

Planning a Retreat

by Toni Papp

There are many reasons to have a retreat, as well as many different types of retreats. However, one thing they all have in common in that they all involve going “away” from the normal places in our lives in order to spend conscious time with God. A prayerful day at the church is not a retreat, nor should a ski or beach trip be called a retreat. That misrepresents the meaning of a retreat. Spending purposeful time in silence, prayer, and “retreating” away from worldly distractions so that one can become more intimate with God should be part of any trip being billed as a “retreat.”

Some of the different types of retreats may include a planning retreat for your upcoming year, where your leadership team of adults and teens spend a significant time in time in prayer and discussion to plan out the year. There are also vocation retreats for those that may be discerning God’s call to them. The diocesan Office of Vocations offers vocations retreats each year, but you also can have a retreat with a vocation theme, and present information on priesthood, religious life, other consecrated life and the call to a happy, healthy marriage.

Silent retreats may be a welcome respite for some and near impossible for others, but can be most productive in re-centering oneself on God.

Prepare prayer experiences well and do not shortchange people on time with God. Too many times, preparations for prayer are not given the same attention as a talk or team building activity. However, the most significant changes in a person’s life are made when talking with God. Offer Confessions, Mass, and Adoration as part of the experience. One can never go wrong inviting God on the retreat, too!

Most Directors of Youth Ministry (DYMs) hopefully have been able to experience a great retreat and can attest to the value of making one. But, great retreats do not just happen. They take planning, preparation and lots of prayer. All of this needs to happen in advance.

In planning a retreat, decide who the target age group is. A high school retreat will be different from a middle school retreat, which will be different from an adult retreat. Once your target age group is decided, start thinking about where the retreat will happen and the duration. Will it be one, two or three days? Many retreat facilities book up to a year in advance, so check several places and be ready to have a second choice weekend.

Questions to consider when exploring a retreat facility are:

- What is the cost per person?
- How far will you have to travel?
- Are there separate sleeping and bathroom areas for males and females?
- Is there a large room for gathering together?
- If you have teens with mobility issues, are the facilities accessible to them?

- Are meals included in the price? If so, how many?
- Are there fixed meal times?
- Is there any menu flexibility for those with special dietary needs, or storage space for them to bring their own food?
- Will yours be the only group there or will you share the grounds, dining areas, and other common areas?
- Can you arrive early to set up?
- What time is check out? What are cleaning expectations at the end?
- Is it an easily “chaperoned” facility (can you keep track of all your teens easily, even at night)?

Think about the purpose or theme of the retreat. Is it for sacramental preparation, leadership training, or just time away to experience God? The purpose of the retreat will help give shape to the talks and activities. There are several formats that can be used for planning purposes, but a very standard and effective format consists of an introduction to the topic, the teaching, a testimony, reflection and small group discussion.

Pull your support team together. Consider carefully what adults can help as facilitators/small group leaders. People bring different talents to the table and some may be more effective in a background/support role versus an up-front/presenting role. It should include set up and clean up help, a “food team” unless your retreat facility includes prepared meals, emergency contact parent, and small group leaders who can also help with large group presentations, planning and implementing activities, fleshing out talk details, and preparing prayer services. If a priest is available for your retreat experience, take advantage of their presence. Think outside of your usual volunteers and see who else might be a great person to help. Holy Family Parish usually tries to have people that the teens will see at church and around the parish, even if they don’t primarily work with youth ministry year-round. This helps foster relationships and encourages more participation in parish life.

In choosing your facilitators, always follow diocesan guidelines for background checks and any policies set forth by the Office of Child Protection and Safety. Every adult spending time on the retreat should be in compliance with all policies.

Once you have assembled your team, meet with them several times to explain your vision of the weekend, the main theme, talk ideas, and to explore other particulars. Either assign tasks to your leaders or ask for volunteers. You as the retreat leader do not have to plan and implement everything yourself. In fact, if you attempt to do so, your retreat may have a level of stress and a one-dimensional aspect that detracts from the overall experience. Communicate your vision clearly, but allow your team to develop ideas and talks themselves. Be aware of areas that they may need more instruction, such as how to plan an effective prayer service.

