



What's the Point of Church Retreats?

Introduction

Some of the best memories I have from my high school youth group are related to our annual retreats at a nearby church camp. They were times of having fun and laughing, cooking and eating together, being outside, and developing a sense of God's presence beyond the walls of the church. Those experiences shaped me in ways unimaginable to me at the time. Out of them flowed my sense of vocation and eventually my ministry as an outdoor ministry professional. The journey was long, but its origins are deeply rooted in the retreat experiences.

It was several years later when I spent my first summer at camp and decades later when I finally said yes to God's call to be a full-time camp director. With the acceptance of that call came a peace and sense of coming "home" that still surprises me. Over the summers of directing camp, I have seen God use that setting to touch the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of counselors, children, and youth. As a retreat host and program leader I have watched as participants slowed down and found God among the tall pines of the Virginia woods. As a retreat and camp consultant I have heard story after story of the way in which God transformed lives at a camp or retreat.

I am not the only church leader and participant who traces his or her spiritual journey back through such times. In 2002, the Presbyterian Panel, a survey agency of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), found that 53% of pastors and 41% of church leaders had significant

spiritual experiences at a camp or retreat. Of the churches surveyed, 59% held a retreat in the previous year. Informal surveys of directors of admission at denominational seminaries testify to the number of students who include significant faith experiences they have had during camps and/or retreats.

Both personal stories and the public record speak of the importance of retreats in faith journeys. This article will seek to examine the reason for that and suggest ways

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that congregational leaders can create such experiences for members.

What Is in a Word?

What comes to your mind when you hear the word *retreat*. Perhaps you are like me and remember youth retreats that were filled with fun and some learning. Perhaps you are part of a congregation that has an annual church retreat going off to your judicatory camp for good food, fellowship, play, and study. Perhaps you go away with your church leaders to plan for the next year or go with the choir to practice your Advent music. Or you may be like many for whom retreats mean a focus

on seeking the presence of God through contemplative prayer, silence, spiritual direction, and meditation.

The word *retreat* seems to encompass all these purposes—and more—making it difficult to know exactly what is meant by retreat. What the word means to one person is understood very differently by another. However, there are several common elements that hold all retreat experiences together and give meaning to them. By understanding these common components we can create positive retreat experiences regardless of how we understand the word.

When I think back to my youth retreats, three things stand out. First, we left home and went to an island in the middle of the Delaware River. There were no family responsibilities to distract us, school assignments were left behind, and there was a real separation between our ordinary lives and our retreat time. Second, we had a sustained period of time to live as a community. None of us went to school together or lived near each other. Youth group was our common gathering place, and retreats just made that more intense. For two days we hung out, explored ideas, laughed, and shared the making of a common memory. Third, we were surrounded by God's creation. I remember sitting on a sandy spit at the end of the island watching the moon kiss the water and hearing the constant bubbling of the current. I knew God's presence was there with me.

As I have participated in retreats, led retreats, and hosted retreat groups over the years, I have seen these three elements woven together into meaningful experiences again and again. Retreats involve going away, leaving behind the everyday, and going to a place apart. Retreats involve life within a sustained community of people and the time to explore relationships with each other and God. Retreats involve the opportunity to be close to God's creation in ways not normally available to us.

Going away, enjoying community, and being close to nature are consistent with great retreats. However, they are only a framework for the basic purpose of retreating, that is, to tend to our relationships with God, each other, ourselves, and creation. These three components only enhance and enable great growth in those relationships. Retreats carve out the time and space for us to be aware, to reflect, to enjoy, and to be encountered. It is what we do with the time and space that makes a retreat significant.

The Value of Retreat Time

The heartbeats of our Christian faith are our relationships—with God, with others, with creation. The whole biblical story tells us of God's continuous invitation for humans to be in relationship with God. The basis of the covenant God made with Israel was the promise, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." (Exod. 6:7). We read in Genesis that God declared it was not good for the *adam*—the earthling—to live alone (2:18a) and that God gave humans dominion over the creation, calling us to responsible relationship with all God had made (1:28).

