

# PEANUT† BUTTER SALVATION



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The climax of the church service was a pair of huge, hairy armpits. Youth Pastor Josh Turner offered up them up to teenage congregants attending a Wednesday night service at Jacksonville's Celebration Church. The armpits belonged to a beefy youth leader, a guy close in age to the hundreds of junior high and high school students in the audience, but old enough have sprouted great piles of coarse body hair. As the youth leader held his arms aloft, the teenagers gaped at the hair, furred into a strip matted by sweat and deodorant. They watched as Pastor Turner dug into a jar of peanut butter and smeared gobs of it onto the exposed underarms, then turned to the audience. Did anyone, he asked, have the guts to lick it clean and swallow it down without puking?

He got two volunteers. As the audience roared with excitement and disgust, the two male teenagers approached the youth leader and began to lick his armpits, burrowing their faces in the peanut butter and eating it. Neither puked. Their only prize was bragging rights.

The event was staged at the first night of the church's five-part "Fearless" series, modeled on the NBC television show "Fear Factor." Although the TV show was cancelled in 2006, its premise — challenging people to perform dangerous and disgusting

acts that might make them vomit — lives on in syndication, at Fear Factor Live! at Universal Orlando and, apparently, in Christian youth ministries.

Creaming the underarms of one of his youth leaders with peanut butter was only one of Pastor Turner's "challenges" at the Deerfield Boulevard campus on Sept. 9. He also liquefied a Happy Meal in a blender and challenged four volunteers to chug it. And he tossed raw pigs' knuckles and chicken feet into a vat of milk and selected two female volunteers to take turns bobbing in it until one, then the other, surfaced with a chicken foot in her teeth.

It may seem hard to believe, but the genesis of the "Fearless" program was a marketing impulse. Pastor Turner and his creative team say they wanted to do something that would shock and astound their teenage audience. They hoped to get students talking about Celebration Church and about the Wednesday night service. They wanted a buzz that would go viral, that teens would text and Twitter about. They wanted the kids to share their cell phone pictures and videos. Ultimately, they wanted hordes of kids to show up the following Wednesday to see what crazy things the youth ministry would think up next.

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Pastor Josh Turner (above) didn't recall the peanut butter stunt when asked, but it was the first thing several teenagers remembered when asked about that night. On a subsequent Wednesday night, a Christian rock band (right) performed at Celebration's Deerwood campus.

The program isn't confined to the church's Deerfield Boulevard campus. Across town, at the Orange Park campus, another youth minister was hosting his own "Fearless" event. Pastor Shawn Kelley, 22, had issued a challenge to his students: If they brought 500 kids to the "Fearless" premiere, he would swallow five live goldfish. About 200 kids showed up — an amazing number, since Kelley started the Orange Park ministry with only 15 kids, but still short of the 500 mark. Kelley compromised; he swallowed two fish.

It was hardly the pastor's most extreme act. At other services, he's allowed students to pelt him with raw eggs and shoot him with paintballs when he wasn't wearing any protective gear. If the students ever bring 1,000 friends to a service, he wants to let one of them zap him with a Taser.

When asked about the highlight of the Sept. 9 "Fearless," Kelley is initially vague. Pressed, he finally admits he also issued a "peanut butter challenge." Instead of an armpit, Kelley smeared peanut butter on a youth leader's feet and challenged two teens to lick it off. It was pretty gross, the pastor assures. "This leader's feet are pretty bad."

Asked what he means by "bad," Kelley explains, "He's just got hairy feet." Still, Kelley says he did not, as Folio Weekly heard from a concerned parent, spread the peanut butter on his own feet, or between the youth leader's toes. "We didn't want to put it in between his toes," he says. "That would be pushing it."

Pastor Turner wants to send kids home from church thinking, "I don't believe what just happened here tonight."

That's a fair approximation of what one area mother felt when her son came home from the Orange Park service with video footage of the toe-licking. The woman asked that her name not be used because she didn't want her son subjected to ridicule, but she says she was appalled by what the teenagers described and by what she saw on the video. She was so upset that the next morning she contacted Pastor John Wyatt, the head youth pastor for all six Celebration locations. She was stunned when he didn't agree that having a child lick anything off an adult's feet was inappropriate.

