

Lins, Mary and Katy Palmer, (2003) "25 Simple Things You Can Do to Incorporate the Arts into Your Youth Program," S. Hamilton, MA: Center for Youth Studies.

The arts have been making a sweeping come back of late in churches across the nation. Colossal music festivals, art discussion forums, biblical historical fiction novels, and magazine publications such as *Relevant* top the list for the many ways that Christian artists are engaging with and challenging their surrounding culture. This is one bandwagon you definitely want to consider jumping on. The arts provide an opportunity for adolescence to experience and deepen their understanding of the beauty of God. There is a place for the arts and artistic expression in every youth group, including yours.

Perhaps you are somewhat intimidated to incorporate the arts into your programming due to lack of experience. While you may not consider yourself to be an especially creative person, you most certainly are; after all, one has to be creative in order to be a youth leader! And remember, you don't have to do it all yourself, the mark of a quality leader is the ability to delegate tasks to youth volunteers. Incorporating the arts in to your group can be a great opportunity to recruit adult members of the body that are artistically gifted (especially if you aren't).

Of course, there will always be a certain amount of risk involved when asking adolescents to express themselves in an artistic way; the outcome could be disturbing or even somewhat provocative, because good art reveals the inner thought lives of individuals. As long as you are using wise discernment, pursuing relationships with the youth, and challenging and/or encouraging them when appropriate, you may be surprised at the level of spiritual understanding and connectedness that surfaces in their art.

Below you will find a practical guide of twenty-five ideas for incorporating the arts into your youth programming. It is your responsibility to incorporate these ideas with the gospel in whatever way you see as most suitable to the group's needs. Remember, art is a marvelous metaphor for life, and these hands-on art experiences can function as fabulous object lessons to communicate biblical truths to teens. So, take a seat and hold on tight, and see what new tools can help to fight the fight!

1. Check out your local museum

This is a great way to expose youth to high art, and it gives them an opportunity to develop their own artistic sensibilities. Generally, there are certain weekdays that offer free admission to students. Different exhibits are rotating through all the time, so make sure to check in with the museum's schedule every so often.

2. You very own Fine Arts Show (and/or exhibit)

This is a great project to do as a joint effort with other local youth groups. Offer the show to the community at large...A good idea may be to present a theme to the youth and have their work inspired by that concept. For example, a group of Christian artists from Beverly, MA presented local arts show entitled "And There Was Light" in the town square during the summer of 2003. Many local residents came to enjoy the work.

3. Art's Night

You can try this in one of a variety of forms including a coffeehouse, open mic, American Idol, dinner theatre (a great fund raiser), talent show, variety show, comedy night, etc. Various arts utilized could be poetry readings, musical talents, stand up comedy, monologues, dramatic readings, etc.

4. Graphic Arts, publications

Even if a student doesn't believe himself to be artistically inclined, most teens know how to operate graphics programs. Teens such as this may enjoy serving as a graphic artist, picking out the graphics, fonts, etc. for youth group publications such as monthly newsletters, t-shirt design, web pages, bulletin boards, etc. E-zines and online journals like Xanga are also something to consider for those young people that enjoy writing and spreading the word about what's been going on in your group.

5. Making Movies

This can be a hugely successful activity for youth of varying degrees of interests. Whether its documenting a youth fellowship mission trip, used as an object lesson, creating an after-school-drama, or preparing for a film festival, teens love being both in front of and behind the camera. The more control you feel comfortable giving them in the process, the better!

6. The late, great Youth Sunday

For many congregations, youth Sunday is the one Sunday every calendar year for the children and youth of the church to be recognized. This classic annual program could be revolutionized as a vehicle for proclaiming the Gospel to the body. Be creative! Incorporate the senses and all kinds of art forms. Go big! Consider putting on a quality play or musical production rather than a last minute cheese-ball skit. Remember, the worship program for youth Sunday can dare to be a bit more risky than your head pastor can get away with.

7. More than just Youth Sunday...

Most adolescents are mature enough to handle a gift offering during worship. Musical instruments, visual arts, Christian clowning, dramatic scripture reading, sacred dance, etc. can serve to enhance worship.

8. The Art of Prayer

There are many different forms to this classic spiritual discipline. Try painting a prayer, sharing lyrics to a prayerful song, reciting poetry to God, writing out letters/journal entries as prayers, or even (for the more bohemian oriented youth group) dancing out your prayers.

