

Buns Charades versus Acts 2

by Ken Moser

Confessions of an Event Skeptic

I have been in youth ministry for 25 years, and I am skeptical—very skeptical—about the “big event”-approach to youth ministry.

When I was new to youth ministry, I was desperate for guidance. Clueless as to how to fill up a two-hour time slot with 12 rowdy teens, I spoke to some veterans in the youth ministry field. They suggested I run each Friday night youth gathering as a “big event with lots of fun activities.” These activities would grow a crowd that could be funneled into something more serious. Sounded like a good plan to me.

The next few weeks were exactly that: Full of activities designed to attract a crowd and excite teenagers. We smacked each other with newspapers, spat water into a bucket, and stomped balloons tied to each other’s feet. Suddenly we hit week six—that’s when the wheels came off.

The week we played “buns charades.”

If you don’t know this game, I urge you not to investigate further—I’m fairly sure it’s illegal in several states. The game is based on charades. But (no pun intended) the “twist” is that you wiggle your backside to spell words. To my naïve, simple mind this seemed like a great idea. However, one of the

players was an attractive 16-year-old girl trying to spell the word *boat*.

Soon I realized that most of the boys in the group had caught onto the word straightaway; except they were enjoying this girl’s buns charade so much that they were shouting out, “Elephant! Automobile! Bicycle!”—anything to keep the game going.

I watched this and realized that for them this was the perfect Friday night: Hang out with the opposite sex while the youth leader runs an activity that gets an attractive girl onstage wiggling her rear end. I stood there in utter dismay. This is *not* what I’d hoped for. I left that night with the sad realization that I needed to revisit my original commitment to the “event” as the way forward in youth ministry.

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Years later I’m an even more diehard event skeptic. I feel like one of those “last men standing” in a Quentin Tarantino film as I step over the corpses of youth events over the last two decades.

I’ve seen so many things come and go, so many new gimmicks that promise to bring great

rewards to my youth group. A few years back I read an ad promising the “next big thing to really transform my next youth event.” It was, believe it or not, Christian Karaoke.

Are you kidding me? Now I’m all for Christian music, but having a big event where my students sing karaoke to Toby Mac really isn’t going to transform my kids, group, or community.

Just a year ago a group came to Vancouver promising monthly events that would “blow our minds and reach the youth of this great city.” It promised rock bands (not just one or two, but *three* groups that would rock for Christ), an indoor climbing wall, wild games, and I think there was something about a man ripping a phone book in half (I may have my events mixed here, but you get the picture). This program lasted two months before the organizers either realized that not only were they having no impact, but they also were going broke at the same time.

Yes, I’m an event skeptic. Why am I so skeptical? Well, there are a number of reasons.

Events Presuppose Two Things That Aren’t True

1. I need to import fun into my Christian gathering.
2. Non-Christians won’t come to my youth group unless there’s something fun for them to come to.

These two statements just aren't true in my experience. The kids in my youth group love coming to our gathering week after week. We have a great time learning about Christianity and helping each other grow in the faith. In fact, the gathering is so good that parents often use it as a means of discipline if their child misbehaves ("If you stay out too late you won't be allowed to go to youth group this week"!).

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Similarly, new people come to our group not because we have light shows and rock stars, but because their friends invited them to experience how fun it can be to hang with Christians.

One day we moved our youth group meeting to a new hall. As this was a special "event," I decided to run one of those things I call a "meaningless activity." You take off your shoes, throw them into a pile, and your partner has to find your shoes for you. We had a large number of kids there so the pile of shoes was enormous.

At the end of the evening three eleventh-grade girls said, "Can we meet with you this week to talk?" Later that week we met, and they sat me down and said they were afraid that "youth group is

losing its edge and becoming like the other dumb groups who play stupid games. We come to sing and pray and hear about God. We come to grow in our faith and not run around looking for shoes. If you start running stupid games, we don't think we can invite our friends anymore."

I was overjoyed and rebuked at the same time. These young women gave me the message loud and clear.

"Seeker" Events Have Little Lasting Impact

The event designed to reach the outsider promises so much and usually delivers very little. Furthermore, it teaches us that if we pull a crowd, we're successful. Most of us who've been in youth ministry for a few years have learned a few tricks that can bring in new people. Flashy advertising, lots of pressure on the regulars to bring their friends, some entertainment, and free food. But new kids rarely come back and, if they do, it's to see "what's playing this week."

It's interesting to note that where a great number of young people turn their lives around is on a camp or weekend retreat. You don't need to be a rocket scientist to work out why. They experience Christian community in action.

"Youth group is losing its edge and becoming like the other dumb groups who play stupid games."

Youth Group Night Is My Event

We all agree that people are more important than fancy programs. The way I see it, the gathering of my youth group each week *is* my event! This is where we worship God, change the world through prayer, hear God speak to us through the Scriptures, and help each other press on as believers. Wow! It doesn't get much more eventful than this. Let's take a quick look at Acts 2:42-47.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (NIV)

Here we find a snapshot of what characterized the early church. And what a picture it is. Without going through it thoroughly, notice the things it tells us about the early believers.

- They were devoted to the pursuit of spiritual disciplines (the apostles' teachings and prayer)

- They were committed to each other (fellowship)
- They were marked by overwhelming generosity
- They had a real impact in their local community
- God blessed this with numerical growth

Wow! What a picture. When I read this I hang my head in shame, thinking of all the weeks I wasted in my desperate attempts to make each week at youth group an “event.” I’d hoped I could reach the outsider and build the insider through wiggling butts and other crazy activities. In the end, I needed to look no further than the book of Acts.

In light of Acts 2, I ditched “event style” youth ministry. The following is what I now try and do instead.

- We center our weekly meeting on Bible study, fellowship, and prayer. At the end of the gathering we enjoy a meal together. We’ve found this manages to hit both our targets (building up and reaching out).
- In addition we spend lots of time together as a group, as the early church met together continually. This means I try hard to remove any thoughts from my mind of an “every other week” gathering or a “drop-in center” approach to ministry. We have small groups during the week and a number of retreats and overnights during the year. Yes, I realize

that this is difficult to accomplish in today’s culture, but we press on anyway.

- In addition we’ve worked at developing generosity among our youth. We’ve done away with fundraisers. A carwash? Are you kidding? Instead our group is learning to give generously—even if it hurts. The results have been fantastic. Each time we take on a new cause (i.e., a compassion child or giving money to the poor), we’ve reached our target with money left over. This has then allowed us to take on more and more causes.

In the end, when I got rid of “events,” I found that my youth group actually increased in size and quality. It was as if the kids themselves could see that buns charades paled into insignificance compared to reading of the Bible and prayer.

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In the end, event-style of programming just didn’t deliver. But true Christian community does. ☺

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