

the volunteer's

BACK POCKET GUIDE TO

events & retreats

NECESSITIES FOR VOLUNTEER LEADERS

BY JOHNNY SCOTT



The Volunteer's Back Pocket Guide to Youth Events and Retreats
Necessities for Volunteer Leaders

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INTRODUCTION

(Supplies? Check. Energy drinks? Check. Teenagers? Check. WAIT! Read this book first!)

Events, camps, retreats, and similar experiences seem so intertwined to youth ministry culture that we can't imagine working with teenagers and not announcing some upcoming activity. It's what we do constantly: Teach the lesson and then make the announcements! "Don't forget, we are visiting the old folks' home Saturday—and turn in your registration for camp!" These tools have become catalytic platforms to starting relationships with teenagers and inviting them into relationship with Jesus. However, it's not the events on a youth ministry calendar that will shape and define the culture of a group as much as it is the leaders that go on them with the students!

This book is a dynamic collection of thoughts about different kinds of events you may find yourself on: the weekend retreat, the video game marathon, the amusement park road trip, the summer camp, or the specially themed outreach your group eagerly anticipates. You'll find specific tools and information that will aid you in each of these situations. Some of the material may be pointed toward one kind of event while other general principles can be applied to many of the activities common to youth ministries.

If you are reading this book because you have an upcoming event where you have the chance to work with teenagers, then I am so excited for you. What a privilege. In fact, it's also part of God's desire for us as Christians, parents, or anyone else entrusted to spend time with teenagers. Here's what Psalm 78:4 says: *We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell*

the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.

Anytime you're with teenagers, it's a chance to make a significant investment in their lives. You are building bridges for conversations that are to come. Just as significantly, you are modeling a faith that will lead to breakthroughs in their lives you may never even know about. It is my hope that your time reflecting over these thoughts on interacting with teenagers during retreats and events will equip you to better maximize your impact.

Important! Before you hang with students for any event or even before you read the rest of this book, will you agree to prayerfully consider the mysterious experience of teenagers developing their faith in conjunction with caring adults outside their normal routine? You need to believe in the powerful way God works outside the lines. Think back to the events and special occasions you participated in when you were younger. Did you count down the days to a spring break celebration? Did retreats or camps with leaders and friends from your church play a role in your decision to follow Christ—or to take your faith journey seriously? Is that why you are willing to pitch in and give back now? Or perhaps your story was quite different: You didn't have the opportunity to participate in such events when you were a teenager, but you recognize their impact and value. Whatever the case, may your time reading this book prepare you not just to survive but also to thrive!

Why do we do events and retreats anyway?

The short answer: because they are fun and teenagers remember them. However, there are some deeper reasons that every leader should remember so in the heat of the moment you can remind yourself why you have aged four years in 72 hours.

Everybody needs a break from the mundane or something to look forward to—including teenagers! We live in an age of hurried children that are shuttled from one activity to the next, and students can benefit from interruptions to their routines. Besides the family, only the church is equipped to provide an environment where teenagers can search out their faith with caring adults. The church is the place where we invite students to holistically experience all the great things in life together that God intended. Sure, it can be awkward at times because teenagers don't know all the social cues or rules yet—like the value of wearing deodorant! But these moments with students very well may be the mountaintops of their teenage years. These shared experiences can be big steps in a world of baby steps.

Not everyone believes in the power of events or retreats. Every now and then a magazine article or opinion will come along claiming that they're a thing of the past. While it's true that youth culture is continually changing and our moments with students seem to be dwindling, the benefits of breaking the norm are huge. Simply put, teenagers seem to be more open in many areas of their lives when their routines are interrupted.

Since the emergence of modern youth ministry, retreats and events have been a standard part of the curriculum because they're part of the coming-of-age experience. The greatest stories of all time are filled with distant lands, dangerous passages (we try to avoid those as much as possible), hidden fortune, and great escapes. We are drawn to these powerful stories because they resonate with a need and longing deep inside of us. I would even argue that it reflects part of who God is, which is why it echoes within us. We can all hope that our spiritual journeys will ultimately look more like a great adventure than a series of systematically calculated steps!

Events and retreats are so important because they allow us to advance. When we make a time and place to “retreat,” we are taking refuge from the regular onslaught of our hectic lives to examine our perspective. With new perspective, we can move forward with renewed energy and purpose. Here are two ways that these new perspectives launch us forward—and God uniquely designs both results.

