

# Teen Mania Gets Youth All Fired Up

In a world that has become so wrapped up in social media like Facebook, Instagram and avatars, has the live event lost its place? Has the “not forsaking the assembling of ourselves” become relegated to a computer screen or a smartphone (Heb. 10:25)?

I recently watched a group of young girls sitting at the same table in the food court of a trendy mall and laughing. Though there’s nothing unusual about that, what caught my attention was that they weren’t talking to each other; they were feverishly texting back and forth. Their laughter wasn’t a result of what they were saying to each other, but rather what they were texting to each other. In our digital age, have we lost even our most fundamental art of conversation?

I’m supposed to be writing about live events, the gathering of multitudes, people actually showing up and really interacting with other live people. How do we get above the sound of the most recent message notification or the vibration of the phone? More importantly, how do we get them to hear and receive from God?

How can we “suspend disbelief,” arrest the senses and get people—particularly teens—to that moment where the Holy Spirit can work, where pivotal decisions are made and where they can experience a real encounter with the love of the living God? Can this be achieved at a live event anymore?

The truth is that people, teens especially, are starving for connectivity. They’re searching for authenticity. In the absence of something real, people will naturally crawl through the desert with their gaze on a mirage, which often comes in the form of some faux connection. When they find no water,

they're usually so desperate that they'll actually drink the sand!

Likewise, we have a generation dying of thirst that will try to fill their void with connectivity even if it's meaningless.

## **Galvanizing the Masses**

Throughout our history, we've seen people flock to these gatherings that have served to galvanize a message, agenda or goal. When President John F. Kennedy assembled a special joint session of Congress, he set an audacious goal of "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" by the end of the decade. He could have simply sent a memo or made an announcement via radio or television. Instead, he used that special assembly to set forth a vision that would decisively end the "space-race" years later.

Fast forward to July 20, 1969: Lunar Module Pilot Aldrin asked those listening to "give thanks." He took communion only hours before they opened the module doors for Armstrong's famous words, "One small step ..."

But it all began with that gathering in 1961, where the nation tossed doubt aside and reached for the seemingly impossible.

Events have served as pivotal and galvanizing moments in our history. In August 1963, a young, passionate minister with unflinching commitment to making a difference and changing the world stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., before a crowd of some 250,000 people and delivered the iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. departed from his prepared remarks and began to minister under the anointing. The echoing refrain, "I have a dream ..." served as a beacon to shape American history—for all of us. Those events mattered. From times of old, large events have created pivotal moments; they have shaped our lives, and there is nothing new about gathering.

## A Biblical Precedent of Large Events

In Matthew 4:23-25, we see the stage set for one of the most iconic sermons in the New Testament: the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had been traveling and preaching throughout Galilee, proclaiming the Good News and healing the sick when large crowds from the region of Galilee, Jerusalem and Judea began to follow him. In Matthew 5:1, Jesus saw the crowds and went up on a mountainside. Some people think that Jesus was only speaking to His disciples during that sermon, but in Matthew 7:28 (the conclusion of the message), the crowds were said to be amazed at his teaching.

Jesus seemed to strike a balance and underscore a need for both events and discipleship. Many times in the Word we see Jesus ministering to the crowd and to the disciples. Mark 6:30-34 is one of those times where Jesus tries to peel away to a quiet place to minister only to His disciples. However, the people continued to press in. We see Jesus again moved with compassion as He ministered to that great crowd and later fed 5,000 people.

Another great example of Jesus ministering at an *event* is found in Luke 5:1-9. As He was ministering near the shores of Lake Gennesaret, crowds were crowding around Him. He launched out into a fishing boat to create a platform to allow His voice to carry over the water so that people could hear the Word.

It's interesting to note that all three examples of Jesus' ministry to the multitudes also included miracles. Both before and immediately after the Sermon on the Mount, there were miracles. In Mark, Jesus fed the 5,000. In Luke, Jesus blessed Simon Peter for the use of his boat with a miracle catch after a night of catching nothing. He then went on to heal a leper and forgive and heal a man who was paralyzed.

