



# Essentials of Retreat Planning

## Introduction

In my experience as camp host, I have watched many retreat groups come and go. Some leave camp full of excitement and hope, thankful for the weekend and reluctant to go home. Other groups limped away, glad that the weekend was over so that they could go back to their regular lives. As I have considered the two types of groups, there are some things I know for sure:

- Great retreats yield significant spiritual growth for participants.
- Great retreats offer participants encounters with God, with each other, and with creation.
- Great retreats provide meaningful and memorable experiences for participants within an environment of Christian hospitality.
- Great retreats take seriously the responsibility to keep participants safe physically, spiritually, and emotionally.
- Great retreats do not just happen.
- Great retreats require great planning.
- Great retreats require the commitment of a group of people working together for up to a year to develop the many retreat details—big and small—and to put them in place.

The other thing I know for sure is that you and your congregation—regardless of its size—can hold a great retreat. It requires attention to a lot of details, but with careful planning it is a goal all churches can achieve. Begin with a committed bunch of people and give them a well-developed timeline and list of tasks, encouragement, and prayer, and you can have a great retreat.

## Committee

Form a retreat planning committee as far in advance as possible, even up to a year before the retreat. Include on the committee those who have previous experiences attending retreats and those with special skills for such things as music, promotion, and organization. Set up a schedule for the countdown to the retreat. A sample of this type of schedule is given at the end of this essay. If possible, establish the dates for your regular planning meetings so that all have the dates on their calendars.

**A retreat center with hotel-like facilities is probably not the best choice for a youth group planning lots of active group games.**

You may want to divide the committee into task groups and add others with special skills as needed.

The first job of the group is to choose the date for the retreat and get it on the church calendar. Do this as early as possible and publicize the date so that members of the congregation can mark the date on their own calendars. Promise that more information about theme, leaders, and schedule will be available soon.

## Location

The second major task of the planning committee or subgroup is to determine the location for the retreat and to reserve the space at that location for the retreat. The frequent choice for many congregations is a nearby judicatory or private camp or retreat center. An important aspect of a great retreat is actually going away. Hotels

and church basements do not provide the separation or freedom from distractions needed for great retreats.

Camps and retreat centers offer the spaces most conducive to a retreat experience at reasonable prices. Camp office staff members are familiar with the questions and requirements of church groups and are trained to help you find your way through their fee schedule and the types of accommodations offered at the site. Keep in mind that weekend spaces at camp and retreat centers book early so you may need to reserve your space up to a year in advance.

The purpose of the retreat and the facilities of the site should match. A retreat center with hotel-like facilities is probably not the best choice for a youth group planning lots of active group games. Yet it might be a great choice for an older adult spirituality retreat that will include silence and solitude. If you are not familiar with the site, visit ahead of time and ask lots of questions about what is included in the fee. Find out what other resources are available, such as swimming, canoeing, campfires, and/or nature trails. Be sure that you meet deadlines for providing a count of participants and registration payment.

## Program Development

The first step of program development is to be able to understand and articulate the purpose of the retreat. It may be to practice Advent music or to engage in spiritual practices or to gather as congregational leaders to plan for the year. Or it may be an intense time of confirmation preparation for youth or even a church family retreat. Whatever the purpose, the planning group will then need to ask how they can best achieve that purpose during the retreat. A list of retreat program books are available online and at denominational bookstores. Additionally, a growing collection of retreat programs are available on the Thoughtful Christian Web site.

There are three basic program models for retreats. In the first model, a keynote speaker explores a topic or theme with the participants in a basic lecture format. A variation of this model uses sessions following the keynote to give participants the opportunity to discuss the content of the lecture.

A third method, which lends itself particularly well for retreats, is the experiential model that invites participants to explore a theme or topic in a small-group

format without a keynote speaker. The activities of the groups are based on shared experiences and value the contribution of all group members. This format works especially well for spirituality retreats, youth retreats, and intergenerational whole-church retreats. Lots more information about this experiential model can be found in “Church Retreats and Faith Formation,” another in this collection of retreat essays.

