



Ideas for Worship, Play, Community Building

Introduction

At the end of leading the retreat with a small church congregation, I invited the participants to name the ways in which the retreat had been meaningful to them. During the past two days we had thought about the light of Christ, and along the way we had studied Scriptures about light, worshiped by candlelight, made a banner together, and enjoyed the beauty of the autumn season. Now we sat around the Lord's Table to eat a last meal together before it was time to go home.

One woman spoke up in response to my question, speaking softly. "In the last two days, I have learned more about the people in my church community than I have learned in fifteen years of going to Sunday worship. I can't believe how much closer I feel to all of them."

I have heard similar comments to these made again and again by those who attend retreats. People come away with a deeper awareness of God's presence and a new consciousness of being part of Christ's community. By leaving the ordinary routines of our lives, putting away our calendars, slowing down our pace, and making time to linger—over a meal, a sunset, a thought, a prayer—we allow the gifts of a retreat to fill our being.

It is the reality of two or three days of time away that creates the opportunity for lingering. It is the responsibility of a planning group to integrate time for lingering and slowing down into the schedule and to intentionally invite participants into activities that build community, open up space for God, and encourage groups to share experiences together. Worship can be more informal, more participatory, and connected to the outdoor

space; community building and play enables the group members to find out about each other and to have fun; the exploration of nature allows participants to pay attention to the natural setting, to ponder the Creator God, and to consider God's call to preserve and protect the creation.

Worship

Worship is the central act of the people of God. In our call to worship, God echoes through the Old and New Testaments. No retreat would be complete without times of worship so that the gathered community can invite God into their presence with praises, confession, supplication, and the hearing of God's word. Normally, we associate the act of worship with Sunday and with

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sanctuaries that we have built and set apart for that use alone. However, the informality and natural setting of retreats provide the gathered community with the opportunity to engage in other forms of worship beyond the familiar Sunday morning format. Morning watch, morning or evening prayers/vespers, and times of silent worship allow us to worship in different ways. The retreat setting invites us to engage in more informal and responsive practices. Any of the following practices can be included in these worship settings.

- **Read Psalms Responsively**—Since so many of the psalms were written to be used in corporate

worship, they easily lend themselves to a responsive reading. You can alternate two groups of voices, such as male and female, or use a single voice and a chorus of voices for the response. Any psalm can be read this way. Read verses back and forth or read a verse and use a single, repeated response.

- **Use Easy Music**—Instead of lugging along hymnals and singing hymns with multiple verses, explore the use of songs and hymns that are short and repetitive. Several collections of such songs are listed at the end of this essay, or you can use praise music or music from the Taizé Community. The shorter, simpler songs mean that retreat groups can sing anywhere they want to worship, including spaces outside.
- **Have Retreat Participants Develop Worship**—Instead of a worship leader developing all the worship services, participants can do this as part of their reflection on the meaning of the retreat. They can write prayers, choose music, create a way to relate the Scripture, and offer confession. A closing worship created by participants that includes their insights into the theme can be very powerful.
- **Offer Symbols with Natural Elements**—In making an offering to God, we are dedicating a gift God has given us back to God's service. Within the retreat setting, participants can collect items from nature (remind them not to pick anything living) and make an offering to God.
- **Make Time for Confession**—You can personalize confession by asking participants to write out their sins and then inviting them to burn them in a campfire as a sign of God's forgiveness.
- **Make a Skit to Proclaim the Scripture**—Retreat settings offer a different context to read Scripture than is ordinarily practiced in our sanctuaries. Acting out a biblical scene can engage all participants and offer new light on biblical passages. It also can be a good way to engage different age groups together.
- **Engage the Senses**—Retreat settings offer many opportunities to engage all of our senses in worship. We are creatures who explore our world with our sense of smell, touch, sight, taste, and sound. You

can be intentional about making all the senses part of the worship experience. For example,

- The smell of a campfire
- The sound of running water
- The feel of the texture of wood and leaves
- The taste of bread and juice
- The sight of the colors of wildflowers

Recreation and Play

The word *recreation* often conjures up the images of kickball or tag played in a schoolyard; in our minds, play is sometimes limited to children and their games. More and more, our idea of recreation has become one of observation, and the emphasis is placed on competition and winning. Retreats offer the opportunity to rediscover the wonders of playing together for fun, being outdoors, and finding joy in shared activity. Within the retreat environment, a wider understanding of recreation can be explored through community-building activities, noncompetitive games, and adventure programming. The relaxed and informal atmosphere of a retreat lends itself well to play and fun. Such whimsical behavior reminds us that Jesus told us we must be as little children when we come into the kingdom!

As you plan your retreat, weave together worship, play, and nature exploration, not as extras, but as important aspects of the retreat experience. They will enrich the meaningfulness of the retreat for all the participants. Joined with your study and work, they will create a holistic experience.

Community Building

The goal of group-building activities is to develop a sense of community by enhancing the comfort level of the group and deepening their sense of familiarity with each other. These activities allow participants to share experiences and information with each other in a fun way. There are lots of resources available, and some are listed at the end of this section of the essay. Become familiar with the directions for a game ahead of time so that you can give the directions in your own words. Be sure you have all the supplies you need.

