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C H A P T E R 1



First things first!

Don't you feel sorry for the poor guy in the previous story? He had devoted two years of his life to building up a youth group yet he saw little or no fruit. While there was a great boost in numbers, he saw very few kids turn to Christ and follow him long term. Ultimately, there was nowhere near the impact for the Kingdom of God that he had hoped.

Yet, take heart, he learned his lesson and won't make the same mistake again! The lesson for us all is that what we do in our weekly youth meetings is of the utmost importance. We must be clear about what we are trying to achieve and how we are going to do it.

I am going to assume that your aim in youth ministry is to produce disciples of Christ; disciples who will last the distance. These young men and women will be the backbone of a youth ministry that will be truly effective in changing this world for Jesus. I am also going to assume that you intend to run weekly youth group meetings that will achieve that goal.

The formula is simple – concentrate primarily on running a group that is committed to being Christian. As the group prays and reads the Bible together it will encourage the members to live lives that reflect Jesus to the outside world.

The goal is to produce strong Christian young people who will reach out to their friends, neighbours, family and workmates. They will do this naturally as they live godly lives. In addition, run targeted evangelistic events designed to clearly present Christ to the outsider.

Make sure that the groups 'flow', that is, endeavour to keep the young people you have built up and reached by running groups that are age appropriate. As the kids grow up, move them into a group designed for that stage of their lives. The obvious example of this is having a junior youth group ready to take the kids who are moving up from Sunday school. You need to plug the gaps that can cause you to lose kids.

I call this way of thinking 'Build, Reach and Flow' (see *Changing the World*, chapter 5, p32.)

This book is designed to go a bit deeper than *Changing the World* when it comes to the actual 'how to' of running a weekly youth gathering. Hopefully, you will find ideas that will be Christian, helpful for building good relationships within the group, and are a lot of fun. We can't promise miracles (that is up to God) nor will we make empty promises based on programming tricks or gimmickry. All the ideas have been tried and tested by groups in different contexts in many parts of the world.

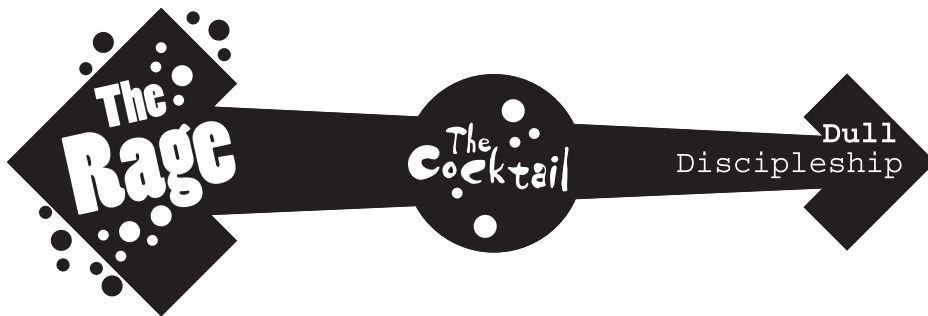
Traps for youth leaders

If you wish to set up and run a weekly youth program that will produce real long-term results, there are a number of traps to avoid. Let's examine a few common mistakes youth leaders often make.

Big Mistake #1: The False Spectrum

Many of us see youth ministry as a wide spectrum. At one end is the 'Rage'. The Rage is a program of entertainment and attraction. It contains a high proportion of games, and activities designed to be fun with little or no meaningful content. A typical evening might be an hour or so of games and activities, a short talk (maybe some discussion groups) and then another game or two. The aim is to have a variety of activities and entertainment, with a small amount of Christian input. This style of program is very common, very tiring and in most cases, has a low success rate.

At the other end of the spectrum is 'Full-on Bible Study & Discipleship'. The leaders see youth group as a place of serious commitment to Christ. The evening (or afternoon) meetings are built around solid Bible study and prayer. They hope to cut through the obvious shallowness of the Rage and produce real followers of Jesus. However, they find that the whole thing is a bit heavy. The group doesn't attract as many nonChristians as the Rage and soon becomes quite dreary. Sure, some kids are being well disciplined, but there must be a way of producing disciples without putting them to sleep! (See the ballad of Bruce and Neil in *Changing the World through effective youth ministry*.)



The majority of us run a program somewhere in the middle of the spectrum. (I call this 'the cocktail' or the 'half-half'). This is where we try to run a program containing the good elements of the activities-based Rage program. We hope the group will be fun and exciting with new people coming every week. Yet, we also want a group with the real devotion to Christ that is found in the full-on Bible study program. Therefore, we run 45 minutes to an hour of games and fast paced activities, then have a short Bible talk, discussion groups, a bite to eat and everyone goes home.