Once you have chosen your retreat model, you are ready to invite your retreat leader or keynote speaker to develop and lead the theme using one of these models. You will want to invite the leader well in advance of the retreat. Ask that person to provide you with the number and length of sessions so that you can plan them into the schedule.

## Retreat Schedule

Retreats normally begin on Friday evening and last until Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning. Several examples of retreat schedules are given below. You will want to adapt them to match the needs of your congregation and the program you are planning. Begin with the arrival and departure times and then insert meal times—usually set by the camp or conference center. Once you and the leadership have decided on program times and number, you can put those in your schedule. Don’t forget to include time for group building, play, worship, nature exploration, and free time.

### Two-Day Weekend Retreat

#### Friday

6:00 p.m.	Registration and getting settled
6:30 p.m.	Dinner
7:30 p.m.	Community-building activities
8:00 p.m.	Introduction to the theme
8:30 p.m.	Worship
9:00 p.m.	Snacks and/or bedtime

#### Saturday

7:30 a.m.	Morning devotions (optional)
8:00 a.m.	Breakfast
9:00 a.m.	Large-group meeting, singing, and worship
10:00 a.m.	Community-building activities and small groups
11:00 a.m.	Workshops in nature study or creative activities

12:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 p.m.	Free time/recreation
2:30 p.m.	Small groups
3:30 p.m.	Worship
4:30 p.m.	Go home

## Three-Day Weekend Retreat

### Friday

7:00 p.m.	Registration and getting settled
8:00 p.m.	Community-building activities, announcements, and introductions
9:00 p.m.	First keynote address/introduction to the theme
10:00 p.m.	Worship
10:30 p.m.	Snacks
11:00 p.m.	In cabins (or facilities)
12:00 a.m.	Lights out

### Saturday

7:30 a.m.	Morning watch
8:00 a.m.	Breakfast
9:00 a.m.	Community-building activities and second keynote
9:45 a.m.	Small groups
10:30 a.m.	Workshop using creative arts
12:00 p.m.	Lunch
1:00 p.m.	Community-building activities and third keynote
1:45 p.m.	Small groups
2:30 p.m.	Workshop using creative arts
4:00 p.m.	Free time
6:00 p.m.	Dinner
7:00 p.m.	Sharing of the workshop experiences
8:00 p.m.	Community-building activities and fourth keynote
8:45 p.m.	Small groups
9:30 p.m.	Worship
10:00 p.m.	Snacks and social time
11:00 p.m.	In cabin
12:00 a.m.	Lights out

### Sunday

7:30 a.m.	Morning watch
8:00 a.m.	Breakfast
9:00 a.m.	Small groups plan worship

10:00 a.m.	Closing worship with final reflections on theme
11:00 a.m.	Go home

## Budget

The goal of planning a retreat budget is to figure out ahead of time how the retreat can pay for itself. The process includes several unique challenges. For example, you have no idea how many people will come when you prepare the budget and you will need money up front to pay for reservations at your location before you have any income.

Here's a suggestion for how to address those challenges. Estimate the number of people who will attend and then calculate a per-person cost. Determine the cost for each individual at a retreat center for room and

## Identify small ways to make people feel welcome as soon as they arrive.

board. Then add up the speaker honorarium, program costs, promotion/registration, and so forth and divide by the estimated number of attendees. Add those two figures together to determine a registration fee.

Some congregations include a budgeted line item for retreats in the church budget. You can use that money to cover the upfront costs of the reservation fees at your location and for the work of the committee.

## Promotion and Registration

In an age of social networks, e-mail, and desktop publishing, there are no limits on the ways a planning committee can promote the retreat. Develop a visual "brand"—clipart of a created logo—so everyone will recognize announcements about the retreat. You can use that "brand" whenever you talk about the retreat, whether it is in the newsletter, on Facebook, or on T-shirts.

Create both a hard copy and electronic registration brochure so that people can choose the format they want to use. Be sure that registration deadlines and requirements are clear. Remember the personal touch of making phone calls, speaking to people face to face, and

following up with people who say they are coming but don't register. Follow up each registration application with a cover letter, directions to the site, and a "what to bring" list, including such things as appropriate clothing, sleeping bag, Bibles, and so forth.

