

Welton Baptist Church ran the 'Big Top Festival' every year between 2001 and 2007. It has been relaunched in 2009 as NFest. Here Paul Evans, who runs the festival, talks about why they did it, and gives us a picture of what this mammoth event involves.

To get a better idea of the range of activities involved, have a look at a video of the 2007 Big Top Festival on the Welton Baptist Church website:

<http://www.weltonchurch.org.uk/NFEST/tabid/836/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>

Big Top 2007

Why did this project seem right for your church and community?

The event had grown from a Childrens Holiday Club and in 2001 our then youth worker had a vision for the Childrens Holiday Club to take place in a marquee (a Big Top).

This vision was taken up by the church and over the 7

years the event grew in size and scope to incorporate activities for children, adults and youth. Each year as a church we sought God's will to continue the event in the following year and, such was the impact upon us and the community it was felt right to proceed up until 2007. In 2008 we decided to take a sabbatical.



The key thing for us was to communicate the gospel to our community in ways that were relevant using a variety of methods from quiz nights, to skate parks, to drama productions, jazz bands, rock music nights, stand up comedy, dance workshops, a Hog Roast, cricket and football matches, fun runs, slapstick humour Oh and things for the children as well!

However the central point was that EVERY event included a Christ-centred message or testimony. The other aspect was that we decided as a church that this was something to GIVE to the community so every event was FREE of charge. We believed through this that we were demonstrating to our community what a working church looked like through all of the activities that took place.

How long did the planning process take?

Planning the event took from October in the previous year to August the next (when the event took place) so around 9-10 months.



How many people were involved, and what were their roles?

During the 8 days of the festival there were over 120 church members involved.

Tasks ranged from organising praying (throughout the event and in the planning process), leaders/helpers for the childrens club (in 2007 we had > 280 under 11 years children attending each

morning), set construction and decoration, managing the skate park for teenagers, looking after 24 hour site security, setting up staging, making drinks, preparing food, running the tuck shop and “cocktail” bar, leading various events, acting, singing, speaking, “MC’ing”, providing the sound, light and AV (essential!), running the crèche, welcoming, portaloos cleaning, publicity/advertising, etc, etc – we have a large schedule with every persons responsibility detailed.

How much time did they need to give?

During the week itself the main core helpers (25-30 people) probably gave around 50-60 hours of time. On average other helpers provided around 15-20 hours. Most of the church in one way or another were present on the site of the event for some time during the week and, of course attending some of the events and invited friends along.

Prior to the event a massive amount of time was invested across large numbers of church members rehearsing, planning, practicing, planning, etc, etc. Too many hours to count!

What resources were needed, and where did you find them?

A school field (courtesy of the local secondary school) and some very large marquees which we hired for the week + loads and loads of other items, staging, skate ramps, sports equipment, AV, light and sound equipment (some owned mostly hired in) ... in very simple terms we determined our requirements during the planning cycle and agreed a budget through the church.



Did you encounter any statutory requirements (eg planning permission, food safety, events licence) and how did you fulfil them?

Yes we had to apply to the local authority for an events licence, we did a full H&S risk assessment on each activity undertaken and reviewed all the statutory requirements for food safety, etc. We ensured that the site always had a qualified first aider on hand and

also made certain that the police, the local authority and local residents to the event were advised of what was happening.

A number of the legislative requirements are less onerous if events (and food specifically) are not charged for. It is then a question of ensuring that best practice is adopted to avoid problems and incidents (i.e. the provision of proper safety equipment for skateboarding, making sure insurance is in place AND asking participants to sign disclaimers with regard to injury).

Over the 7 years of Big Top we have just had one broken arm which is testimony to the organised way in which potentially dangerous events were handled.



What was the biggest challenge you faced?

Exhaustion of the volunteers from the church and the sheer “pressure” of handling a large event with a large number of different age groups on site at the same time.

Large groups of teenagers present a particular challenge, especially when on site whilst an adult event is taking place.

We used church members to act as security and are fortunate to have a policeman, an ex-policeman and an experienced outward bounds schools teacher in our congregation who were able to maintain a good security presence but in a calm and caring way.

What were the expected and final costs?

In 2007 we budgeted to spend around £17,000 – we spent a little more than this but this was more than compensated for by the additional giving from the church. We also budgeted some costs for merchandise and “trading” of refreshments, etc but all of these costs were covered by sales at the event itself.

What were/ are the most successful aspects of the project?

The number of children (around 120) who indicated commitments during the week, plus the dozen teenagers who gave their hearts to Christ + the 5 or 6 adults who became Christians during the event.

In addition the fact that we were able to interact with such a large number of our community during the event (around 4-600 people came through the site each day). Further the way in which the event drew us together as a church, working together (very hard) during the period of the event bonded us very closely.

What would you do differently next time?

The follow up! We have let ourselves down here by not having a good enough “post-event” plan in place for those we made contact with during the event. This has meant that some who made commitments have not been followed up, etc, etc

What has changed or is changing in your church and community as a result?

As above, people have become Christians and it has helped our community to understand that church (and church events) are perhaps not what they envisaged. Many, many non-church-goers in Midsomer Norton know all about “Big Top” and associate it with a high-quality festival, which costs them nothing to attend. It is a safe place for their children and above all it is fun.

Importantly all who have been have heard a very direct challenge about the place of Christ in their life and the need to make a decision for him Our prayer is that those seeds sown will grow and sometime soon bear fruit.



Paul is happy to offer advice to others in WEBA churches who may be considering a similar outreach initiative.

Please contact the WEBA office, office@webassoc.org.uk, and we'll put you in touch.