"It's inappropriate anywhere, but that it's happening in a church is just horrible," she says. "What would you think if that was happening in a home?"

The mother suggests that the act between a minor and an adult in a private home would seem not only inappropriate, but perverse — and possibly illegal. But she says Pastor Wyatt, 37, and other church leaders didn't concede there was anything wrong with what they'd done. The woman decided not to allow her son to attend the church again.

"I think it upset me the most that they didn't take responsibility," she says. "They actually seemed proud of what they were doing. When you send a kid to church, you aren't expecting they are going to be exposed to something like that. It just does not really

make sense how Bible study turns into fish-eating and eating peanut butter off a grown man's toes."

Pastors Kelley and Wyatt admit they may have gone a little too far with the peanut butter, but Wyatt says he spoke to only one parent who found the event offensive. And he observes, "Youth ministries have always been about doing things to reach kids." Besides,

**Pastor Kelley swallowed two goldfish at a recent service. He's allowed students to pelt him with eggs and shoot paintballs at him. At some point, he wants to let one of them zap him with a Taser.**

the "Fear Factor" shtick worked. "It certainly got them excited about bringing their friends to church and about church in general," says Wyatt. "The idea is to get students here to meet our Savior. They are getting all this crazy stuff out there in the world all the time. We are trying to show them that God is cooler."

Of course, getting kids psyched about aberrant behavior isn't the same as inspiring them spiritually — and may be just the opposite. Asked whether there was a religious lesson behind the grotesquerie, Wyatt

offers, "It's all about what it means to be fearless and know God is with you." Pastor Kelley describes the "Fearless" stunts as metaphors for the courage it takes to be young and openly Christian. "It's about being fearless, by allowing them to do something that took boldness, that they might possibly get made fun of for doing," he says. "Standing up for Christ in the world requires you to be fearless."

Pastor Turner concedes that the first night of the "Fearless" program was mostly about creating a buzz. But all three ministers talk about the challenge of fighting for teenagers' attention in a world where they're swamped by video games, music videos, new media like Twitter and Facebook, and the temptations of drugs, sex and alcohol. Wyatt explains that the youth ministers have to be willing to be extreme to even register on kids' radars.

"We have to plan to get them in the door, and then trust that God is going to do what God is going to do once they're here," he says.

Wyatt also points out that it's much easier for a kid to talk about church with other teens when the conversation is about chugging a Happy Meal or bobbing for chicken feet. "They experience God here on Wednesday nights," says Pastor Wyatt, "and they can't always articulate that to their friends. This gives them something to say. 'Wow, you've got to come to church, you've got to check this out. This is *amazing!*'"





**Asked to explain the “Fearless” stunt, director of outreach and events Jenny Huang explained it involved “putting peanut butter on various body parts and licking it off.”**

The most extreme parts of the “Fearless” program were only used to introduce the series. On subsequent Wednesdays, Pastor Turner talked about how Daniel believed God would protect him from death in a lion’s den, and how Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego chose to be cast into a fiery furnace rather than bow to an idol.

Turner, 28, dropped out of Florida State University where he was majoring in economics, and completed his social science degree online so he could study to be a youth minister with the Celebration

a picture of his daughter Riley flashes on the flatscreens, tubes sticking out from all over her infant body. Turner urges the teens to take out their cell phones and text their biggest fear to a number he gives. The messages pass through a content filter and then scroll down the screens overhead: “I’m afraid I’ll never get married.” “I’m afraid I’ll be rejected for not doing what everyone else does.” “I’m afraid of fish.”