Enacted Prayers~ A powerful theatrical exercise physically expressing a prayer request through a series of pectorals as improvised through a troupe of performers reenacting a prayer request (scenario). For more information, contact theatre professor Jeff Barker at Northwestern College in Orange City, IA.

9. Improvisational Games

Your very own Who's Line is it Anyway? See resource list for books that include descriptions of numerous games. In a world full of rules and regulations, improv encourages youth to use their creative mind and provides a much needed sense of freedom to their lives. Even your most introverted of students can come out of their shell during the right game. It should be noted that the more you do improv, the more fun and the easier it becomes.

10. Collage your Angst

Just like improv, with collaging, anything goes. Encourage young people to think outside the box and express themselves on a specific topic (their feelings towards life at school, Jesus and the Leper, body image, etc). The cooler and more abundant the materials, the more excited teens will get. Magazines, finger paint, glitter, etc. can be found in the back of any Sunday school closet or your local craft store! Also, encouraging teens to bring their photos will personalize the work even more.

11. Theatre for Young Audiences

Many theatre companies offer performances geared toward youth or theatre designed for younger audiences. Many of these special showings include a question and answer session afterward with the cast and crew. Be sure to take a time to debrief with the group yourself; if all stories are part of 'the story' (Dean Borgman), how did the play relate to the gospel?

12. Here we go a-caroling

Okay, we know this one might be a bit of a stretch, but if you have the right group chemistry, caroling can be really great. No really. Sing alongs can be a fun activity any time of year, and no matter how out of tune the choir may be, there are certain captive audiences that can be blessed by it. Nursing homes, local hospitals, maybe even the mall. The wackier the environment, the more thrilling it can be... think outside the box, and don't be afraid to contact local businesses!

13. Check your local listings

Most communities (both large and small) offer all kinds of various cultural events that can encourage and inspire. Local craft shows, symphony orchestras, college hip hops groups, poetry readings, ballet, opera, folk arts, and photography shows are just a sampling of what might be going on in your community. Remember, the local library often offers discounts on ticket prices.

14. Mural Mural on the Wall

Murals are a public display. Murals take teamwork. Murals say something. Murals can incorporate all youth, both the kids gifted in drawing and those who can paint in the lines. Murals can make a dirty, scary, ugly space beautiful. Murals have a lasting impact on a community. Murals are a lot of fun to show off when they are completed. Murals can proclaim the coming of the Kingdom.

15. Festivals of fun

Christian music festivals are all the rage within the evangelical subculture, and while it's important to make sure both you and the youth are separating Truth from commercial hype, these large musical events offer the great benefit of being geared towards getting excited for God.

Cornerstone, Creation, Purple Door, Soulfest, Ichthus, and Sonshine are some of the larger fests...Cornerstone is highly recommended as a festival that incorporates many different art forms (everything from open forums of Christians in the arts to a film festival). Another possibility? Get together with local youth workers and put on a music fest of your own.

16. Three Dimensional Deconstructive Sculpture, a.k.a. Junk Yard Wars

Ahhh, the wonders of duct tape... Gather several quirky pieces of junk donated by members of the congregation and divide the pieces accordingly, plus one roll of duct tape per group. Make sure to have wheels of some sort for each group so that the creations can be mobile. Separate each team so that they can have some privacy, then give each group a limited amount of time to build with some guidelines to work with (such as the creation must be mobile, it must incorporate every piece you've been given, etc.). Once the time is up and the creations have been completed, have a special unveiling ceremony. Then, the real fun begins. Outline the "battle field" and have two teams at a time push their creations simultaneously towards one another to simulate battle. Declare a winner and move on in tournament like fashion. Debriefing after the event is key. Make sure to ask the youth how they felt to watch the creations they worked so hard on deconstruct before their very eyes. Ask the winners, even though they were victorious, does their creation look the same as it did when it began? Obviously, this event is a great way to introduce creation, the fall, and God's redemptive plan. This activity is particularly successful when held in the form of a lock-in, so that you and your youth have plenty of time.

