. that sports ability is really important in life, but being a good thinker isn’t worth much). By equalizing the scoring for the various events, a team that has good thinkers but not very athletic individuals will have just as good of a chance to win.
- **If possible, try to divide up teams ahead of time (at least in your head) & strive to divide them equally, based on their abilities.** You want teams that are fairly equal athletically, academically, etc. After all, it’s no fun to play a game (or series of games) where your team gets totally stomped into the ground. Notwithstanding that potential problem, I would say that competition is good. Young people need to learn that you win and lose, just like you win and lose in real life, depending on how you perform while playing by the rules, etc. The youth can learn some good lessons through competition *IF* it’s done in a fair, balanced, and good-natured way, emphasizing Scriptural truths.

G. Be sure to always have a devotional (i.e. a short “challenge”) at every youth activity. These devotionals should in my opinion be short (5-15 minutes at the most). But you need to have them. In addition, it is one more way to communicate to the young people the fact that “*There is no division between the secular and the sacred.*”

To the Christian, all things are sacred.² Note: If your youth group is engaged in a scripture memorization programme, quoting the youth group's "*verses of the month*" at either the start or end of each activity may also be a good idea.

H. Discipline. Do not lose self-control (e.g. scream, holler, etc). Emphasize to the youth that when they are ready to be quiet and listen, you will play the game, and that you are not going to play it until they do. Have a whistle, bull horn, etc, as it helps for you to be louder than the people that you are trying to work with. If an individual refuses to pay attention or is disruptive, then you may need to take them off to the side and talk with them privately and ask for their cooperation. If, after that they are still uncooperative or disruptive, then you may just have to take them out of the activity. Do not allow 1-2 "big heads" to ruin an entire activity. In eight years of youth ministry I can't recall ever having actually had a real discipline problem (e.g. not following instructions, etc). Once or twice I had to very calmly and quietly tell a young person that if he didn't straighten up that he was going to go home. But other than that, I never experienced much of a problem. It helps to remember that young people typically want to enjoy themselves at activities, so we don't have to become "Chuck Norris" in order to enforce discipline. Be firm, be fair, but be calm. If you have a question in the area of discipline, a good person to get advice from would be your pastor. Don't do anything you'll later regret.

I. Keep samples of all scoring sheets, entry forms, schedules, permission forms, etc, from previous activities in your computer, as well as hard copies in a file. These will be a nice resource for you to find some ideas to help you plan another future activity. For instance, I kept the retreat schedules, game lists, etc, from all of the previous years of our youth retreats. First of all, in regard to annual activities it will keep you from falling into a rut and just doing the same things over again, playing the same games year after year, etc...and experiencing a drop in attendance because it has become boring and predictable. Secondly, it will save you having to make up new forms from scratch (*There's no point in reinventing the wheel!*) Thirdly, it will help jog your memory regarding some things that didn't work, so that you can replace them with other ideas, so that hopefully the activities will get better and better with each passing year.

J. Be sure to note any activities, games, etc, that really "bomb", so that you don't use those or try those again ever ...or at least for a long time. Even if the event failed due simply because something wasn't planned quite right or executed properly, you will still have to wait a long time before you try to do that activity again. Young people have long memories and.☺. This reemphasizes how important it is that we plan and produce high quality activities, because if you have two or three activities in a row that are duds, it will become very difficult to get the young people to believe you when you say "*This is going to be a really great activity!*" *Success breeds success* in regard to activities, and likewise, *failure will breed failure*.

² A well-known saying of the late evangelist Bob Jones, Sr.