HOW TO PLAN A YOUTH MINISTRY EVENT FROM START TO FINISH

Planning events can be overwhelming—especially when you already do so much to keep your ministry running! But whether you've planned hundreds of events or this is your very first one, we want to help your next event go a lot more smoothly. We'll give you some step-by-step guidance through these four important phases of event planning:

- **THE IDEA**
- **THE LOGISTICS**
- **THE BIG DAY**
- **THE NEXT DAY**

We may not be able to do all your event planning for you, but this resource will hopefully give you a nice head start.

THE IDEA

Every great event starts with a great idea. Whether an event is meant to help people grow spiritually, develop deeper relationships, or have fun, the best events are clear about what they are and who they're for. So, as you and your team work to develop your event ideas, here's what you'll want to think about, plan, and do.

START WITH A GOAL

Before you begin to plan any event, **it's essential you can communicate what the event is trying to accomplish.** This might sound obvious, but it's easy to miss this step! When you clarify the goal of your event at the outset, you can use that goal as a filter to help you make decisions about the structure and features of the event. So is the goal of your event to ...

- **GROW SPIRITUALLY?**
- **HAVE SOME FUN?**
- **HELP SMALL GROUPS CONNECT?**
- **ATTRACT NEW STUDENTS?**
- **SERVE OTHERS?**

A strategically planned event can meet each of these goals, but if you try to achieve too many goals in one event, you probably won't be able to accomplish any of them very well. So, for each event you plan, get focused by clarifying just one or two goals you want to achieve.

THEME

Once your goal is clarified, it's time to start thinking of a memorable event theme! You'll want a theme that's broad enough to build a whole event around but not so broad that it's generic and boring. Here are a few ways to think about it.

- **START WITH AN ACTIVITY.** Try taking an activity everyone knows, but then level it up!
- **START WITH A HOLIDAY.** Holidays like Christmas, Easter, and New Year's are easy excuses to get teenagers together for an event or party. Just remember some holidays will lend themselves more toward fun, while others lend themselves more toward discipleship.
- **START WITH A WORD.** This works well when your goal for an event is to help teenagers grow spiritually. You can build whole sermons, object lessons, games, and activities around the right words like "focus," "move," "go," or "lift."
- **START WITH AN OPPORTUNITY.** Some events might be inspired by an opportunity to serve in your community or a need that arises in your church. If your local food pantry needs a bunch of PB&J, try a Peanut Butter Jam Slam. Or if all the schools in your district are doing prom on the same weekend, plan a prom after-party!

When trying to create a memorable theme for your next event, remember there are plenty of different starting points. But what really matters is that your theme is clear and memorable, and it helps support the ultimate goal of your event—and not undermine it.

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ENVIRONMENT

To make the theme of an event come to life, think about all the elements you can add to create a physical environment that complements your event goal and theme. What does your environment look like? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? While every event requires different kinds of environment details, some of the things you'll want to think about are ...

- **BRANDING:** What's the title of your event? What's the color scheme? What fonts are you planning to use?
- **SCREENS:** What graphics and videos will be on display throughout the event?
- **SIGNAGE:** How can you decorate by turning your event branding into printed materials like welcome banners and signage for important areas?
- **STAGE:** How will the stage look? For some events, it can be as simple as throwing the event graphics on a screen, while other events might benefit from something more involved. But if your event isn't focused on what's happening on stage, don't spend too much time or energy here. Focus instead on the decor of your room.
- **MUSIC:** What will your event sound like? High-energy music is great for building excitement but is not the best for reflection or discussion. Choose music that fits the mood you're aiming for.
- **TABLES:** If you need tables for registration or eating, what will they look like? This might be a great time to invest in a set of black fabric tablecloths. They're versatile and reusable, and they hide pizza stains really well!
- **DECOR:** Besides the stage, how can you decorate your room or building to enhance your environment? Not every event needs a lot of decor, but adding some color-coordinated balloons, themed streamers, backdrops, or props may be helpful.
- **LIGHTS:** How can lighting help you create the kind of environment you're intending? On-stage lights can be color-coordinated to match your event branding, but what about other lights in the room? Do they need to be bright for games and conversation? Dim for worship and reflection? It all depends on your event idea and goal!
- **PHOTO BOOTH:** How can you help teenagers remember the event with an on-theme photo booth? With a themed backdrop, some good lighting, and maybe a few on-theme props, you have everything you need for a little photo op.