There is a common flaw in each of these models. We try to make our programs fun and often the fun is not Christian. We then have a Christian segment, which isn't fun. We believe it is an either/or situation. The program can be entertaining and attractive (the fun), or there is the Christian time (the truth). There is a false dichotomy or split in our programs between having fun and doing the Christian things we feel we must do. We need to throw this whole idea of youth ministry out of the window. Get rid of any idea that a Christian youth gathering cannot be both Christian and fun. We must have fun doing Christian things (like meeting together, encouraging each other, prayer, and studying the Bible).



Big Mistake #2: Building with straw (Choko programming)

In Australia we have a plant called the choko. Choko's are great. While the fruit has no flavour of its own, they are used to fill up whatever is missing in certain food dishes. For instance, if you are making pie and you don't have enough apples, grab a choko and throw it in. It takes on the flavour of the apples already there, and fills out the pie.

While the choko is a great food additive, it is not as good as the real fruit. It is only an additive. You never make a 'choko pie.' When it comes to youth ministry, we must be careful that we don't fill our programs with choko! The temptation for many youth leaders is to fill the program with contents that serve no real purpose. Some things that we do can actually work against us rather than for us.

In the book of 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul warns us that we must be careful how we build in our ministry. I'll remind you of his words.

By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

The message is clear, build with good materials (gold, silver and costly stones). Avoid building with anything that will not stand on the Day of Judgment. With this in view, we must be careful that we don't fill our programs with straw! Our weekly meetings or fellowship nights must not contain items that only fill in time, or burn up some energy.

If this is the case, either change your program or shorten the length of your meeting. Certain games or high energy activities often fall into this trap. We justify them by claiming that they promote getting to know each other, good mixing or team building. In reality, they are usually nothing more than straw. They serve no purpose other than filling in time. Many of us shrug our shoulders and say, 'How else are we going to provide young people with a good time and fill up two hours at the same time?'

Quite often we don't know how to run 'Christian' programming that is truly fun and attractive. We sweat through giving a short talk from the Bible, sometimes bribing the kids along the way, 'If you sit still and listen for five minutes then we'll play another game'. We try to have a group prayer time but often end up taking silly requests and when it's time to pray all we hear is an eerie silence or the occasional cough. Many of us would never dare to sing or have a time of praise and worship. You'd be better off trying to control a herd of wildebeests barehanded. Some leaders find that their groups pray and study the Bible because it is important, but it certainly isn't the highlight of the evening. We must learn how to correct this.

Big Mistake # 3: No committed core or community

Some of us have run groups built on a shifting base of sand. This sand is our desperate hope for commitment from the members of our youth group. Our great desire is for the young people in the youth group to become committed to Christ and to the group as a community. We hope that our group will grow as new people come, hear about Christ and stay. A few groups are doing this quite successfully. The majority are on a constant treadmill of disappointment as their numbers are constantly shifting. Furthermore, we rarely attract as many nonChristians as we would like. Those we do attract are often rowdy and come to the group with mixed motives (a great social night and to meet the opposite sex). We need to learn how to develop groups that are driven by a committed core of Christian young people whose top priority is following Christ.

Furthermore, much of our programming actually hinders rather than fosters the development of good relationships. Think about your group. Do the kids ring each other up during the week to say hello? Do they ring some one who has not showed up for a few weeks? How about the humour in the group? Do they laugh with each other or at each other? When new people come, does the warmth of the relationships between group members immediately strike them? Or, is there a large amount of complaining within the group? Are there cliques that exclude other members of the youth group (or newcomers)? The Bible couldn't be clearer about the fact that our groups need to be places of kindness, selflessness and love. Quite often the fact that our programs are designed to entertain promotes something contrary to what should be there. We aim for love and joy but we program mindless activities and entertainment. We need to focus on producing a group that reflects Christian love, where good relationships are fostered and developed week by week.

Fixing the problem!

Some of the above problems are deep and it would be silly to suggest that there are easy solutions. However, there are ways of making our programs more effective. We need to develop weekly youth gatherings that promote three things:

- 1. Good solid Christian content.**
- 2. Loving Christian relationships within the group.**
- 3. Enjoyment in being Christian!**

It is important to realise that we are not giving you a magic formula that will automatically transform your group. The ideas in the following pages will work only if the leaders are willing to serve the kids and be committed to running a group that is thoroughly Christian and enjoyable at the same time. Be prepared to persevere for several weeks or even months to see these new ideas for your weekly gathering take root and produce fruit. It took many months of hard work in my own youth group before we saw any fruit at all.

How this book will work

We will give you some practical tools to help you develop a youth gathering/meeting that is Christian, group building and enjoyable. We will try to provide segments and programming content that will assist you to be effective in building the Kingdom of God in your area.

We will discuss how to put it all together to form an easy to run, well structured time for your group.

We will focus on how to bring these elements into your weekly meeting and introduce change into your program.

Please note that the items in the following chapters occur in the order that they can appear in your weekly program (ie a Spotlight followed by a Bible game etc.)

There is a resource section in the back with questions, memory verses and other goodies to help you along.

Read on!