

## **Creating Fun Environments With A Small Budget**

**By Butch Hunter**

How can I make this work? I want to give my ministry area a fun, exciting atmosphere, but I have to keep in mind that it is a multi-use facility. And I can hear our financial team warning me to be careful with my spending. Yet my education director wants to know why kids don't like the room. Has he been in the basement? Does he have a stuffy nose? My curriculum is great, now I just need to create the right environment to go along with it. God help!

Have you ever heard this conversation? I have and I keep hearing it. How do we meet these seemingly impossible challenges with our space, curriculum, multi-use concerns, and the budget? I have dealt with these questions over and over again in my own ministry. Currently, our children's ministry shares space with our congregation's jr. and sr. high ministry, as well as a k-8 private school. Our space must also be able to accommodate weddings and funerals on short notice. Sometimes we say people are dying to get into our area. (Just kidding.) In addition, I don't know of a ministry that hasn't felt the budget pinch. Here are a few inexpensive ideas that have worked for me over the years.

To accommodate multi-use concerns, make your ministry decor as portable as possible. We built several sturdy backdrops on wheels using corrugated plastic boards. This is the same material used to make the political signs you see in front yards during election time, just cut into larger pieces. One of our church's handymen agreed to make the wooden frames and attach the wheels. Approximately 6 ft. high and 5 ft. wide, these backdrops look like the old-fashioned bulletin boards that were on wheels. With some plastic-bonding spray paint, these work great!

Now, whenever we change our curriculum theme, we can cheaply print new backgrounds in poster format right from the computer and tape them to our backdrops. Sometimes we purchase long rolls of scenery landscapes at party stores to fit the theme, usually for under \$20.00! All backdrops are reversible to a neutral white and easily turn over to hide our set. We embellish the backdrops with props that are easy to remove and store in an office or resource area.

We also use hanging pieces throughout the room. These lightweight pieces are made out of cardboard or foam insulation boards that cut nicely with a Styrofoam cutter, which can be purchased in the floral section of any craft store. Foam insulation boards look the nicest when they are painted. Sometimes you can get broken pieces for free from a contractor.

Our elementary kids meet in old auditorium, a very large room with high ceilings. Smaller groups tend to get lost in this big room. We used foam insulation boards to create portable walls, making our area seem smaller and safer. Foam insulation board clouds are mounted on a simple pulley system to complete our atmosphere. A large foam tree built "into" the wall greets families at our welcome center, while the trunk holds special prizes. The possibilities with foam are endless.

Paper shapes on the plastic covers of the florescent lights give a new look. We have also placed letters on these covers, spelling out Bible verses and other important words we want to impress on the kids. On the side wall beams are huge, removable leaves that fit our wilderness theme. I found these at Ikea for about

**\$15.00 a piece. This entire set put together makes our area look kid-friendly and is mostly portable to meet the demands of a multi-use building.**

**As you are creating your fun environment, look for items that are easily portable or items that can be hidden with tastefully positioned blinds or other décor that fits the other uses of the room. On any given Sunday we can have our environment in place in twenty minutes. To store supplies, use carts on wheels with plastic storage boxes. We have found that sturdy bakers' carts work well and last a long time. Any purchase should be seen as an investment. Ask yourself how long it will last and be useable. Then count the cost.**

**Some curriculums call for environment changes frequently. This can be a challenge for ministries on a tight budget. Always try to reuse and recycle. Before you go on a shopping spree, look over what you have and ask, "Can I make this work?" Make friends with the creative people in your congregation and ask them to help you look over your inventory to see if there is any thing you can recycle. You may be surprised at what you can do with what you already have! Recently, we did a series that called for an amusement park set. One of my leaders created an awesome roller coaster using a flower trellis (normally used once a year on Baby Day) and a preschooler shopping cart.**

**If you've looked through your resources and you still can't find the right things, start to network! Ask other ministries in your area if they would lend you some props for your current theme. Ask your congregation for items too. Make a list of the specific items you need, and be sure to find out whether these items are a permanent donation or on temporary loan. Garage sales and thrift stores will save you a ton of money if you simply plan ahead. After you have planned out your year, make a list of props you are going to need and give it to your ministry team. This way they can also be on the lookout. Keep an open mind and remember that a coat of paint can work wonders. I have to admit that I have found some great props on the curb!**

**Above all, ask for God's direction and ask Him to provide what you need to create an environment that kids will love. Remember it's God who gave us these ministries. Do you really think He will not give us what we need to reach the children He so deeply loves? Give your dreams to the master artist and watch what He will do.**