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An Idiot's Guide to Thrillseeking

A few years back I decided that what the youth ministry at our little urban church needed was a skatepark in our driveway. This was sure to be the magic potion that would cause our ministry to explode and put me on the map as youth pastor god. So I ran the idea by the Senior Pastor and the Elder Board—who gave the concept their endorsement. Pending insurance company approval, it was a done deal.

I vividly recall talking to the agent, and telling him I had a great idea to reach kids in our neighborhood. Before I said anything else, he asked, “Does it involve skateboard ramps?”

“Why yes, it does” I replied, quite surprised. Before I could say another word, he started rattling off statistics about how many church injuries have occurred because of skateparks and ramps and fun boxes.

As expected, that great skatepark idea never materialized. Sure it seemed like a risk, but so does walking down the street. The payoff was what I was looking at.

But, *payoff* (kids following Jesus) and *payout* (as in dollars and lawsuits) are two distinctively different issues that involve different outcomes. Big payoffs result in much praise, adoration, and book deals; everyone wants to know how you succeeded. Payout usually results in stern lectures, loss of trust and sometimes having to look for a new job.

Following that conversation, the insurance company sent me a pamphlet that they had produced for churches. It detailed all the unsafe activities that I, as a youth pastor, should keep my students from doing. It included things like skydiving, bungee jumping, bike jumping, cliff-diving, barefoot water skiing, and anything involving fire. Well, half of those things I'd done with my group, but I never thought about the consequences or whether anybody even cared that I was doing them. I was reaching kids, and they were beginning to think about following Jesus because I was not afraid to go have some fun with them.

Risk is a part of who we are as youth pastors. Calculated risk is the way we justify what is worth doing in the name of evangelism and ministry to

youth. I still take my students wakeboarding and cliff-jumping—and occasionally fire is used to promote or enhance a certain element of something I'm doing (I'm taking the Fifth); but nothing is worth the life of a kid and nothing is worth the risk of that kid not coming back to the church or to the Lord because someone got hurt.

A friend of mine was the youth pastor of a large church. In each of his six years there a student died or was severely injured. Most of those situations weren't his fault, but he certainly looked bad. He lost his house and job because of a lawsuit. That kind of risk just isn't worth taking.

So have fun, but play safe.

