

Let's Chat Show Notes

OCTOBER 2021 Retreats & Events

Show Opening (JM)

Welcome to Let's Chat, an ongoing conversation with youth workers and leaders about student ministry and whatever else we end up talking about. Thanks for joining us! Today's episode will focus on Events and Retreats and, as part of our discussion, we're going to be talking about what a successful event or retreat looks like, what pieces are essential to include, what mistakes to avoid, and how to follow up after a great event or retreat.

INTRODUCTIONS:

I'm your host, J.M. McGinnis and today I'm thrilled to be joined by:

Kelly McConnaughey - Family Pastor at Life Community Church in Kirkland, Washington with experience in both large and small churches
(Say hello or whatever is natural)

Blair Spindle - Long-time youth pastor, currently Campus Pastor at Southern Nazarene University and Field Youth Coordinator for the Southcentral Field and author of "(THIS MONTH'S BLOG ARTICLE)"

Justin Pickard - Youth Coordinator for USA/ Canada at the Global Ministry Center

Episode Preview (Host)

In this episode we're going to be asking. . .

- o What makes a successful event? What are the elements, people, places, popcorn, pyrotechnics that help make it successful? What are the mistakes to avoid - mistakes we have made ourselves? How do we follow up after an event to maximize the impact?
 - Events and retreats are a key part of the life of a student ministry because there's something about getting out of our normal daily routine that can cause us to become more aware of things we had previously been distracted or distracting ourselves from - specifically what God might want to say to us. For this environment to become reality, there are a lot of things to think about as we prepare for the event:
 - Themes, schedule, bands, speakers, transportation, food, activities, and so on.
 - Each event is unique - from a Fall Retreat to a Camp or Lock-In kind of event, or in some cases a weeklong gathering of thousands of students from all over the world with multiple major speakers and bands in huge arenas...each event is a little different and brings its own challenges and victories but there are some key

elements that are the same in most cases. But before we get into each individual ingredient, let's start big picture:

Host's Outline / Questions

- So, what makes a successful event? (JUSTIN)
 - How do we decide whether or not an event is, in fact, successful?
 - How do we decide to repeat or retool or remove an event?
- What are some practices BEFORE an event? (BLAIR)
 - What are some things we should be thinking about and doing?
 - 6 months out? 3 months out? 60 days out? 30 days out? Week of?
- What are some things happening DURING a successful event? (KELLY)
 - Scheduled and Unscheduled
 - What does "free time" look like?
 - What kinds of activities work well?
- What about leaders? (JUSTIN)
 - What roles are important to fill on a retreat or at an event?
 - Why is it important to have leaders there?
- Talk to us about your best practices when it comes to retreats. (BLAIR)
 - What are some things that are top priority for you? purpose, excellence, opportunity for relationship and moments, proclamation, sabbath
 - What are some things that you make sure DON'T happen? divisions, other agendas, unsafe practices, too much free time, snake handling
 - Tell us about some of the resources you've used at camps or retreats. YS, DYM, other youth pastors (networks)
- If you were to give advice to yourself just before the first retreat or event you put together, what would it be? (KELLY)

JUSTIN'S NOTES:

The ultimate starting point and evaluative key has to be purpose. The big why? What is the key purpose/focus? Is it spiritual formation, discipleship, evangelism, worship, community building, fun – some combo. By the way it is totally appropriate to have an event just for fun. We can't only live there, but in youth min we should have a theology of fun/play (if we only knew someone who could expand on that – Blair "Dodgeball Theology"). I suggest focusing on just a couple key points of purpose, rather than trying to cram every good purpose into every event.

With NYC we start with mission and message. Next consider your audience. How to best take the purpose, the mission and message, to your specific audience in a way that will relate, engage, challenge.

Barometers of event success?

Metrics – the good old number, sometimes this gets overplayed or underplayed. Things like attendance (students vote with their feet), budget (make/lose money – side note: it's not a crime to make money on an event periodically if you are offering a worthwhile event that casts a wide net for involvement/growth and you are not building your ministry on the backs of students/events. In fact it can be a blessing for your group if you run a couple of events so well each year that they help fund other ministry opportunities.), and response (response, altar call, raised hands, etc)

Mission – did the event meet our purpose(s)?

Momentum – this one is hard to quantify, but it's good to reflect on the energy level our events and retreats bring to our students and ministry. There is the kind of hard work that makes us tired and worn and the kind that invigorates and inspires. Does the event feel like a hamster wheel where we run real hard, but get nowhere, does the event bring the group together and increase overall group momentum, or does it just let the air out of the balloon?

Events/retreats should create memories, milestones, individual and collective stories that can be shared around transformation, inspiration, challenge, growth, fun. If none of these describe the event it may be time to kill it.

Creating memories (practical) Put extra stock in the bookends of events (beginnings – capture attention/engage and endings/launch are critical). I like to think “come and go” or “gather and launch”. Make sure to give at least a little time to thinking about “wow factor”. You don't have to spend a lot of money, but how can you create a unique memory. And solidify the memories so they are easy for students to talk about and share when they leave (pictures, images, swag, momentos, letters, videos, stories).

Leonard Sweet talks about EPIC preaching, but I think it is a critical framework for life changing events/retreats...

