

Retreat Planning Steps for Local Churches

by Lisa Jean Hoefner

Let's have a retreat! Sounds like a good idea.

Why?

- A retreat is a chance for encounter with self, with God, with other people, with creation, with issues.
- A retreat is, literally, a "strategic withdrawal." When we retreat, it is not for the purpose of just getting away and staying away. Everything involved in getting away, and all that is done while away, involves coming back. We go to the mountains not to see mountains, but to see the valleys in new perspective.
- On a retreat we hope to deepen our relationship with God, to look at our lives — deliberately focusing on issues and questions through reflection and meditation and discussion and dialogue with others — in order to come back with a renewed sense of direction for living.
- Jesus modeled this pattern of engagement and withdrawal, and it is instructive for contemporary disciples as well.
- Retreats deepen the fellowship of a community through shared experiences and can helpfully focus the energy of a group, whether your purpose is to do planning, problem solving, team building, or to tackle a topic of interest or concern.

Who is the retreat for?

Are you planning for

- Members of the church only?
- Members of your church and their invited guests?
- Members of several churches in your area?
- Any interested people in your community?

Remember, people attend what they help to plan, so if you're looking to reach a larger audience than just your established group, invite and involve others to assist in planning for the retreat as well. Don't just invite them once all the planning is done!

When can we go?

Make sure to check school calendars for concerts, big games, tests, and so on that would affect the attendance of your particular audience. Look also at times when in-service days or other days off might allow for a possible new pattern — like a Thursday evening through

Saturday, for instance, or a Sunday afternoon through Monday night. Some adult groups have found that creating an alternative of interest to some people while others are involved in a major cultural event (the Super Bowl, Mother's Day, prom, a big tourist event in your town) is a worthwhile and much appreciated ministry.

As you plan for your retreat, there are many things to keep in mind. You'll find helpful input from your conference camp/retreat ministry leaders — don't hesitate to ask for ideas that work well or considerations that are especially helpful at the site you are using. Many people have asked us for a checklist to guide their planning. Here is a topical list, then a timeline, and finally some tips from experienced leaders — offered to assist you. **Retreat Planning Checklist**

- Reasons for having a retreat
- Goals for this retreat
- Theme
- Dates
- Location
- Leaders
- Activities and program components
- Contingency plans
- Meals
- Finances
- Schedule
- Transportation
- Snacks
- Policies
- Publicity
- Registration
- Evaluation
- Other:
- Other:

A retreat is an intentional time apart to experience a new awareness of the presence of God. It is an opportunity to get some distance and see things in perspective. It requires a pace that is unhurried and conducive to rest and relaxation in order to come back with a renewed sense of living as disciples of Christ.

Steps for Effective Retreats

6-12 months ahead

- Determine the reason for this retreat.
- Appoint a coordinator and form a retreat-planning team.
- Pray for guidance, direction, and purpose.
- Write down the objectives for the group sponsoring the retreat.
- Choose a theme based upon the purpose of the retreat.
- Write down the specific objectives for the actual retreat.
- Write down the major blocks of time and activities.
- Include food preparation, if needed.
- Check these against objectives.

- Look at your church calendar for when a retreat could best be held; choose the best time considering other schedules as well.
- Choose the best facility for your purpose; make sure deposit is paid; confirm reservations
- Choose leader(s) or resource person(s) for your theme.

OR

- You can let a specific person choose topics, based on your objectives.
- Decide honorarium based on fees and expenses if a visiting leader is chosen.
- Begin promotion — communicate excitement about objectives, dates, schedule as known.

2-3 months ahead

- Saturate all aspects of planning with prayer!
- Keep promoting via bulletins, news, mailings, handouts, and word of mouth.
- You will need to communicate the following:
 - specific information, including objectives
 - registration fees and deadlines (consider collecting registration with a deposit so participants will commit to the time away and you'll have funds to pay facility deposit or program supplies ahead of time)
 - itinerary with the time schedule
- Visit the site, if possible, to familiarize yourself, particularly if you haven't been there before

1 month ahead

- Keep praying.
- Keep publicizing through bulletins, news, mailings, handouts, and word of mouth.
- Assign specific tasks to teams.
- Orient, train, and motivate leaders/teams.
- Give clear job expectations to leaders.
- Be clear with leaders about time commitments.
- Follow-up with individuals regarding their progress on tasks assigned.
- Familiarize your leaders with the facility use agreement and relevant policies.

2-3 weeks ahead

- Continue to pray.
- Keep publicizing, ESPECIALLY by word of mouth.
- If cooking food, plan meals based on registrations.
- Hand out itinerary and things to bring.
- Check in with leaders about progress with their areas.

1 week ahead

- Pray some more!

- If you need to, meet with planning committee once more to finalize.

Retreat

- Enjoy!
- Have a time for reflection and feedback with participants.
- Hand out evaluations before closing program.

Post-retreat

- Meet with planning committee to go over evaluations.
- Make note of what worked and what didn't for the next time.
- Follow-up with individuals to continue meeting your objectives

Note: The Christian Camping International publication "Seven Steps for Effective Retreats" (part of their *Focus* series) is quite good. I recommend it highly. You can reach CCI at www.cciusa.org.

Tips Gathered From Experienced Retreat Leaders

- Personal contact via word of mouth is the BEST promotion!
- Choose at least three people to invite people individually.
- When deciding price, give scholarships instead of lowering price.
- Budget for a positive balance (i.e., charge \$5 extra to cover unexpected expenses).
- Usually 24-48 hours is typical for length of retreat — but it can be more or less.
- Be sure to allow for flexibility, spontaneity. Be open to the Spirit!
- Over-plan (plan for more than you'll actually include in any one event) so there are no lapses, but allow for flexibility.
- Allow time for worship, unstructured time, input, reflection, and reaction.
- Individual sessions should be 90 minutes maximum.
- Always plan optional strategies in case of a change of circumstances (i.e., weather factors).
- Choose a site that is not too far away and not too close — it's good to have a sense of being apart from your usual setting.
- The site should match your objectives for gathering.
- Be able to specify what kind of space you need (spaces for gathering the whole group together, as well as breakout spaces for small-group activities, for example).
- Consider the number of people desirable for your particular objectives. Bigger is not necessarily better.
- Touch base with your planning committee at least once during the retreat to review schedule and process and make any adjustments required.
- If appropriate, offer classes or groups for follow-up after the retreat.

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