ACTIVITIES

Whether it's games, contests, individual activities, or group activities, what should actually be happening at this event? Well, that depends on your event! But here are a few categories you might want to think about ...

- **SELF-SERVE GAMES** that don't require an adult to explain the rules or facilitate (although you still want someone nearby for safety), like four square, air hockey, board games, or giant Jenga.
- **STATION GAMES** like the kind you might find at a carnival. Think extreme tic-tac-toe for a larger-than-life board game night, a pizza-themed relay race, or a Christmas-themed hole-in-one miniature golf game.
- **ALL-PLAY GAMES** that get the entire room involved at once, like a Rock Paper Scissors tournament or kickball with an oversized beach ball. These types of games can work great as either the focal point of an event or just one component of an event—but make sure you always have other options (like self-serve or station games) for teenagers who don't love organized games.
- **UPFRONT GAMES** are great for when your event involves upfront programming! But if these games only involve a handful of teenagers, make sure they're just as fun to watch as they are to play. For ideas, check out the free Grow Games & Icebreakers app!
- **COMPETITIONS & TOURNAMENTS** can span the entire event or make up a single part of it. Be sure you think through your scoring system well in advance and plan to have an award ceremony where winners are announced and rewarded!
- **CREATIVITY STATIONS** where they can create something, like art, music, food, or an on-theme craft like cookie decorating, mural painting, gift-making, or writing.
- **QUIET AREAS** for teenagers to go if they want to have a conversation or are feeling overstimulated by the event activities. Don't skip this!

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GIVEAWAYS & PRIZES

Whether you need a fun little giveaway for everyone at the event, prizes for your game winners, or a trophy for your top-scoring team, here are a few giveaway ideas you can use for any event ...

- **TROPHIES** work great, even if they're just random objects spray-painted gold.
- **GIFT CARDS** for food, local activities, music, movies, or whatever else your teenagers would enjoy!
- **DONATED PRIZES** from people in your church or local businesses.
- **SWAG** T-shirts! Mugs! Bags! Stickers! Print them with your ministry or event name and hand them out!
- **PARTY FAVORS** like on-theme stickers, buttons, fidget toys, candy and snacks.

FOOD

If you've planned an event before, you probably already have some ideas of what kind of food, snacks, and drinks you like to serve. But if you need some general ideas for how to provide food for an event, here are some of our favorite ways to think about feeding a crowd.

Whether you're providing food for free, for a small price, or both, you'll want to have a few things on your menu.

- **MAINS:** Think pizza, sandwiches, tacos, pasta, or whatever you'd like. Make sure you're considering food allergies and aversions, especially if your main dish is the item you'll be providing to everyone.
- **SNACKS:** Snacks are a great way to add variety and themed foods into the mix! You might choose concession-style snacks like pretzels and cheese or nachos for a sports-themed event. Or, for a bowling-themed event, all your snacks could come in "gutters," like a super long trough of ice cream or nachos.
- **DRINKS:** Besides the standard drinks like water and soda, think about some extra on-theme drinks you could add to your events. Maybe you want to set up a hot chocolate toppings bar for your Christmas party, a juice bar for a breakfast event, or a customizable soda bar where you mix club soda with different colors and flavors of syrup.

THE LOGISTICS

DATE & TIME

Always try to schedule your events six months in advance. Remember, families and volunteers have jobs and other responsibilities and need plenty of time to prepare. To choose the best dates for your event, remember to think about major local events, holidays, school activities, and conflicts with your church calendar.