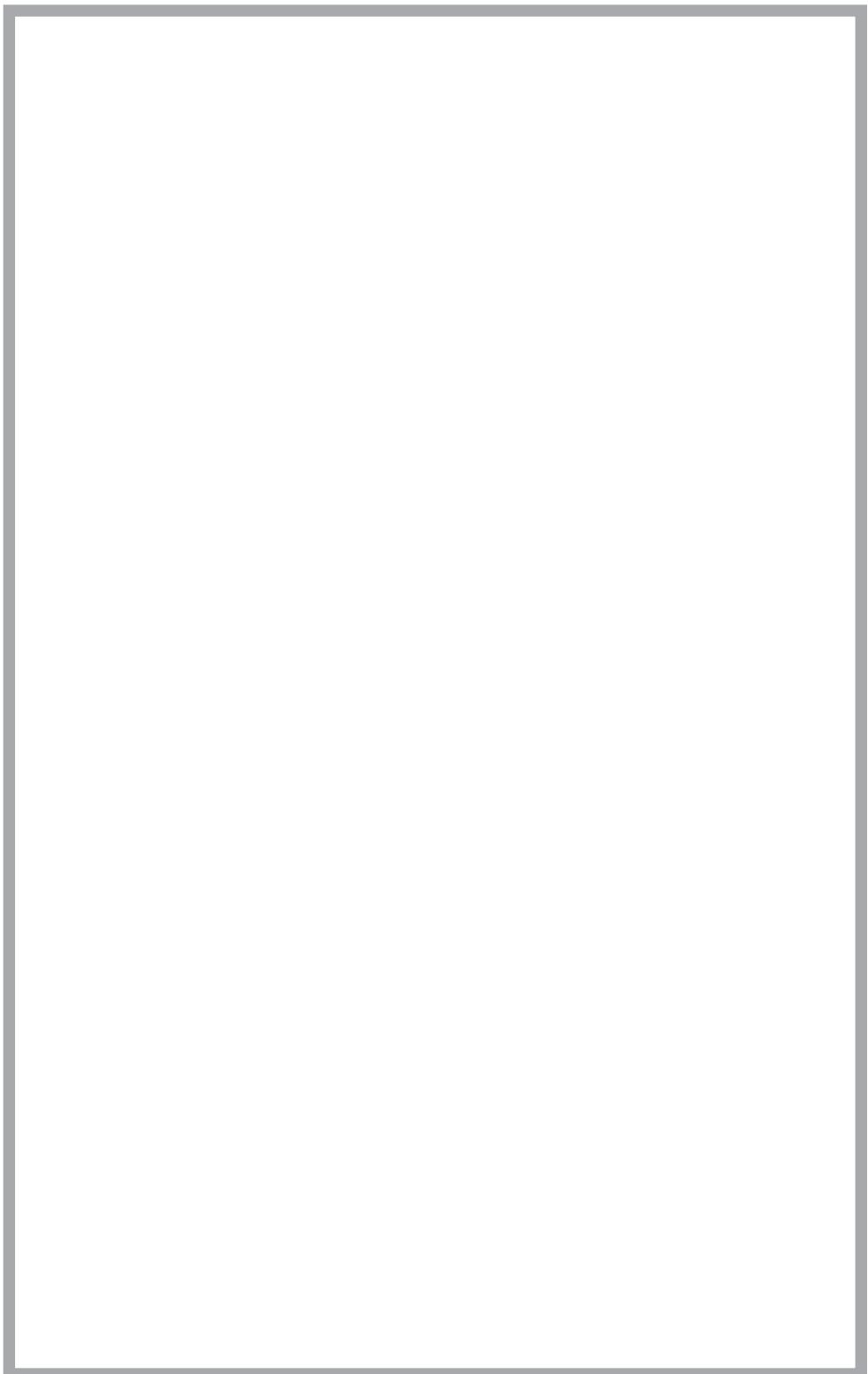
First, people change on an individual level when they “retreat.” We all need sparks that propel us in our own personal journey with Jesus, and special events are often the framework for that to happen. It may not manifest itself clearly in the moment. Perhaps days or weeks later, after teenagers have returned to their routines, they are overwhelmed with a sudden realization—but the seed for that pivotal life change was fostered in the framework of an event or retreat.

Our communal story is the second perspective that God can shape during an event or trip. Just like we each have our own set of circumstances that define who and where we are on our spiritual journey, our community travels the path of a spiritual journey, too. As individuals we may be getting along fine, but the health of the whole group is off. Our community can experience blessing through an event or retreat. God uses the time, space, and intentionality of a well-planned event or retreat to be the spark that moves members of a community closer together and closer to himself.

God understands the need for a good trek; in fact many times, God initiated *spiritual* movement through *physical* trips. God called Abraham to pick up and go to a distant land—a destination unknown! God called Moses back to Egypt, leading a *huge* group to a camp he was going to build for them (I’m paraphrasing only slightly for the point). Jesus called 12 men on

a three-year road trip that would change the course of human history forever. Our eternal calling is a lifelong trip where we are reconciled to God. I'm pretty sure there will still be moments like ice cream outings. And those won't be "for fun only" then either.

