

Retreats and Other Trips

What Makes Retreats Work?

What goes through people's minds when they hear the word *retreat*? Some think of cities, working in soup kitchens amid skyscrapers, parks, and museums. Others think of being miles from human development, with open skies, forests, campfires, and no television or telephones. Many imagine something in between those two extremes. Retreats continue to be one of the best ways to build Christian community. Regardless of the focus or theme, one of the wonderful, serendipitous benefits is how well trust and closeness develop individually, with others, and with God.

Consider the following reasons why retreats remain one of the most popular options with youth for developing and deepening discipleship.

New Surroundings

Getting away from the familiar and going to the unfamiliar has the effect of releasing teens from the normal roles they live in, day in and day out. In a new setting they have an option to relax, be themselves, and open up to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

A Captive Audience

Depending on the setting and intent of the retreat, there is an opportunity to have the undivided attention of a group for an extended period of time. This allows time not only for the introduction of a theme or idea, but also for many opportunities to reinforce learning in a short span of time.

Shared Community and Experiences

Youth are thrust into a setting with friends, people whom they know or at least share similar concerns and issues. This common bond

heightens their willingness to be open to each other, deepening friendships, making new ones, and supporting one another in shared experiences. A shared history allows a group to develop. Retreats become stepping stones in the faith journey.

A Dozen Ingredients for a Successful Retreat

1. Identify a steering team of youth and adults to plan and to implement the event. Ideally, a few youth and an adult would be assigned to most of the categories listed below. If that is out of range for your size group, combine tasks to suit the number of available persons.
2. Decide on the purpose and goals of the outing. Ask, "Why have this retreat? Will it help us reach our target and move toward our vision? Will it move our youth in the direction we need to go?" Don't assume everyone has the same mental image of the purpose. Agreeing on an answer to these questions gets everyone on the same page: "We're going to retreat for the expressed purpose of . . ."
3. Promote the retreat. The rule of thumb is one month of promotion for each day of an event. Note that the "one month for each day of an event" rule only applies to promotion. Planning the dates, securing the location, signing up speakers and music, and so forth should be done months in advance. Produce publicity flyers, posters, bulletins, newsletter articles, and announcements. Parents or guardians should be specifically informed about what is required in the way of dates, times, financial support, encouragement, and applicable disciplinary measures. This task also includes developing a plan of registration. Decide when registration will open and close; what maximum and minimum number of persons can be accommodated; and where, when, and how the money is to be paid. Will payment be made by installments? Will it be made all at once? Make payment as convenient as possible for the participants.
4. Investigate sites and locations for the retreat. Opportunities run the gamut from the crowded beach blasts that cater to thousands to isolated mountain lodges. Wonderful things can happen in either setting. Which place depends on the ministry goals, the overall vision, and for whom and why the event is happening. One thing is clear: Don't get crossed up by mixing the right agenda

CHAPTER TWELVE: RETREATS AND OTHER TRIPS

with the wrong location, or vice versa. Make sure the site and the goals work together. Follow up on issues such as:

- Sleeping arrangements.
 - Meeting rooms.
 - Recreation facilities.
 - Meals (who fixes them and when and where will meals be eaten).
 - Fees and hidden costs, such as phone call charges, towel fees, and firewood.
 - Rules and expectations of the site management.
5. Develop a group behavior covenant. Before the trip is taken, have the youth write a covenant setting the standards for acceptable behavior and the consequences of breaking the covenant. The word *covenant* means "agreement" or "testament." In many Biblical passages a covenant is made that declares promises between God and the people—and the consequences if the promises are broken.
 6. Inform the church and the parents. Make certain that your church officials understand the nature of the trip and give it their approval. Keep the church apprised of the group's whereabouts. A telephone call once the group has reached its destination is thoughtful. Publish the schedule of your trip or retreat in the church bulletin, newsletter, or as a bulletin insert. Ask members of your congregation to post the schedule on their refrigerators and to pray daily for your event. Parents need to be informed about the trip from registration until the travelers return home. They need to know the proposed itinerary, destination, and general activities; the address and telephone contact arrangements at the destination site and at en route lodgings; financial obligations; health and emergency release forms; which adults will accompany the youth; and the content of the group's covenant for conduct.
 7. Determine the schedule. Tackle the schedule as soon as the theme is set. In what exact order will the retreat unfold and in what time frames?
 8. Identify leadership. Identify those who will assume responsibility for the tasks listed on the schedule. Will you use a guest speaker? Who is responsible for worship? Do you need a music leader? Who will lead recreation? Who is responsible for planning and preparing food?