## Hospitality

It is through intentional practices of hospitality that participants feel welcome. This is an important component in making a great retreat since it helps participants feel comfortable in an unknown place with this group of people. The planning committee will want to get there before the rest of the retreat group. In that way they can set up registration and arrange signs to sleeping lodges, meeting rooms, and the dining hall. Identify small ways to make people feel welcome as soon as they arrive: have ready refreshments, maps of the site, nametags, and a suggestion for an interactive activity they can do while they wait for everyone to arrive.

At many camps and retreat centers there is a facility host assigned to the group. The planning committee members need to identify themselves to this person when they arrive and find out what the site will do to provide hospitality.

## Risk Management

The management of risks is something often overlooked by congregational retreat planners. No one wants participants to be hurt in any way, but risks are a reality. Instead of hoping that nothing will happen, it is possible for the planning committee to anticipate the risks and to reduce their impact through careful planning. All participants should complete a health information form, which includes health conditions, allergies, medications, and next of kin. The parents or guardians of all youth attending a retreat without them should complete a permission-to-treat form. The church's sexual abuse policies should certainly be in effect.

The camp or retreat center shares the management of risks with the congregation. Find out about their policies ahead of time. This is particularly true if retreat guests will go swimming, canoeing, or use high or low ropes course. Camps and retreat centers accredited by the American Camp Association (ACA) operate according to the highest nationally established standards.

For more information about managing risks during retreats, see "Keeping Participants Safe" in *The Retreat Leaders Manual* (found in the "For More Information" section) or visit the ACA's Web site at <http://www.acacamps.org/staff/safety>.

## Evaluation

Develop an evaluation form to use at the end of the retreat. This will allow you to know what participants liked and didn't like. The information you gather will be useful to the next group charged with planning a retreat.

Great retreats are possible with careful planning. Such retreats result in spiritual growth for individuals and for congregations. Great retreats create meaningful memories that can lead to a desire for other similar experiences.

## Retreat Planning Resources

Nancy Ferguson and Kevin Witt, *The Retreat Leader's Manual: A Complete Guide to Organizing Meaningful Christian Retreats* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006).

Rachel Gilmore, *The Complete Leader's Guide to Christian Retreats* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009).

## 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*.

# Sample Retreat Planning Schedule

## Up to One Year Before

- \_\_\_ Select a retreat planning committee and choose a convener
- \_\_\_ Set a date for the retreat
- \_\_\_ Get the date on the church's calendar
- \_\_\_ Reserve a location for the retreat
- \_\_\_ Establish a budget, including cost of space, leadership, supplies, and so forth
- \_\_\_ Make a deposit to reserve the retreat facility

## Six Months

- \_\_\_ Choose a theme and write goals and objectives
- \_\_\_ Design a retreat outline
- \_\_\_ Set a schedule
- \_\_\_ Invite speakers/workshop leaders
- \_\_\_ Develop safety and other retreat policies
- \_\_\_ Plan promotion of the retreat
- \_\_\_ Make announcements about dates/theme/place

## Three Months

- \_\_\_ Develop a process for registration and choose a registrar
- \_\_\_ Design, print, and distribute a brochure for event
- \_\_\_ Promote! Promote! Promote!

## Two Months

- \_\_\_ Promote! Promote! Promote!
- \_\_\_ Stay in contact with the retreat facility and send any additional deposits as needed
- \_\_\_ Design evaluation forms
- \_\_\_ Plan for hospitality details and make an assignment list

## One Month

- \_\_\_ Check with leaders about any special supplies they may need
- \_\_\_ Check on hospitality details

## One Week

- \_\_\_ Check with the retreat site about numbers
- \_\_\_ Check with leaders about time of arrival and any special needs
- \_\_\_ Purchase snacks and supplies

## After the Retreat

- \_\_\_ Review evaluations
- \_\_\_ Get feedback from committee members
- \_\_\_ Prepare a written report for next year's committee
- \_\_\_ Set a time and place for next year's retreat