Experiential
Participatory
Image Rich
Connective

What about leaders? (JUSTIN)

What roles are important to fill on a retreat or at an event?

Why is it important to have leaders there?

I tend to think that planning and preparing for big events/retreats is an event in itself. So I love to work with other leaders/team (students and adults) to dream, plan, and execute. Creates ownership and fun even though it can be harder, more time consuming, and you have to hold loosely to your own ideas.

PLAY, PRAY, PLAN – a good model even for the event/retreat planning team
Different leaders (students and adults) connect with different students and bring different gifts to the process and planning.

Making memories is catalytic to intergenerational relationships and building community.

There is only so much one can learn about leadership by reading, studying, watching.

The best leadership training is in active participation and actually leading.

It may seem like extroverts will fit event/retreat roles, but don't miss out on the gifts like creativity, administration, small group relationship building. And radical hospitality cannot be minimized with events/retreats.

BLAIR'S NOTES: One thing I've been noticing is too many events are planned without a real understanding of "purpose." I still think this is crucial for the planning process. I like to lead with purpose with my teams as we start planning. For some events, that planning needs to start taking place about 6 months out. For recurring events, planning usually starts, well, during the event and in the days immediately after. I think youth pastors would strengthen their relationship with parents and pastors by having more long term calendars available. But, 6 months is a good time to really start planning. Maybe even a good time to send an initial "save the date" card out or post on social media. Everyone should know the details 3 months in advance. The rest of the time should be spent just dealing with the details.

Retreats: Creating Memorable Moments is a top priority for me. Regardless of our specific purposes, in almost every event I planned, I tried to create moments (Kairos) for students and adults. Of course, having a printed agenda, being ready at all levels is important.

By 3 months the event should be mostly planned and communications sent. Of course adding digital access to media/promotion materials is crucial. etc . . .

Being able to adjust on the fly is crucial as the event draws closer. We've all gotten better at this in the Covid era. Downsides to this?

KELLY'S NOTES:

Planned: Bonding time, spiritual time, and time to hear from the Holy Spirit. And just random fun to create positive memories. Youth groups are normally made up of teens with a variety of interests and introverts/extraverts so it's important to find things that can reach a variety of students. Activities that help teens feel comfortable if they don't want to stand out and would rather blend in (card games, art projects, bracelets, etc). Upfront and active games for the teens who do want to have the attention and need to get energy out. Time to relax and recharge for the introverts. By creating these spaces we help teens feel understood and acknowledged which helps open the door for them to become more ready for the spiritual conversations.

Unplanned/Free Time: Thinking about free-time or the Planned vs unplanned as "organized chaos." Even if it is unplanned time "or free-time" there is still some organization that goes into it that allows for somewhat structured chaos. Chaos can then be a positive experience instead of a negative. Part of having a successful free time is prepping your leaders for setting the tone for the time. Thinking through the activities that are available during free-time and spreading the leaders throughout those different areas to build connections and keep watch. (The purpose is relationship, not just supervision.) The leader's goal should be to help bring teens into the

fold during free-time. Keep an eye out for kids that might be on the outside and help find ways to connect them in.

Don't begin retreat with free-time. Have activities as soon as you get there to start if off with excitement.

Whether it is a retreat or an event, know the venue and your students. If there is snow on a retreat students will spend more time with free-time. If there isn't, you might want to schedule more group games, art projects, things your teens are interested in that helps them use their passion/interests, etc. Sometimes its getting creative with these.

Planning the event schedule, think of every moment as a way to build relationships. Activities and free-time should encourage relationships. When it comes to building relationships, you can get close to a years worth of youth ministry work accomplished within a weekend retreat.

What advice before the first event or retreat? Know your group. If they've done this event or retreat before, learning what traditions they already have and what their expectations are (both positive and negative) from past experiences can help be your guide. Doesn't mean you need to do those things, but you do need to be prepared for what the teens are already thinking, feeling, and remembering in order to help move things forward in a successful way. Sometimes if you are wanting to take things in a completely new direction it might mean having a complete venue change for your retreat or event in order to create an openness for teens to try new things and/or to go deeper. Things that might work amazing for one group, doesn't always work for another. When talking about retreats specifically we've done them a variety of ways depending on what the vibe of the group we were leading was like.

NEXT STEPS:

What are some resources we could point our listeners to who'd like to know more about PLANNING RETREATS AND EVENTS?

- www.nyiconnect.com - Blair's blog post

SUMMARY:

Host summarizes the discussion in a few sentences and then transitions into the show closing.

SHOW CLOSING:

Thanks for joining us on Let's Chat!

- FEATURE
 - For more on PLANNING EVENTS & RETREATS check out NYICONNECT.COM for blog posts and more.
 - AND, if you'd like to download the resources we talked about Then visit the show notes for this episode at NYICONNECT.COM
- And if you enjoyed today's episode, we'd love for you to . . .

- ASK:
 - Comment on the podcast! It lets us know who is listening out there and gives us the opportunity to connect and get feedback from you!
 - If you have a friend who came to mind as you were listening to this episode who needs to hear this conversation, you can share the link with them or on your social media.
- Until next time, thanks for listening!