



Church Retreats and Faith Formation

Introduction

I am the daughter of a Presbyterian elder, and I spent my childhood and youth attending Sunday school and worship. At church, people called me by name, and I felt safe and welcomed. At college, I participated in a denominational fellowship group, and the chaplain introduced me to Karl Barth and Paul Tillich, encouraging me to use my brain to think about God. After college there was a year of seminary and then marriage.

For fourteen years I lived in small towns as the minister's wife and tested out my own skills to educational ministry by writing Bible studies for women. Then there was a return to seminary, graduation, and ordination that eventually led to almost thirty years as a church camp professional with a focus on summer camps, retreats, and the creation of resources for other camp leaders.

Along the way, my faith was shaped and formed by my experiences in churches, at camps, and during retreats. It was formed by the ideas, and words, and love of those I encountered on my journey. I found God's presence as I ate with others with whom I shared a common experience, as I walked through shaded woods with the dogs, and as I worshiped around a campfire, watching as the light lit the faces of the community. My faith was battered by family pain, difficult choices, and transitions; my faith was strengthened by the faithfulness of those who stood beside me.

I am not the only one with a story of faith. Each of you reading this article has a story about the experiences

and the people you found along the way and the role they played in nurturing your faith. Collectively we have discovered our gifts and the ways to use those gifts in the service of Christ.

The topic of faith formation has recently become a buzzword in the church with a variety of definitions. In this essay I want to explore one perspective and provide suggestions about the ways in which retreats are natural places for faith formation.

Faith Formation

Faith formation is the process by which we grow up into mature discipleship. Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians, "The gifts he gave were . . . to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the

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body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ." (Eph. 4:11-16)

Faith formation encompasses the ways in which we are molded into disciples, grow up into Christ, and are knit together so that we can promote growth in others. Faith formation is about the ways we acquire the maturity we

need to take our place in the body of Christ and, in turn, equip others for their ministries.

A decade or so ago the Search Institute did an extensive research project to identify the characteristics of Christian education programs that lead adults and youth to have a mature faith. Some of their findings were remarkably like the words of Paul. Their research found that mature Christians, among other things, trust in God's saving grace, integrate faith and life, and seek to be part of a community that gives "witness to their faith and support and nourish each other."¹

Paul is clear that it is within the body, within the church, that faith is formed. This is one understanding of the church that has stayed constant through the centuries. Within the church there are the traditional practices of worship, education, fellowship, and service through which the church has sought to nurture faith. A second stream for formation also emerged from the earliest days of the church. The practice of retreats and pilgrimages as well as the monastic movement valued time spent away from the everyday. Separated from others, you could make your sole focus be on God, living in community, and service to others.

From that retreat and monastic tradition has come our modern retreats—time spent away from the ordinary with an emphasis on God and others. All sorts of experiences are now labeled "retreat"—an officer's planning retreat, a choir practice retreat, a youth confirmation retreat, a church family retreat, and so forth. Many people still hear the word *retreat* and associate it with an exclusive purpose of making connections with God through the practice of spiritual disciplines and prayers.

However the retreat experience is defined or understood, several things remain constants for all retreats. They offer a period of time away from the everyday demands and responsibilities of our lives, as well as opportunities to live within a community and the natural surroundings of God's creation. This sustained time of retreat offers a unique occasion for faith formation. The question before us is how to maximize the use of this setting as part of the education and nurture programs of the church.

The other essays in this collection address the need to go away for retreat and to understand the retreat as a single experience in which all the parts—worship, study, play,

and nature exploration—are important. In the remainder of this essay, I will examine the need to adapt educational methods to the retreat's unique setting.

Retreats as Occasions to Nurture Faith

On any Sunday morning in churches all over this country, classes of children, youth, and adults meet for faith education. Usually an hour or forty five minutes are set aside, but by the time everyone arrives and gets focused the time is closer to thirty to forty minutes. During this limited time, we seek to educate our congregational members about what it means to follow Christ, give them some biblical and theological content, and make connections between the content and how they should live their lives. We are under great pressure—particularly with children and youth—to make it interesting and fun enough so they will come back again the following week. More often than not they come only once or twice a month, or less.

Compare this to the retreat setting. Youth, children, parents, or older adults leave home with church leaders and come to the camp or retreat center late on Friday afternoon. If they arrive early enough there is time to set up their room and explore the grounds or sit by the fire with a cup of hot cocoa. After dinner there are name games and mixers, an introduction to the theme or purpose of the retreat, and worship. There may be a campfire, s'mores, and a night hike. For the next day or two, there is time for lingering over meals, for laughter, for praising God together, for exploring God's creation, and for "educational" or work aspect of the retreat.