9. Identify and gather needed equipment. A master list of equipment is important. This list should include everything needed for recreation, program, worship, food, music, first aid, emergency lighting, and so forth. Keep space limitations of your vehicle(s) in mind.
10. Plan for emergencies. Secure an adequate first-aid kit and know how to use it; devise a health and liability form and make sure that the necessary forms for each participant are available at all times; make sure the group has adequate insurance coverage; locate the nearest hospital and medical help for major stopping points along the way; check for health hazards; establish fire exits; and set up a meeting spot for the group in case of disaster. Be aware of special health needs of participants (for example, juvenile diabetes or epilepsy), and obtain the services of a nurse for an extended outing. Follow your church's established policies for safety.
11. Make travel plans. This includes securing transportation; providing competent driver(s); giving travel directions; planning for side trips, if any; and planning for all stops. Break long rides with relaxation and recreation for both riders and drivers. The travel schedule should:
 - Reflect selected priorities.
 - Be realistic; don't try to cram too much in too little time—fatigue can be devastating to group dynamics.
 - Allow for changes when necessary and helpful.
 - Allow enough sleep time; resting in a moving vehicle is not the same as sound sleep between rides.
 - Be posted and given to participants in advance.
12. Evaluate and report the experience. Evaluation promotes celebration and leads to improvement. You can help the next group charged with planning a similar event by writing out in detail:
 - What went right and why.
 - What went wrong and why.
 - What you would recommend for similar events in the future.Multiply the value of the event by telling others what you learned and experienced during the event. This sharing also can encourage other groups to try similar activities. Sharing can be done with video presentations, posters displaying photographs, newsletter and newspaper articles, and so forth.

Many groups have a congregational dinner after their travel event to share words and pictures and what the event meant to them. The benefits of this kind of sharing are many: The congregation is informed about the "good news" of what is happening in the youth ministry; the youth gain support for their next endeavor; a powerful example is given to the children of the church about what youth ministry can be and what they have to look forward to; and youth have the opportunity to share their faith in public.

Building a Group Behavior Covenant

The covenant is written to serve the youth on the event. It should be written to ensure that the everyone present respects each person and that each person respects the group experience. It is signed as a symbol of mutual trust. A group-created covenant helps youth in your group learn to take responsibility for their actions. The group takes the responsibility of being faithful to the covenant, rather than placing the burden of rule enforcement on the adult leaders.

A clearly worded statement needs to be drafted, discussed, and perhaps amended by those attending until it can be adopted by the youth and adults on the trip. The statement is then presented to each participant, who agrees to it as a prerequisite for going on the trip. Have the covenant printed at the top of a sheet of paper that is passed around for each person to sign before each travel event. Or the covenant can be printed on the registration form, with a blank for the participant's signature.

Sample Covenant

Event: _____

Date: _____

In signing this covenant, I agree to live by the following guidelines listed below during the event in order to fulfill the purpose and vision of our youth ministry:

(List your youth ministry vision statement here.)

I shall:

1. Respect the health of my own body by refraining from the use of tobacco and drugs of any kind, except those prescribed by a physician.
2. Respect the physical and emotional well-being of other youth and adults by "doing unto them as I would have them do unto me"

(Luke 6:31, adapted). This includes respecting the need for sleep, refraining from harmful practical jokes, and so forth.

