



Planning great retreats

by **J. Ann Craig**

Retreats help build healthy spiritual lives and are a necessary part of putting our faith, hope and love into action.

One of the ways we feed ourselves is through retreats. Planners of retreats at all levels know how important these soul-nurturing events are. At a United Methodist workshop on retreat planning I gathered people around a table to find out the best ideas for retreat planning. Here's what I learned.

Location

Workshop participants talked about their best and worst retreat experiences and what contributed to those experiences. Overwhelmingly, people identified two key elements—location and leadership—as crucial components of a successful retreat.

If we are physically uncomfortable, it is difficult to go deep into a spiritual reality. Scripture that comes to mind is James 2:15-17: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat

your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

There is nothing inherently spiritual about physical suffering. We can make the most of difficult circumstances, but when your body is comfortable and safe you can move beyond survival instincts to communion with God's creation and enjoyment of time with your neighbor.

Your retreat participants' well-being and comfort is a part of creating a space where they can take in the love of God and hear God's call to service.

Where will your retreat participants feel it is worth their time and money to be? The retreat location could be by a lake or in the mountains. Soul-inspiring aesthetics can also be found in an urban retreat center where Catholic sisters surround you with simplicity, beauty, hospitality and great food. The range of possibilities is enormous. Be sure to find or create a sense of place that participants will treasure.

When choosing a venue, accessibility is vital. Think of both physical and financial accessibility. Ask about the physical acces-



sibility. Are there stairs? Is the staff accustomed to providing food for those with allergies? How close is the nearest medical facility? Can wheelchairs be easily accommodated or hearing devices provided? Are there long distances to walk?

Expenses for participants are always an accessibility concern. Travel and registration fees can be obstacles for some people. Be creative: charge more for basic fees so you can create a scholarship fund.

Encourage local units to raise funds through events that also serve to announce the retreat.

Leadership

The best retreats, no matter what location, have a leader who is on a spiritual journey, who cares about what happens at the event and who has the ability to engage the women who attend. Your retreat leader may or may not have exten-

sive experience facilitating retreats, but it is important that someone on your team or in your network has a sense of who the prospective retreat leader is and what she or he brings to the table. Some retreat leaders come with an extensive track record of leading retreats, and others may bring their journey and enthusiasm but may not have a lot of experience.

You and your team will have to determine what will work best for your retreat participants.

Give the leader as much information as possible—photos of previous retreats, of the rooms, dining hall and outside environment—so your retreat leader can get a sense of the space and possibilities. Let the leader know the formula for the schedule and how open the group might be to surprises and creativity. Provide previous schedules and topics and work together to come up with a theme for the retreat.

Plan to be surprised

I led my retreat workshop two days in a row. The second day, I went back to the same room to lead the workshop again. I set up my guitar, notes and PowerPoint, and a few people trickled in. I thought, "Hmm. Either everyone came the first day or word got around that it wasn't such a great workshop." Then (with help from the others) I realized I was in the wrong room—panic!

I was now late. I packed my things and ran down the hall to the correct room and found an overflow crowd getting restless. I decided to make it a teachable moment.

"What do you do when things don't go as expected when you are planning a retreat?" I asked.

Isn't that the way of planning? Half the battle is planning and organizing and making sure the food, location, leadership and travel instructions are in place. The other half is dealing with the unexpected, whether during the planning or in the middle of your event.

Plan everything and then be ready for surprises. Surprises will happen because of error or unforetold events—storms, equipment failure or a traffic delay that makes half the group late. Or a surprise can come in the form of a young person who brought an instrument and graces the participants with music. Stay open to positive surprises as well. Allow for flexibility in your schedule and keep your heart open for the movement of the Holy Spirit (who is always ready to surprise us).

Let the surprises come! When they happen, just say to yourself, "Here is one of those surprises."

Do have a plan

Openness to the Holy Spirit does not mean that we do not take the time to

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TRY THESE GREAT YOUTH RETREAT THEMES!

Year after year, youth camps are being organized in many parts of the U.S. While we have the Bible as a reference for our ideas, we know how difficult it is to come up with themes for your youth camp. With various themes that you can simply choose from, we put together a list of the most popular ones through the years and some that deserve more recognition.

15 Epic Youth Camp Themes:

- 1) EQ: The Emotional Quest (Proverbs 25:28) – EQ is more important than IQ. Controlling their emotions is vital to their success in school and prepares them well for adulthood.
- 2) Friendships: Bonds that Last (Proverbs 13:20; Proverbs 17:17; 1 Corinthians 15:33; Hebrews 10:24) – Valuing friendships will go a long way into helping our youth obey the second greatest commandment.
- 3) Family Feud: (Genesis 37; 50:20; John 7:1-8) – Our youth need to know that they can make or break their family with their decision to hate their family members or to love them unconditionally.
- 4) Under Pressure: The Truth about Peer Pressure (Proverbs 27:17; 1 Corinthians 15:33) – There's bad peer pressure and there's good peer pressure.



Our youth need to know how to determine which is which.

5) The Born Identity (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 Peter 2:9; Romans 12:2) Knowing their identity in Christ will develop their self-confidence and God-confidence. You may also refer to http://www.openbible.info/topics/our_identity_in_christ for a more thorough list of verses on our identity in Christ.

6) Inside Out: Being Pure Starts from Within (Matthew 15:17-20; 1 Corinthians 6:18-20) – Being pure on the inside paves the way for purity in all their relationships.

7) The Flipside: Dealing with Acceptance and Rejection (Isaiah 53:3) – The road to maturity goes through learning how to deal with acceptance and rejection among peer groups.