The duration of your events is important too! Here are a few ways to think about your time constraints ...

- **BASIC EVENT:** 3 hours
- **ALL-NIGHTER:** 8–12 hours
- **WEEKEND CAMP, TRIP, OR RETREAT:** Friday night to Sunday morning
- **SUMMER CAMP OR MISSION EXPERIENCE:** 5–7 days

LOCATION

Most of your events will probably occur on your church property, but sometimes, there are reasons to switch up your event location! Here are a few types of locations you might want to consider based on your event concept and goals.

- **CHURCH:** Your church is usually going to be the best (and most free!) place to host an event. It's cost-effective, allows you to have the most control over your venue, and introduces visitors to your space.
- **RENTED FACILITY:** You may need to rent space at an off-site facility for some events (or for a portion of an event). Roller rinks, bowling alleys, laser tag facilities, trampoline parks, and arcades are all great locations for an event using specialized equipment or facilities you can't replicate at church. Just remember to reserve your space in advance!
- **COMMUNITY:** For events where your goal is community engagement, you probably want to be out in the community where people can find you, like a public park or other community-centric location.

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- **CAMP OR RETREAT CENTER:** For do-it-yourself weekend retreats, summer camps, winter camps, or leadership retreats, a specialized camp or retreat center is often your best option! These facilities usually come with lodging, meeting space, kitchens, dining space, and recreational activities already prepared for you and your group.
- **HOST HOMES:** Whether it's for a weekend retreat, a pool party, or a volunteer retreat, who are the people in your church who are willing to let you use their home for a special event? Whoever they are, make sure they've received background checks and you have safety protocols and liability waivers in place!
- **HOTELS OR RENTAL HOMES:** Once in a while, a hotel or rental home might be necessary for a trip, retreat, or camp. They're not always the most economical option, so this option is best reserved for a small group of teenagers or volunteers.

REGISTRATION

Whenever possible, handle your event registrations online! Online forms will save all registrations and allow you to make certain fields mandatory so there's no confusion about missing information, hard-to-read handwriting, or lost paperwork. Whether it's Google Forms, Typeform, WuFoo, or your church's go-to form builder, an online solution will simplify your registration more than pen and paper.

On your form, don't forget to collect important forms like ...

- **Liability & Consent Forms**
- **Insurance Forms**
- **Photo Release Form**

And be sure to collect all the important information about each student, like ...

- **Name**
- **Birth Date**
- **Grade**
- **School**
- **T-Shirt Size**
- **Allergies and Medical Information**
- **Parent or Guardian Name(s)**
- **Parent or Guardian Contact Information**

TRANSPORTATION

Most of your events will probably take place on your church property, so transportation isn't always something you'll need to consider. But when transportation is an issue, here are a few options to consider based on your event concept and goals.

- **PARENTS & VOLUNTEERS:** If your group is small enough, ask volunteers and parents to help drive teenagers to your designated venue. This may take some planning in advance, but offering to pay for their gas is still cheaper than renting a vehicle. Just make sure you've followed all of your church's required protocols for ensuring the safety of your teenagers and acquiring consent from their parents.
- **VANS:** Renting 12-passenger or 15-passenger van (or using your church van, if you have one) is a great solution for fewer than 50 teenagers. The positives? Your group will have the opportunity to make memories together while you drive. The negatives? There are additional costs for insurance, rental fees, and the transportation of your supplies.
- **BUSES:** A charter bus will likely be your most expensive option, but it may be your best option for groups of more than 50 teenagers. A local school bus will likely be much cheaper if you can find one available to rent. Contracting a school bus from a local school district is safer and more cost-effective.
- **FLIGHTS:** For long-distance trips like conferences, camps, or mission experiences, a flight might be your best choice. If so, you'll want to work with a person or agency specializing in group travel to ensure you and your teenagers have everything you need.