3. Respect the property of the places we will be visiting.
4. Be responsible for my own behavior and participate fully in all scheduled activities of this event and abide by group decisions made during the event.

(You can include a question that asks each youth to indicate what exactly he or she is willing to do during the event that will contribute to the viability of the covenant.)

Signature: _____

A Sample Retreat Schedule

There is no limit to what a schedule can look like, but following is a fairly typical arrangement.

Friday night

- 8:00—Arrive and unpack gear.
- 9:00—Gather; discuss rules; clarify agenda; answer questions.
- 9:30—First session: theme development; establish prayer partners; sing.
- 10:30—Whole-group active movement/recreation, movie option, snacks.
- 12:00—Evening wind-down via share groups and devotions.
- 12:30—Lights out.

Saturday

- 8:45—Breakfast (Remember, sleeping in can be a gift.)
- 9:30—Gather; review agenda; answer questions.
- 10:00—Second session: sing.
- 10:15—Second session: presentation/theme development.
- 11:30—Break for lunch.
- 1:00—Organize free-time options, such as soccer game, pool, volleyball, hiking, and preparation for evening talent show.
- 5:00—Supper.
- 7:00—Gather; review agenda; answer questions; chat.
- 7:30—Third session: sing.
- 7:45—Third session: presentation/theme development.
- 8:30—Special evening activity: talent show.
- 10:00—Snacks and break.

10:30—Game: high energy.

12:00—Devotions and cool down.

Sunday

Breakfast, not too early.

9:30—Gather; review schedules for packing up, cleaning up, loading vehicles, and other issues; sing.

10:00—Fourth session: sing.

10:15—Fourth session: presentation/theme development.

10:45—Closing worship event.

11:30—Pack; load; head home.

Traveling With Youth

Assuming the event goals are clear and attainable, you've now got to put it on the road. Taking any kind of trip for any distance with any number of people requires planning and preparation. Whether moving four people across town or moving busloads across the country, planning will make things smoother.

Attendance

Is this a senior high trip only, a junior high trip only, or for everyone? Estimate realistically, by name if possible, the youth who might attend. Add in the number of adults required (one adult for five to six youth is ideal) to make the event safe. When those numbers are tallied, is the trip still feasible cost-wise? This is important because none of the other areas below can be dealt with until some sense of participation, including a good guess of how many females and males will attend, is firmly stated.

Transportation

- **Cars**

Traveling in a car is usually the cheapest way to go, and it is certainly the easiest to plan. Cars get excellent gas mileage, and because most people have one, you don't have to rent.

- **Vans**

If your numbers are too large to fit into a car or several cars, then it is time to move up to the next size: a van. A van presents some different issues. Where will you put the luggage? Do you need a trailer? Do you have a hitch? Is a driver available who can safely maneuver a van with a trailer? If your church doesn't have access to a van,

explore renting one. Are there people in your congregation with a van who would be willing to go along?

- **Bus**

If you have a large group, a bus may be the safest and most manageable way to travel. When renting a bus, find out the total costs involved (price per mile, driver expenses, and so forth). The initial price of a bus may sound high, but when divided by the number of people traveling, it may be within your budget.

Lodging

Anytime a trip continues into the night, you need to give some thought to how sleeping arrangements will be handled. Options include:

- Tents/camping.
- Hotels (Give attention to tips and taxes, which sometimes are as high as eighteen percent. Room quotes seldom include this amount, and it adds up quickly.)
- Churches.
- Colleges (In summer, dorms lack linens, sometimes even light bulbs.)
- Inexpensive motels (Why pay for extras such as pools and hot tubs, especially if arrival is after those kinds of amenities are closed?)

Meals

Here are some options for dealing with meals while traveling:

- Expect all the youth to bring extra money for their own meals; whenever a food stop is made, they are responsible for their own meals. They should know in advance exactly how many meals and which type of restaurants will be frequented.
- Collect all the money ahead of time. At each food stop, hand them an appropriate amount for that meal.
- Buy groceries and prepare meals for the group at appropriate meal stops.
- There are times when all three methods should be blended for an event.