The Search Institute found in the same study cited above that an effective educational program "not only teaches in the classical sense of transmitting insight and knowledge, but also allows insights to emerge from the crucible of experience." Interestingly, they determined that both types of learning together are more effective than either one alone.² This is where retreats come in. They are the place where the experience of participants is both valued and understood as important. Even beyond this, retreats are where the inclusion of multiple experiences from which participants can learn and grow is made with intention and purpose.

The retreat experience is everything that happens from the moment the group arrives until everyone goes

home. The designated content learning as well as all the other elements of the retreat contributes to the nurture of faith. Staying at the breakfast table for conversation and a second cup of coffee, eating s'mores around a campfire, singing songs of praise by candlelight, taking a creek walk, and playing silly games are as much a part of the way in which faith is formed and molded as the times to learn about Jesus.

Experiential Education

Many retreat groups choose to re-create the learning environment of church school by sitting down in chairs and focusing on content. This does not make the best use of the unique opportunities offered for growing in faith by the retreat setting. The informality, the natural environment, and the sustained amount of time make types of experiential education a great fit for retreats.

So what exactly is experiential education? It is an educational process that begins with the experience and leads to insight and spiritual learning.

The most valuable aspect of experiential education is that it enables learners to make connections between content and their own lives. It is a process that is active, participatory, and dynamic. Learners do not get to just sit and listen, they need to be up and contributing. Experiential education integrates the use of all the multiple intelligences (see the Thoughtful Christian free teaching tool titled "Multiple Intelligences: Understanding the Many Ways We Learn" for more information) and appeals to those learners who get lost with linguistic teaching methods. The methods are especially effective for intergenerational retreats when groups are composed of participants of different ages.

The shared experiences of this education model are fashioned in one of two ways. Either the group creates and shares in an experience or the experience is one common to all group members, although it may not have happened to them all at the same time. Let's look at some ways these two types of methods operate and their use within a retreat. These methods work best if the whole group is divided into smaller groups of six to eight.

1. The group creates and shares an experience.

- Creative Telling of the Biblical Story—Assign each small group with a biblical story from one of the Gospels or from the Old Testament to read and then to interpret through a skit, mural, slideshow, song, or poem. Invite the small groups to present their creation for the whole group and encourage them to talk about what insights the creative telling of the story gave them.
- Creative Response to the Biblical Story—Following the telling of the biblical story or theme, ask small groups to use a creative arts medium such as clay, pastels, watercolors, collage, and so forth to portray the meaning they find in the story or passage. Invite the whole group to wander through a display of the creative responses and to reflect on the meanings they find through them.

The informal setting invites conversations, provides time for reflection, leads to a deeper sense of community, and gives us time to laugh and learn together.

- Nature Exploration—In small groups, explore an ecosystem or aspect of the natural setting at the retreat center. You can walk by the water and observe the plants and creatures that live in and near the water; go on a wildflower hike and see how many different kinds of flowers you can find, noticing their colors and seed growth; go outside at night and look at the stars; or sit somewhere quietly and listen for the sound of birds. Reflect together on what you observed and where you found the presence of God.
- Challenge Courses—Arrange for a facilitator to lead small groups on the camp/retreat center's high or low ropes course. Engage in the "debriefing" and talk together about what the group learned about itself and each other.

2. Experiences common to the group members but not shared at the same time.

- Shared Christian Praxis Learning Process (developed by Thomas Groome)—Participants begin by reflecting on an experience or feeling common to all of them. They then hear the biblical story and weave the story together with their own experiences to decide a way they can act differently in the future.
- Theologizing Method—Begin by sharing stories about a common experience or feeling. Choose a biblical story that focuses on the theme and then ponder the implication of the biblical passage for the common experience.
- Life Maps—Each person in the small group marks their life experiences chronologically along a line drawn down the middle of a piece of paper. They can add the places they lived, major transitions, people important to them, and current events going on in the world. Participants can then share their insights, observations, and lessons learned as they reflect on their faith stories, asking where God was along their journey.

A Final Thought

Retreats offer us a wonderful complement to the nurture ministry of the local congregation. In the sustained learning environment of a retreat, learners can reflect on their faith in new ways. The informal setting invites conversations, provides time for reflection, leads to a deeper sense of community, and gives us time to laugh and learn together. The total experience draws us closer to God and plays a role in forming us into mature disciples of Christ.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. "Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations" (Minneapolis: Search Institute, 1990), 10.
2. Ibid., 54