MARKETING

Not every event needs an elaborate marketing campaign, but some do! Whether your event is small-scale and low-stakes or the most important event of the year, here are a few channels you should consider using to get the word out about your event ...

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- **WEEKLY SERVICES:** Think of ways to promote your event in your youth and adult services. Get some influential teenagers in your ministry to be a part of talking it up to other teenagers or posting about it on social media. By promoting an event in your adult services, you'll spread the word to parents and get your church excited about the event, which will come in handy if you need drivers, donations, scholarships, or volunteers.
- **PRINT:** Print flyers or small business cards and place them throughout your church. Encourage teenagers to take a stack to invite their friends, but go above and beyond to make people feel wanted. So much can be achieved by handing a student a flyer and saying, "I want you there. Will you come?"
- **VIDEO:** Have a hype video to show during service and on social media leading up to the event. You can create a high-quality video for under $50 with services like Upwork or Fiverr. Or ask a celebrity to create an invitation with Cameo!
- **SOCIAL MEDIA:** Printed marketing materials can get pricey, so balance your marketing budget with free social media advertising. Select a unique hashtag, create some graphics, tap on a few of your most influential teenagers or volunteers for help, and organize a social media marketing campaign.
- **INCENTIVES:** To encourage early sign-ups and offer incentives to those who commit to early deadlines. You might offer a $10 discount for those who sign up early, then raise the price by $10 after your deadline. If your budget doesn't allow to offer pricing advantages for deadlines, then offer free or affordable bonuses to early sign-ups, like ...
  - Free pizza.
  - A special branded item or unique t-shirt.
  - First dibs on activities or experiences.

VOLUNTEERS

Every event has a slightly different list of needs and requirements from volunteers, but there are a lot of things every event has in common. To get you started, consider which of the following categories of volunteers you'll need at your event ...

- **ACTIVITY LEADERS:** Lead games or activities. This might include explaining the rules, keeping track of points scored, refereeing, and making sure everyone is having fun and included.
- **BAND:** Lead everyone in live worship music, just-for-fun music, or both.
- **CLEAN-UP:** Help clean up, tear down, and organize supplies after the event ends.
- **DRIVERS:** Transport event attendees to and from the event or activity locations.
- **FLOATERS:** Be available throughout the event to fill in for other volunteers, join teams that are short-handed, or help solve problems as they arise.
- **FOLLOW-UP:** After the event is over, follow up with new visitors, thank volunteers who were present, and connect with anyone who needs additional follow-up.
- **FOOD & DRINK:** Set up, prepare, serve, and clean up the food and drinks before, during, and after the event.
- **NURSE:** Keep track of attendee's medical conditions and medications. If needed, be available to give first aid and complete accident reports.
- **PHOTOGRAPHER & VIDEOGRAPHER:** Take and edit photos and videos of the event that can be shared through social media, emails, or the church website.
- **PROMOTERS:** Before the event, help spread the word by participating in special marketing efforts or handing out flyers and posters in the community.
- **REGISTRATION:** Check people in as they arrive, collect money and forms, and give instructions.
- **SECURITY:** Supervise to make sure everyone stays safe throughout the event.
- **SET-UP:** Help set up, decorate, shop, and organize supplies before the event begins.
- **SMALL GROUP LEADERS:** Lead discussion groups and spend time with the members of their small groups.
- **TECH:** Coordinate graphics, videos, lights, and sound throughout the event.
- **UPFRONT HOST:** Make announcements, give instructions, host segments, and provide entertainment for all attendees throughout the event.

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Once the basics are covered, you can add more specialized volunteer roles for each event if needed.

THE BIG DAY

SET UP & CLEAN UP

While most of your shopping and prepping for the event should happen well in advance, there are always some last-minute preparations to do on the day of your event. So on the morning of your event, do a final run-through of all your logistics.

- **Do you have all your supplies?**
- **What still needs to be set up?**
- **Are all your key volunteers still coming?**
- **What's the schedule of the day?**
- **How long will it take to clean up afterward?**

Make sure all your set-up is finished at least 90 minutes before your event begins and that everyone involved with clean-up knows how much time and effort you expect from them when the event is over.