- **Human Bingo**—Create a Bingo card with five blocks across (rows) and five blocks down (columns), just like a Bingo card. Write the letters B-I-N-G-O in the first row across. Instead of numbers filling all the boxes, write a piece of information such as someone who is wearing red, someone who has been to Montana, someone who likes to cook, etc. Provide each participant with a copy of the BINGO card and have them circulate and find people who fit a box and have that person initial their card. The first person who fills an entire column or row wins.
- **Barnyard Scramble**—Choose three or four animals that make a distinctive noise and write them on cards so that there are enough for everyone. Pass out the cards and tell participants they are to find others who are animals like them by making the animal's noise.
- **Name Puzzle**—Give out paper and markers. Have each person write his or her first name down the left hand side of the paper, lining up the letters one on top of the other and write a word or phrase that says something about them that begins with the same letter. Invite them to share what they have written.
- **Commonalities**—Have participants mingle and form pairs. Have the pairs find out at least three things they have in common.

Noncompetitive Games

Noncompetitive games put the emphasis on having fun together rather than on winning. Often the whole group or sometimes smaller teams will achieve some goal together just for the pure enjoyment of doing it.

- **Knots**—Eight to twelve people stand shoulder to shoulder in a circle and grab the hands of two other people in the circle who are not standing next to them. Then the group untangles the “knot” they have made without dropping hands.
- **Dragon Tail**—The whole group is divided into smaller groups of six to eight people. These people stand in a line with their hands on the shoulder of the person in front of them to make a “dragon.” The

last person in the line tucks a bandana into his or her back pocket and the other “dragons” try to grab it. When the bandana is grabbed, the front player goes to the end of the line and play continues.

- **Elbow Tag**—Group members form pairs, linked by their elbows, with the outside arm bent at the elbow. The pair who is “it” tries to tag another pair, but in

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this tag game, those who are not “it” can become safe by hooking up with the elbow of one of the other not “it” pairs.

Adventure Programming

Adventure programming includes a wide variety of activities divided into the categories of initiative games and low and high ropes courses. The inclusion of adventure programming can enrich the community building and fun of a retreat experience. It is important to note that leading adventure courses, especially low and high ropes, requires special training. No retreat group should ever attempt to lead a ropes course without a trained facilitator and without following safety guidelines developed by the site.

- **Initiative Games**—These games are characterized by fun, cooperation, and trust building. They usually involve a group of people in an activity in which the group works together to solve a problem. Conversation following the event helps groups think about the dynamics of the group and what they learned. The physical risk is low, and props are often moveable so the games can be played anywhere.
- **Low Ropes**—These courses generally use obstacles that have been built on an established course. Again, the goal is to allow a group to work together and

then to reflect on what happened and what was learned. The physical risk for low ropes is slightly higher than for initiatives.

- **High Ropes**—These courses involve elements that are built high off the ground. All high ropes courses should practice rigorous safety standards. While initiative games and low ropes courses stress group activities, high ropes courses stress individual achievement. Still, they can become a group experience of sorts when group members encourage and belay each other and then process the experience together.

Nature Exploration

The natural surroundings of camps and retreat centers invite participants to take quiet walks or sit simply to enjoy the beauty of creation. However, retreats also provide opportunities for participants to observe the natural processes and explore the habitats of creatures and plants at the site. Here are some suggestions:

- **Look for Colors**—Take paint color cards from a home improvement store along on a walk. How many of the colors can you find in the natural world?
- **Observe the Small Details of Nature**—With a fifteen-inch-long piece of yarn or string, make a circle or square on the ground. Look at the surface of the ground. What do you see? Who lives there? What grows there? Use a stick or trowel to dig into the soil. What do you see at the second level?
- **Listen to the Natural Sounds**—Stand outside where you are away from human sounds and just listen. What do you hear? What direction are the sounds coming from? What is making the sounds?

- **Make a Rubbing**—Place a piece of paper over the bark of trees or the surface of stones and use crayons or charcoal to make a rubbing. How are the patterns different from each other? What surprises you?
- **Take a Walk**—Take a walk around the camp or retreat center site. Notice how the plants are related to the soil; how water, weather, and the seasons affect their growth; and what creatures depend on them for food and habitat.
- **Go on a Night Hike**—Go outside at night and look up at the sky. Read aloud Psalm 8. Ponder the question in verse 4: “What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” What can you give in return for the goodness of the Creator God?

Resources for Play

Anthony Burcher and Mike Burcher, *Making Fun Out of Nothing at All* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004).

Marilyn Kielbasa, *Community-Building Ideas for Ministry with Young Teens* (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 2000).

New Games Foundation, *New Games* (n.p.: Dolphin Books, 1976).

New Games Foundation, *More New Games* (n.p.: Dolphin Books, 1981).

About the Writer

Nancy Ferguson is a certified educator and former day camp director at Camp Hanover (in Richmond, Virginia). She lives on the eastern shore of Virginia where she concentrates on writing resources for camps and retreats. She is the author of eight books including *The Retreat Leader's Manual: A Complete Guide to Organizing Meaningful Christian Retreats with Kevin Witt*, and *Retreats for Renewal: 5 Models for Intergenerational Weekends*.