Whether it is a special occasion at the church or an adventurous weekend gathering at the beach or in the mountains, these moments have the potential to set foundations of faith. You will get to be there when special memories are made that affect lives and generations to come. There is no such thing as a "for fun only" trip when spiritually intentional adults are along for the ride. Let's get busy equipping you to be a passionate volunteer ready to thrive. This is going to be a great adventure!



CHAPTER I

PREPARING FOR YOUR EVENT OR RETREAT

“I can feel it coming in the air tonight, oh Lord.”

—Phil Collins (*not a youth worker*)

Leading teenagers is not an easy task, and like any important job, it takes a sense of preparation on many levels. How you prepare for an experience can greatly determine its outcome. Jesus provides a great example of preparing for ministry. Before he started his ministry, he took off into the wilderness by himself to be alone with God the Father. It was apparent that the road ahead was going to be difficult and that the careful preparation was essential for him and his mission. Satan knew that this period of reflection and readiness would be a perfect time to attack Jesus, so he did. Your investment in teenagers can make a significant impact. Satan knows this and may attack you as you prepare. Read Matthew 4:1-11 to see what Jesus did to prepare himself for ministry. Here are some other thoughts on preparing before your event or retreat!

Take time to pray

If you spend time praying *before* your event or retreat, you will have time to cover all the prayers that seem logical, ordinary, and appropriate. This is important because at youth events, you may find yourself praying for and about things that you never thought any person would ever pray for in the course of the human experience. Don't understand what I mean? At a weekend retreat, you may find yourself praying, "God, help that boy not kill the cat in the pillowcase when he hits the other teenager that I'm not sure is even part of our group." Prayers like this may cause guilt if they are the first prayers you have uttered in some time. So pray before your event for things like spiritual impact for the students attending, strength for the other leaders, wisdom and discernment from the Holy Spirit (see James 4), and God's work in the families represented by the teenagers.

Be physically ready

Don't fool yourself: Getting ready physically shouldn't only concern out-of-shape or older youth workers. Trips and retreats (and even one-day events) can be demanding. Don't underestimate the toll this can take on your body! If you are over 19 years old, out of high school, and have played a video game for over four hours in one sitting, I am talking to *you!* The human body is not meant to go with less than three hours of sleep on the floor, surviving on Ding Dongs® and Ho Hos® exclusively for sustenance. I've seen college students at the height of their physical specimen go unconscious because they didn't appropriately prepare for a winter retreat. High school students may laugh while you stretch out before playing Capture the Flag. Live with that instead of a nickname like "The Guy Who Died at Summer Camp." Don't start the event tired; rest up before you arrive, and eat healthy before you get there—chances are good that you'll consume Taco Bell® delicacies at least three times, even if the event doesn't last an entire day.

Pack accordingly

If you show up with a fanny pack loaded with sunscreen, you will be made fun of—and then everyone will come to you asking for sunscreen. If you show up to the roller skating party with your own in-line skates, you will be made fun of—and then you will be asked for pointers all night. These are double-edged swords—personal decisions that you, wise adult volunteer, must make on your own. The moral of the story: Within reason, pack the stuff you will need for the specific event, and don't be a kid and forget things—you're an adult, for goodness sake. And no, we don't have time to stop and find a bathroom; we just left the church!

Choose to journey spiritually with the students

This really is a conscious decision. It's similar to telling teenagers to make important decisions *before* they get into a crisis and have to think on their feet. If they have already decided to not do drugs, they have a prepared answer and thought-out commitment in their heart. The same logic applies to us as volunteers. Events and retreats can move fast. Prayerfully make the sober-minded decision to intentionally journey spiritually with your students. That commitment needs to be made beforehand so you can move with the group and, more importantly, the Holy Spirit. The effects of this single decision may be the most important ones you experience. This choice will show up in the nuances of every other fork in the road. And by deciding to be all in, you won't miss out on what God wants to teach *you* along the way, which may end up being as significant as what you intended to teach the teenagers.

Offer support to parents

Like a good sermon, your event or retreat needs a clearly thought-out purpose—and it's essential for communicating that purpose and all the other details to parents. You also want to connect with parents when they bring their teenagers to the

church or other location for your event. As a leader, you can do little things to help make this pivotal moment the best it can be! Help calm anxieties—especially if you’re leaving for a longer camp or retreat, or if parents are dropping off a first-timer—by serving homemade cookies while kids unload luggage. Make sure you clearly communicate details about traffic, sign-ups, and other items that could stir up nerves that are already tense. Welcoming parents and praying as a group are always good ideas, too. You know your context; create the most appropriate atmosphere possible. The most common mistakes come through poor communication and planning.