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## 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 accessibility. 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 re-

■ See RETREAT PLANNING page 11

## TRY THESE GREAT YOUTH RETREAT THEMES!

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](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

■ See YOUTH THEMES page 10

# 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 supporting 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 weekend from a Friday evening until a Sunday afternoon and focuses on a topic relative to one of the environ-



ments 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, 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 its 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.

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## Ask the Expert: Planning a marriage event

**Becky Suggs | Lifeway**

Pumpkins. Changing leaves. Apples. The arrival of "sweater weather." Football. These are all things that come to mind when I think of fall. In addition to hayrides, campfires, and harvest festivals, fall also provides the perfect setting for marriage events. With school in session and daily routines back in play, fall offers a great time to plan an event for couples. Winter and Spring is the perfect time to start planning your fall marriage retreat.

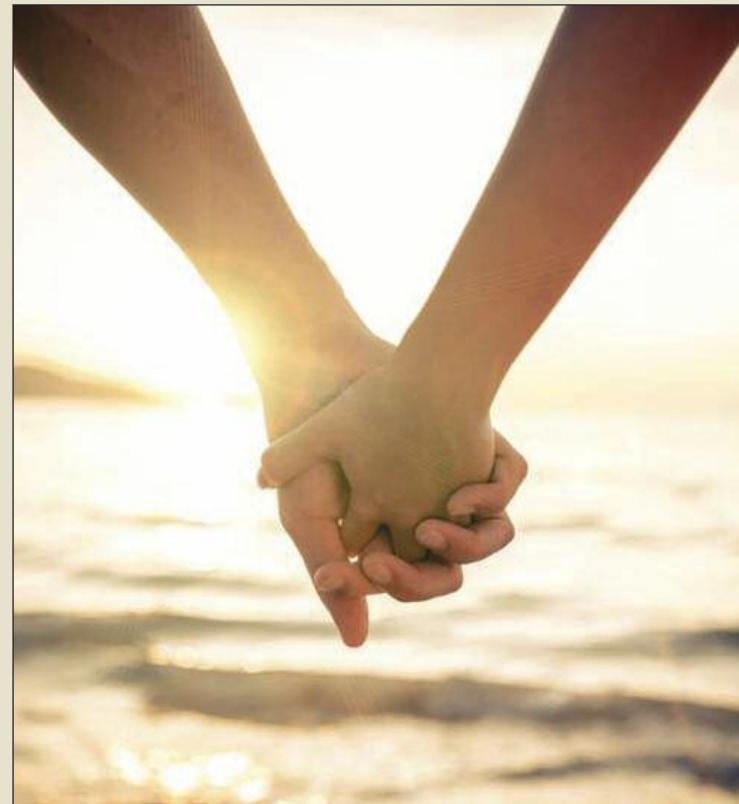
Tammy Slayton is an Event Project Coordinator at LifeWay. Tammy coordinates events such as Marriage Getaways, Fall Celebration, Music City Gospel Singing, and Christmas in Branson. Tammy offered the following great advice on planning marriage events, and they aren't just for the fall!

**"What do you love most about marriage events?"**

Marriage isn't easy; life gets in the way. I've met couples that come to a Marriage Getaway to reconnect and be reminded of how God brings them together to balance and serve one another through life. Then, there are those that have lost hope. I have seen couples come as their last chance and through the event learn how to ask, find, and give forgiveness as our speakers share testimonies and show witness to the power of God in marriages. As one whose marriage was restored after divorce, it blesses me to be able to bring these couples and speakers together to learn that nothing is impossible through God. We need to look to Him and not one another for completeness. Marriage is between two imperfect people who are loved by one perfect God.

**"What elements do you feel are 'must-haves' for a marriage event?"**

Transparency is a must. Not one



couple has it ALL together, and those that don't need to see that.

Besides the teaching times, couples need time to themselves to have fun, laugh, and talk through lessons they have learned and are still processing. They need to start working on communication that could have been lost between them. (While most need time together, in some circumstances they may need a little time apart to focus on God and the lessons He may be teaching them individually.)

Truth! Everyone is so skeptical and mostly for good reason. The world is full of false teachers, liars, tempters, and thieves. A Christian event needs to speak Truth.

**"What are some challenges you face when planning a marriage event?"**

Marriage events have a stigma that there's something wrong with your

marriage if you attend. Some spouses don't want to face certain issues that are dividing the marriage, so a marriage event is the last place they want to go. There are many other events, and couples have to decide in which they are going to invest. In addition, there are things such as family, finances, and other responsibilities that may influence attendance at an event.

**"What advice can you give to someone planning a marriage event for their church?"**

Balance the content. Poll members; ask what they are looking for in a marriage event (like dates, locations, content, activities, etc.). Provide food or refreshments. Pray about those that will speak at the event. Be ready for the fruit; prepare for new believers and those that would want to recommit to Jesus or follow a calling.