TEAM MEETING

An hour before your event begins (and after all your set-up is complete), get your volunteers together for a quick team meeting. When everyone is together, make sure you review a few logistics together ...

- **The schedule.**
- **Everyone's roles.**
- **Safety precautions.**
- **Activity rules and instructions.**

Then remind everyone of a few more really important things, like how thankful you are for them, what you hope this event will achieve, and how much they matter to the teenagers and families you'll impact.

SAFETY

During the event, the safety of everyone in attendance is ultimately your responsibility, so here are a few questions you'll want to make sure you can answer at all times during the event.

- **What are the rules and safety advisories for each activity?**
- **Who is responsible for security?**
- **What do you do if alcohol, drugs, weapons, or other hazardous items are found?**
- **What do you do in a medical emergency?**
- **Have all potential allergens either been removed or clearly marked?**
- **Where can you find everyone's medical information and emergency contacts?**
- **If applicable, where can someone's medication and medication instructions be found?**
- **What forms and procedures are required in the event of an injury?**
- **What do you do in the event of a fire or other types of emergencies?**

Preparing for the unexpected isn't the most fun part of overseeing an event, but it's absolutely essential. Always plan ahead when it comes to safety so there is no confusion or delay about what to do in the event of an emergency.

THE NEXT DAY

FOLLOW-UP

After your event, who needs to be communicated with?

- **Did any new students show up? If so, how are you following up with them?**
- **Did any volunteers put in extra effort, help with a complicated situation, or have a tough night? If so, how are you following up with them?**
- **Were there any incidents, injuries, or concerns during the event? If so, how are you following up with the people involved?**
- **Did anything get damaged during the event? If so, which other ministries or department leaders do you need to follow up with?**

The sooner you can follow up with the people impacted by your event, the better!

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CELEBRATION

After an event, it's easy to let the excitement fade away if you don't have a plan to celebrate all that happened and was accomplished. So before you move on, don't forget to celebrate through text messages, social media, emails, and staff meetings ...

- **What God did in teenagers' lives.**
- **Photos and videos from the event.**
- **Encouraging stories and words from volunteers, teenagers, or families.**
- **Volunteers who went above and beyond.**
- **How your goals for this event were accomplished.**

Celebrating your events helps everyone involved see the vision of why events really matter!

REVIEW

After the event, you may want to schedule an event debrief with your staff or volunteer team. You may even want to give teenagers and parents a survey about what they liked or didn't like about the event. However you choose to do it, it's essential you review and evaluate your event as soon as possible to figure out how you can do better next time. You might ask questions like ...

- **What was our event goal? In what ways did we achieve that goal? How could we have done better?**
- **In each of the following areas, what did we do well, and what could we improve?**
  - Theme
  - Environment
  - Food
  - Activities
  - Giveaways & Prizes
  - Date & Time
  - Location
  - Registration
  - Transportation
  - Marketing
  - Volunteers
  - Safety
  - Follow-Up
  - Celebration
- **What did teenagers say about the event? What did their parents say?**
- **What did volunteers say about the event? What did other ministry leaders say?**

Evaluating an event after it's over might seem tedious, but it's absolutely essential. Only with an open, honest, and objective review can you hope to make your events better and more strategic over time!

WHEW! That was a lot of information, we know. But you did it! You made it all the way to the end. Now you just need to go plan that event of yours. And hey, let us know how it goes! (And yes, you are welcome to do a bit of light bragging about how awesome it was.)

Oh, and last thing. If you're looking for even more resources to help you with your events, you might want to check out Grow Students Curriculum. In every volume of Grow Students, you'll get a ton of brand new ready-to-go event guides, suggested themes, graphics and videos, event-specific recommendations for location, registration, marketing, and tons more. And they all align with the strategy and structure you just learned in this post!



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