Retreats offer us the opportunity to take care of and pay attention to those relationships to which God has called us. Retreats are unique among the other programs of the church in that they offer us time to slow down in order to be intentional about our relationships. They offer us space to pay attention to encounters with God, others, and creation that can be both significant and life transforming. The value of retreat times for the nurture of faith, the search for meaning, the building up of the body of Christ, and the practice of creation stewardship cannot be underestimated. Out of these times can emerge a renewed commitment to discipleship, a clear sense of vocation, a determination to practice the life of the spirit, and an awakened concern for the planet we call our home.

We are a people in a hurry; we live our lives at an incredible pace. Driven by text messages, crazy schedules, and demands that we live up to the lifestyle of our neighbors, we know that rest and time for renewal are hard to find. We are a people urged to consume; we are immersed in a culture that puts tremendous value on winning. The very speed at which we live and the many requirements for our time wreck havoc on the energy we have for those relationships most important to us.

Even our church lives are driven by this pace we set. We certainly hope that when we ask the polite, "How are you?" on Sunday morning that no one will ask us to slow down enough to listen to their answer. We have places to go, games to watch, shopping to do, and the hope of a quick nap. "Please," we want to say, "don't really tell me how you are." There is no time or space in our lives to listen to each other.

One of the outcomes of a cultural commitment to consumption is that the earth's nonrenewable resources are in danger of disappearing. Soil, air, water, and habitats are being consumed along with our desire to own more and more. Fresh water, nutrient-rich soil, and breathable air, once destroyed, will not come back. God has made us partners in caring for the creation; it is not an option of our faith but a requirement. There is seldom time or space in our busy lives to watch a sunset or smell a rose or delight in the stillness of a deep mountain lake and remember God's call.

Retreats create time and space for nurturing those relationships by removing us from the physical places in which we dwell and the pace at which we move. The Gospels remind us that Jesus often walked away from the crowds that constantly reached out to touch him and asked for his wisdom or healing. He turned his back on them and went up into the mountains to pray alone. Sometimes he took his disciples out on the lake to be away from the crowds and to teach them. But one way or another he took time off to go someplace else to talk to God, to delight in close friendships, and to renew himself for his ministry of service. Retreats offer us the opportunity to follow in the footsteps of our Lord.

In Acts, Luke describes for us life in the early days of the church.

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people." (Acts 2:42, 44-47a)

Retreats offer us the same kind and quality of life together. Away on retreat we can linger over a meal, share stories about our Lord, pray to and worship the three-in-one God, serve one another, and proclaim the good news. Detrick Bonhoffer, the German martyr, says the presence of other Christians "is a source of incomparable joy and

strength to the believer."¹ Like those in the early church and faith communities down through the centuries, retreats give us opportunities to praise God and to join together with glad and generous hearts.

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The natural setting of retreats enhances time and space, reminding us that we have not only a Redeemer and Sustainer God but also a Creator God. This Creator has made for us a world full of beauty, wonders, and intricacies. There is nothing in creation that is not amazing when we take the time to pay attention. That is what the psalmists did, and their hearts overflowed with awe and thanksgiving. On retreats we have the time and space to do the same.

Planning Time and Space for Relationships

During retreats, God encounters us through creation, through community, and through the time and space we have set aside to pay attention and reflect. All these encounters take place because of God's graciousness and love. However, we as planners can give structure and intention to these encounters so participants will notice them and ponder their meaning.

Great retreats do not just happen. They are the result of careful planning and activities designed to enable you to fulfill the purpose of the retreat and give participants the time and space needed for relationships. Other essays in this series will give you guidance for planning the retreat, hints for worship, play, and nature exploration, and suggestions for adapting your educational

model to the unique retreat setting. Together they will enable you to give a great retreat that is meaningful and memorable.

As you do your planning and fit each of the pieces together into a single experience, remember that all the components—going away, community building, worship, play, study—are parts of the whole. No retreat is just the study that you do or the prayers that you make or the awe that you feel or the discussions that you have. All are pieces of a puzzle God will use to transform lives, grow disciples, and nurture faith.

About the Writer

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Endnote

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 19.