When you're buying groceries, be aware of special dietary needs and limitations. Some youth may be diabetics or vegetarians; others may have allergies or be on a diet; all have preferences.

Travel Costs

Reviewing the following areas should put you on track for moving your group safely to and from home. Consider the following:

- **Materials:** You need all the little extras: maps, guidebooks, propane tanks for the stove, paper plates, and utensils. Can any be borrowed, or should all of it be purchased?
- **Adults:** If an adult is willing to go on a trip with the youth, his or her expenses should be provided, if not completely, to some significant degree.
- **Entrance fees:** Parks, campgrounds, tickets to attractions—all need to be rolled into the bottom-line cost. Figure the whole package out ahead of time so the participants are not caught off guard during the trip.
- **Trip insurance:** This may be available through your local church or through the annual conference. It's not expensive; it just has to be taken care of ahead of time.
- **Contingency fund:** Carry enough cash to get you out of an average jam. Other more serious emergencies can be put on various credit cards and settled later.
- **Fine print in contracts and forms:** Make sure every question has been asked and all special situations have a ready response.

The cost of the trip can be divided evenly among the youth, backed by a trip budget, raised totally by the youth through activities, or some combination of the three. However it's done, think through the whole plan carefully before you go too far in planning or signing a contract.

Combination Trips

Some groups have had positive travel experiences by combining purposes. These types of trips could include the following:

- **Recreation/Touring/Study**

The group travels to a particular location, taking advantage of sightseeing and recreational opportunities, as well as concentrating on an area of study—for example, a ski trip with Bible study and sharing at night. Or the group might travel to a location related to the area of study—for example, touring a prison and observing juvenile court while studying the Christian's response to prison reform and the death penalty. Study during a campout could focus on God's creation and on our responsibility to take care of it.

- **Work/Recreation**

The group members travel to donate their labor to a work project, such as poverty home repair. They also take advantage of recreational opportunities in the area.

- **Mystery Trips**

Youth sign up for this type of trip without knowing the destination. Clues may be given, but only adult leaders and parents know where the group is going. The advantage of this kind of trip is the interest and excitement it can generate. The disadvantage is that youth are not involved in the planning.

RETREAT CHECKLIST

Supplies

- Extra Bibles
- Nametags
- Room assignments
- Rules or covenant
- Retreat schedule and evaluation handouts
- Lesson plans/handouts/paper and pencils
- Cameras/film/batteries
- Videos/monitor/extra connection cables
- Song sheets/songbooks, musical instruments
- Audiovisual equipment
- Equipment for games and activities
- Worship candles, Communion elements, and so forth
- Petty cash

Food

- Snacks
- Meals (if not provided)
- Beverages
- Special dietary considerations

Travel

- Maps and clear, correct directions
- Full tank of gas
- Jumper cables
- Insurance card, registration

- Telephone number and name of manager on duty at site posted at the church and with a parent

Emergencies

- First-aid kit
- Name, address, and directions to nearest hospital while at the retreat site
- Completed permission slips and medical release for every person. Make sure your medical release form complies with the laws of your state and the policies of your congregation. You may want to talk with someone from a local hospital to find out what is required in your state. Your church insurance agent and church legal counsel are other possible resource people.
- Name and phone number of parent who will notify other parents in case of emergency or change of plans

FOR MORE HELP

Go For It: 25 Faith-Building Adventures for Groups, by Walt Marcum. Published by Abingdon Press. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).

Retreats from the Edge: Youth Events to Build a Christian Community (Essentials for Christian Youth), by Paul Harcey and Edge Ministries. Published by Abingdon Press. Available through Cokesbury (800-672-1789).

Great Retreats for Youth Groups: 12 Complete Faith-Building Weekends, edited by Chris Cannon. Published by Youth Specialties.