When interviewed about the “Fear Factor”-like stunts before the Sept. 17 service,

**Licking peanut butter off somebody’s armpit, says religious ethicist Karen McKinney, crosses boundaries without drawing any valuable lessons. “It’s just totally inappropriate,” she says.**

Church. He is now part of a megachurch on the cutting edge. Services are held in a room that looks more like a disco than a sanctuary, complete with bar tables, a red circular sofa, beams of swirling intelligent lights, even a fog machine. A countdown clock on five flatscreen TVs ticks away moments until the service begins. When it reaches zero, a band with four guitars, two singers, a keyboardist, a drummer and a saxophonist kicks into a thunderous Christian rock song. The beat and the energy brings the teens to front of the stage, jumping in time to the music and raising one pointed finger in the air. A purple glow saturates the room. After a few songs, Turner arrives on stage with a wireless microphone looped over his right ear. He could be any Five Points hipster, with his shaved head and sleeve of tattoos down one arm. He wears a black V-neck T-shirt, straight-leg Levis and shiny black boots with square toes.

In this sermon on Sept. 17, Turner tells the kids that everyone has a fear, a “lion” that they will have to overcome in life. He tells them there are more than 2,000 fears catalogued as psychological illnesses, and he rattles off a few. He tells them that he almost turned and walked away from God when his daughter was born with multiple health complications, spending months in an incubator hooked to tubes. As he speaks,

Pastor Turner didn’t bring up the peanut butter. He said he couldn’t remember anything but the Happy Meal and the chicken feet. But it was the first thing several students remembered when asked about “Fearless.” Isaiah, 17, seems reluctant to give details — like he wasn’t sure he should talk about it to a reporter. “It was just crazy,” he says. “Put down ‘intense and powerful.’” Alex Sanfilippo, a 21-year-old youth leader with the church, said that stunt and others were asking a question: “Are you really fearless?”

About 30 minutes after the service ended, Jenny Huang, the church’s director of outreach and events, calls. She says the pastors were sitting around after the service trying to think of other things they did that “Fearless” night and mentions there was also the “peanut butter thing.” “Have you heard about that?” she wonders. I say I have and ask her to describe what it involved. Huang responds, “Putting peanut butter on various body parts and licking it off.”

During a conference call the following day with Kelley and Orange Park Pastor Darren Sullivan, Pastor Wyatt acknowledges that the incident may have crossed the line. But Wyatt says the church will continue to push the envelope and even risk offending

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people because they are engaged in a fight for teenagers' souls.

"Unfortunately, somebody was offended, and we apologized right away," says Pastor Wyatt. "But the other side of that is, there was a whole bunch of kids who gave their life to Christ that night. Ultimately, our goal is to get people into church and into a relationship with Jesus."

Certainly, Celebration is not the only church using these tactics. A Google search for "youth groups + fear factor" turned up multiple discussions of ways to make Christian kids vomit with games like eating chili out of a diaper, and recipes for gross concoctions. It's a trend that doesn't please Karen McKinney, director of the youth ministry



program and an associate professor of Biblical and theological studies at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minn. McKinney finds programs copying "Fear Factor" and other puke-inducing events to be a contradiction to the church's message of stewardship. "What did we just teach?" she wonders rhetorically when told about the youth program. "What value is it when we know there are kids starving? ... There are ways to teaching young people to be bold without wasting food."

As an example, McKinney remembers how she was invited to speak about sexual boundaries to a teen group at a church in downtown St. Paul. After brief introductions, she broke the 12 students into two groups and told them they were going to play strip Pictionary. For every round lost, the losing group would have to take off an item of clothing. Before they even started, she says she could hear a 13-year-old girl say under her breath, "This is wrong." But she said the group went through three rounds before the 13-year-old stood up and said, "I thought the topic was boundaries. We should not be playing this game." McKinney then asked the other students if they also thought the game was wrong and why they didn't voice those concerns.

"They got the message loud and clear what it means to stand up when it comes to crossing these kinds of boundaries," she says. Licking peanut butter off somebody's armpit, she observes, crosses those boundaries without drawing valuable lessons for the Celebration students. "It's just totally inappropriate," she says.

Pastor Wyatt doesn't agree. "Whatever we're doing, it's working. We saved 35 young people that night. That's 35 teenagers saved from drugs, saved from abortion, saved from premarital sex. There are life transformations happening here, and it's incredible. Thirty-five people's lives were changed forever. They were saved from an eternity of burning in hell.

"I'm sorry the peanut butter was offensive." □