8) Crossroads: What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do (Proverbs 3:5-7) – When confused and unsure, the wisest thing to do is to lean on the Lord.

9) Preparing for the Future (Jeremiah 29:11; James 4:13-15) – The youth need to know how to prepare and plan for a great future.

10) Trust Issues: Who Can You Trust?

(John 14:1) – Learning who to trust and when to trust will be one of the most important lessons a young man or woman can learn.

11) Frenemies: Defining Your Relationships from God's Viewpoint (Ecclesiastes 4:12; Romans 12:14-21) –When friends and enemies change faces in middle school and high school, it's important to know who's who and how to love them both unconditionally.

12) The Survivor: Overcoming Your Fears and Challenges (1 John 5:1-5; Joshua 1:1-9; Isaiah 41:10; 2 Timothy 1:7) – The youth face many fears and challenges that we often ignore. They need to know that they are over comers in Christ and what to do about it.

13) Love Dare: Waiting on True Love (Song of Songs 8:4) – True love isn't just something to aspire for but something to prepare for.

14) Engage Your Culture (Matthew 9:9-13) – As Jesus engaged the culture and society that He was born into, our youth are called to be engagers of culture and not condemners.

15) Living for God (Galatians 2:20) – If everything we do should be pleasing to God then we need to encourage our youth to live for the audience of one.

Examples of church retreats

A Christian retreat involving your church and its members provides a number of benefits to those partaking in the events. Church retreats create a bonding and a community with those people that you are closest to spiritually, as well as support-

ing those people and the church itself. Additionally, a church retreat can come in all shapes and sizes and target different groups of people. The following is a list of four different types of church retreats that can be held for each group's spiritual

benefit.

1) Men's or Women's Retreats – These are probably the most common forms of retreats that the various churches hold. Typically, they are gender-specific and target aspects of the man's or woman's life wherein

they can improve spiritually and be a better person individually, in the family setting, as a marital partner, or with fellow employees. Normally, the retreat takes place over a week-end from a Friday evening until a Sunday afternoon and focuses on a topic relative to one of the environments of a person's life. Part of the purpose of these types of retreats is refreshment and renewal—being able

to share the key elements of a person's "spiritual walk" and coming away from it recharged and invigorated are normally the goals of a Christian retreat. The various relationships in a person's life often benefit from these retreats.

2) Couple's Retreats – All too often marriages get sidetracked,

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thoroughly plan our retreat. It means we take care of every detail we can think of and go forward knowing that we are in God's hands and that in every glitch or success God is with us.

Create a team to plan your retreat. Plan

your retreat as a team, and you will nurture future leadership.

Finally, do not feel like you have to reinvent the wheel. United Methodist Women has a retreat planning booklet available on the downloads section of the United Methodist Women Mission Resources e-store at www.umw-mission-resources.org.

For additional resources and to read

the outline for the retreats workshop at Assembly2014.org/workshops/what-makes-a-great-spiritual.

Use resources from the Reading Program, the Program Book, response and online materials. Use them for ideas about themes and bring them to the retreat to share. Always bring membership information and be ready to tell the story of United Methodist Women in

mission to participants.

We have a story to tell about Jesus and what it means to follow him. We have a story to tell about the women who have gone before us who were faithful in mission. We have a story to tell about how our lives have been changed by Jesus who first modeled what it meant to reach out to women, children and youth and all those who were ever treated as someone

unimportant to God.

Retreats give us rest, and they inspire us to keep moving forward so we can continue to "Make It Happen!"

— J. Ann Craig is founder of *Craig Media Strategy* and works with regional, national and international groups on social justice to utilize traditional and cutting-edge media to create impact.

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stuck in a rut, or begin to fall apart. Attending a couple's retreat has the tendency to bring the focus back to the relationship and re-establish that bond and it's foundation in spirituality. This type of retreat gives a husband and wife an opportunity to discuss and solve problems that may have developed by the relationship growing apart.

Unfortunately, the main reason that couples

attend retreats of this nature is to reignite that spark that was there in the beginning of the relationship but has, over time, gotten dimmer as certain aspects of a person's life tends to disconnect the inner workings of the relationship.

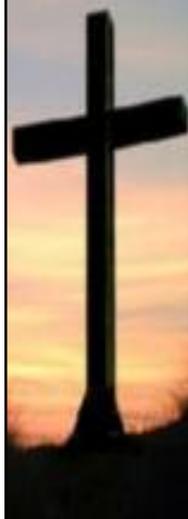
3) Youth Retreats – Youth retreats can be an opportunity for younger church members to be introduced to deeper spiritual teachings and start them out early understanding the importance of this in their lives. Depending on the age group, the benefits will vary. With youth (pre-teens), fun events and games can be incorporated into the retreat so that they have their recreation time along with the spiritual teachings. Once they're in their teens and at that dating age that parents tend to dread, teen retreats play an important part in helping them understand the sexuality issue and how to handle that critical time in their lives.

Away from church and home, older teens are more apt to open up about their fears and dreams and can soak in the teaching provided by church staff.

4) Pastoral Retreats – Any church fellowship knows that pastors and other church leaders need their revitalization time. Maybe they have just been through an intense period of ministry that has drained them or maybe completion of a major construction project has them zapped

for that energy they need at church services. One way or the other, pastoral retreats are just as necessary as the ones listed above. It allows them to step away from the rat race (so to speak) and get their energy levels back to normal, and they come back refreshed and spiritually re-energized. It is a great way to show your pastor and staff some love and concern for their own spiritual and emotional well-being.

"Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."
Mark 6:31



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