You don't need a large crowd to see God move. But I wonder if

the climate created in large gatherings puts people in a place where the Word of God can take center stage; where faith can rise up in their hearts and they can let go of those things holding them back. After Jesus' commission to His disciples (and to all of us too) in Mark 16:15, the disciples began to step out and see results.

Mark 16:20 says, "And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them* and confirming the word through the accompanying signs." The word *them* is in italics, which means it was not in the original text. Reread it without that word: "The Lord working with ... and confirming the word through the accompanying signs." When we can create an environment where the Word can take center stage, where we drown out all the distractions so the Holy Spirit can speak to hearts, we make room for God's power—because the Word works!

I'm constantly reminding our staff that the lights, videos screens, LED walls and sound system are not to simply create a "show." They are all tools to "temporarily suspend unbelief" to get teens to a place where God can get through, where the Holy Spirit can work and where the Word can begin to take root.

We have to break teens out of their everyday routine and arrest their attention.

### **Temporary Suspension of Disbelief**

On Friday night, the countdown video displayed via large screens on either side of the stage has been rolling down for the last 14 minutes, leaving only one minute until the highly anticipated start of the event. The auditorium is filled with thousands of teenagers screaming and cheering, and the final minute digitally rolls away in front of their eyes.

Darkness floods the entire room as the final seconds scroll away, only to vanish as quickly as it came in a flash of pyrotechnics. The color of moving lights cuts through the

haze-filled air. The crescendo of cheers is drowned out by the thunderous sound of the guitarist as he strikes that first chord. Worship is about to begin.

Make no mistake, this is not a concert or a show. This is an event like no other, and God is about to take center stage all weekend long!

As a teenager, that was my first large live event. The event was Acquire the Fire, of which I had no idea that I would grow up and become director. Back then (1991), all I was thinking about was taking my first road trip with my youth group, getting out of the house and hanging with my friends. Little did I know that this event would profoundly impact my life.

Even though the event was so many years ago, I still remember it in vivid detail. I had never experienced worship like that before. Perhaps it was being away from home, perhaps it was the first time I had seen so many other young people worshipping God. Or maybe it was the lights and messages that seemed to be directed only at me. God took hold of my life that weekend.

I had grown up in church and it's what I had always known, but something was different about that weekend. Ron Luce (who many years later would become one of my mentors and a dear friend) gave an altar call like I had never seen before. Ron said, "If you want to give your life to God, I mean really surrender every part of your life to Him—not just play church but pursue God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength—then stand to your feet one at a time and shout, 'I want the cross!'"

As other teens stood to make their declaration, their voices echoing throughout the auditorium, I stood as my heart pounded and shouted, "I want the cross" and made my way forward. This no longer represented my parents' faith; it was mine!

The event did was it was supposed to do; it broke me from my routine and brought me to a place where the Holy Spirit could

work and where I could respond in a climate filled with faith.

But the story didn't end there. Looking back, the event served as a tipping point for our youth group. My youth pastor—who obtained a bus, found chaperones, found hotel rooms near the church and worked out what I'm sure were a million other details—didn't stop once we got back from the event. He followed up, prayed with us, challenged us and called us to go deeper with God. Pastor Anthony's rigorous and relentless post-event follow-up not only caused our youth group to grow, but it also served as a catalyst for us to grow in the things of God long after the event was over.

Acquire the Fire became an annual tradition for our church and youth ministry. As I look back at that youth group “graduating class” (and subsequent classes), it's amazing to see how many of us are still pursuing God and how many of us are in ministry today. The fruit of that displays the beauty of ministries partnering with the local church. I'm forever grateful for Pastor Anthony and Pastor Bud Williams, our senior pastor, who made youth ministry important and helped to make it possible for me to serve the kingdom.

### **Are People Still Gathering?**

Yes, they are. I get to see it most weekends. People are gathering in churches and conferences like the ones I'm privileged to be a part of from coast to coast—and the fruit continues to be evident beyond the event.

Jar your teens out of the normal everyday routine. Lead them to rediscover what some would describe as the lost art of getting together.

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*operations for one of North America's leading companies. Kental combines his call to ministry and passion for people with an ability to execute operationally to equip, empower and inspire a generation.*