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# Why men need men's retreats

**Joshua James** | goodguyswag.com

*Retreat: (Noun) a place of refuge, seclusion, or privacy. (Verb) To withdraw, retire, or draw back, especially for shelter or seclusion.*

As a man, why is important to get away and retreat with a group of other like-minded men? Why is it essential that every man needs squad time, solitude, and security found in hanging with other guys? Men's retreats are something crucial for today's generation. Drawing back and finding refuge in community is important. Community and support is found in solid men's movements such as this.

Not long ago, I sat in a pub with a great mate of mine in Glasgow Scotland. We discussed the issue of men checking in with one another. This mate said that men need to take time to get away with each other and encourage one another on retreats. I wanted to high five him and fist bump the air because this was something that had been going through my thoughts. Allow me to explain...

One of my favorite films from quite

a few years ago now, was "Remember the Titans," a college football movie based on a true story.

The film unfolds with two teams from completely different walks of life. They come together and achieve something unique as one team. Racial lines broke down, social and economic stigmas were eradicated. What was once a

divided group of young, rowdy, egotistical college men became a strong and unified force under the guidance of Coach Boone.

Integration on and off the field did not take place over night. It took a solid football retreat where each young man was tested, tried and broken down.

Bantering and sparring took place on the retreat between the Bertier and Big Ju, "Left Side! Strong Side! Left Side! Strong Side! Left Side! Strong Side!" The narrative comes to a crescendo within that scene. The group of men watching on took stock of who they were and forged a bond that no worldly or political agenda could break. That night they not only became men, they became the Titans.

**"All men need that time to get away and recharge with others and be boys. Yes, I said it, BE BOYS!"**



## MEN'S RETREAT

### It's all about the squad

Men's retreats are beneficial for personal growth. I remember sitting in a seminary class discussing this issue with the head of history and theology. The late Professor Dr Donnie Patton from the University of St Louis was a mad Cardinals fan and I was a Yankees fan.

I asked him why he thought it was important for men to get away with other men as a collective. His response was classic.

"Ever since those immortal words sadly echoed from Cain's mouth, Am I my brother's keeper? Mankind's response has echoed back in time. 'Yes we are!'

Being on a team and looking out for your brotherhood are important. All men need that time to get away and recharge with others and be boys. Yes I said it, BE BOYS! There is nothing wrong with foolish banter, laughing, horsing around, and just taking time out to be jovial. I love having banter while watching the WWE, UFC, the NFL and NHL with my mates.

More importantly as men, we need to be challenged. We need those group encounters to encourage one another to step up in life. It is equally important to check in from time to time with your crew of men by lifting them up.

### It's all about the solitude

Even if you are not a man of faith, one of my favorite views of retreats has always been of the man Elijah that is found in ancient Scriptures (1 Kings 19).

Here is a broken man that was called for a season to fulfill a certain role, but it was in that quiet place of solitude and reflection retreating to a cave that he became all too aware what his vision, his calling and his work in life should be. It was while alone on a mountain that he heard God whisper to him. What about yourself? Do you take time out in solitude, or time to simply reflect on the deeper things of life, and re-evaluate direction? Every man needs this, maybe not cave time, but certainly a cave time experience. Sit in the stillness, the solitude, and just enjoy the moment.

### It's all about the security

Another reason men's retreats are important is that guys need that safe place to talk openly.

I'll admit, I am one of these men. Each week or month, things pile up that affects my mood and attitude. Therefore that sacred and safe place of accountability with one another becomes vital. If it be in a mid-week small group, a locker room, a gym, a club, or a group, all men need that place where they can feel secure in sharing the issues that confront their lives.

In Sydney, I did this with a small church. Whatever was shared among the men stayed among the men. It became a place where things got real, brutal, and honest.

Raw vulnerability broke down barriers and men began to share liberally with no fear or trepidation. The result was that sharing allowed accountability with trust.

Challenge yourself today to stop for a moment and think about one area that you need to work on with other guys. Is there a retreat, a convention, or a camping session coming available near you that you know you should be part of? Is there a group of guys that you would like to go away with and challenge yourself? Can I encourage you? Take that time out to retreat or regroup with like-minded people.

### YOUTH THEMES

*continued from page 7*

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 overcomers 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.

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## RETREAT PLANNING

*continued from page 7*

treat leader may or may not have extensive 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 Power-Point, 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 unforeseen 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 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.umwmissionresources.org](http://www.umwmissionresources.org).

For additional resources and to read the outline for the retreats workshop at Assembly, visit [Assembly2014.org/workshops/what-makes-a-great-spiritual](http://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 a former US-2 missionary and United Methodist Women executive for spiritual and theological development. She 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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