17. The Art of Cooking

As any experienced youth leader in America will tell you, much of teen fellowship often involves food. Why not take that concept to the limits? If your church building offers a nice kitchen facility or if you have some generous parents willing to lend your group their kitchen for the evening, a cooking extravaganza could be right for you! Adolescents will like the responsibility handed to them in the kitchen (chopping veggies, handling the oven, etc.) and enjoy partaking in the out come. Do view the experience as an art form and pick your menu with care; there is a world of difference between cooking up some spaghetti and creating a food lover's delight! You can incorporate a service element to the experience by teaching the youth how to prepare a specific meal and then coordinating a meal delivery to local shut-ins. By the way, this is a great way to get new adult volunteers who love to cook connected to the youth.

18. The Professional

Youth may grow in their appreciation for the arts and in their own understanding of what it means to incorporate their faith into their future career goals by being exposed to the experiences of confessing professional artists. This can be accomplished simply by making a few phone calls and hunting down some artists that would be willing to come in and share their testimony and their art with the group. What a fabulous vehicle for making connections with believing adults that may make excellent mentors for your more overtly artistic youth group members.

19. Interest Groups

This one may be a little obvious, but hey, it's good to be reminded of the basics. As fads come and go, you may want to take advantage of a certain phase that several different teens are into and form an interest group to help develop the skill and use it to the glory of God. Forming

interest groups such as step, hip-hop, clowning, etc. could create a small group atmosphere with a lot of excitement and energy. For example, if you have several junior high girls excited about dance, find a dancer to lead a small group where the girls can learn routines set to edifying lyrics. One word of advice is make sure that all students interested are welcomed to participate in the group in order to avoid cliques and a hierarchy of talent.

20. Art with a Purpose

Visual art project's can be presented to a group with the purpose of giving the finished piece as a gift of encouragement to someone that is hurting. The challenge lies here: make sure the level and quality of the artwork produced is above standard, and choose your projects with care. Also, be innovative in deciding the folks to benefit from this ministry. Voice of the Martyrs lists the addresses of imprisoned missionaries that would greatly enjoy the encouragement supplied by the youth group's creations.

21. Use Your Surroundings

If you live near the beach or in the desert, make sand art. If you live near a metro, show dramatic presentations in the subway. You get the idea! Try to think of things that are unique to your living environment, and then utilize those aspects in a creative and exciting way!

22. Playin' in the Band

Here's a chance to break the classic worship band mold. What does it look like to have a radical vision for youth led worship? How can teens get involved, even if they don't play any traditional instruments? An elaborate rhythm section with hand drums, sound board operation, roadies, the kitchen utensil orchestra, and helping to coordinate trips to different venues or a recording studio all great ways to get youth involved with this very popular art form.

23. Tell Me a Story...

Storytelling provides exposure to the wonderful world of complex and intriguing imagination. Storytelling can also be a safe and effective way for sharing testimony. Success for story telling lies in finding key times to perform your stories, i.e. long car rides home after a group activity, right before a gospel message, and the classic camp fire environment. For more on the importance and practice of story telling, see Paul Sill's Story Theatre, and Dean Borgman's Hear My Story.

24. Art to the ends of the Earth

If the Lord has given your group the ability to perform some art well, you may want to incorporate that into missions in order to help spread the Kingdom. Puppets with a Purpose is a group of adolescent puppeteers in Centre County, PA that went to Peru on a two week missions trip in summer 2002; they shared the gospel through their own shows, taught classes on puppeteering to folks there, and left the new ensemble equipped with a brand new set of puppets, sets, lights, and other various needs.

25. Arts as Educator

The arts are not always performance-based; in fact, the arts can be an excellent teacher and communicator for the person doing the creating. For example, activities such as acting out Scriptures in a game of charades, finger painting out stories, sculpting with play dough in response to a reading from the Word, or making up a Dr. Seuss-like poem highlighting the challenges of obeying your parents are all great ways to educate young people while they employ their God-given creativity.

Of course, there are many more exciting ways to utilize the arts than those listed here. There are numerous sources on the subject, and more coming out all the time as a revitalization of interest in this topic spreads throughout various church and para-church ministries. Be sure to check out the resource list provided.

One thing to reiterate is that the key ingredient to incorporate any artistic endeavor with a youth program is faith integration. Having young people look at the gospel through a creative lens can help them to retain the information better and help them to own it for themselves. To God be the glory!

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