Advertise the retreat using various methods. Layering your message will help reach more teens, help them notice it, and catch the eye of parents also. Postcards or flyers sent to the home of prospective participants or handed out after Masses, personal invitations, posters and other creative ways to grab attention will result in a better response. Online invitations through social media can be effective but should be used with caution.

Putting the weekend schedule together can sometimes be challenging. Do not “over program” the retreat, but allow time for small group discussions, free time, personal reflections, journaling, or prayer time. An adult retreat can have more unstructured time than a middle school retreat. Middle school youth need more direction, so even free time should have some parameters, such as areas that are off-limits and suggestions for games. Adult leaders should interact with the teens during this time to solidify the relational ministry aspect. The relationships made on a retreat can impact a teen much more than we may initially realize. Even years later, you may run into a young person in the grocery store and they will recognize you from the pie-in-the-face game or the Ultimate Frisbee match that took place on retreat!

It is tempting to try to squeeze every great idea into one retreat; there are some activities that just fit better in a retreat setting than they do in a weekly youth gathering at the parish. Resist this temptation and streamline your focus. Allowing more time for small group discussion is preferable to having to break them up just as things get interesting in the group. Every retreat should include time for people to break the ice and become comfortable with each other. Do not skip this very important part of the experience. Mix people up so that they must meet someone new, push a little out of their comfort zone and not move through the retreat in their comfortable clump. Name games, small group skits, the making of a “team banner” are all great ways to start the retreat.

Have an MC for the retreat to help introduce topics, speakers, and keep things moving and on schedule. This does not have to be the DYM, but should be someone with good speaking skills.



Random Tips:

- Have a theme song for the weekend. Expose the teens to it in advance so they can start to know the lyrics.
- Think of a short message or phrase that you would like associated with the retreat. Layer this message through posters, decorations, giveaways, random signs that show up during the weekend. For instance, Holy Family Parish’s Confirmation retreat uses a chocolate milk analogy for integrating the Holy Spirit within us, so the phrase “Stir It Up” is used frequently. This phrase helps the teens recall their experience later when you talk with them.
- Provide song sheets, copies of prayers, notebook paper, a pen, and a folder for each teen.
- When planning activities, plan a variety to accommodate the sports-oriented, the deep thinkers, and teens with special needs or disabilities. Scavenger hunts, strategy games, team builders, relays with different stations can utilize the abilities of many versus a few.

- If you are having Adoration, take a few moments beforehand to explain it. You can give some reflection questions, have readings and some music, but make sure there are prolonged periods of silence as well.
- Be very clear about dress code expectations (including sleepwear), property boundaries, and curfews. For instance, if there is a lake with a dock, be clear that the time to sit on the dock is NOT after lights out and with someone of the opposite sex.
- Think carefully through your supply needs and make a list of who is bringing what. Double check technology needs so that whatever media players are needed will be on hand. Detailed supply lists are your friend!
- Emergency contact information should be given to parents, and you should have medical release forms for every person on the retreat, including adults.
- If you have a band or an individual providing music, go over their playlist so they are familiar with the flow of the event. Stress that they must be ready to go and not be setting up or tuning while someone is trying to address the group. Music is an important component to a retreat. It can raise or lower the energy level, provide focus during prayer or Adoration, segue to the next talk or be a send-off to small groups.
- Include parents in some aspect of the retreat. Provide some post-retreat questions and tips on talking with their teen, ask them to write a letter to their teen, or end the retreat with a family Mass. One suggestion is to have parents write the letter to their teen, but instead of presenting it to them on the retreat, they read it to them on Sunday at the Mass.
- If you can go to the retreat facility early to set up, do so. Having the space already decorated and arranged how you want it for the opening session helps set the mood more quickly. If it is not possible, plan carefully with your leadership team how you will implement set up when you arrive. Have teens help unload, but then send them with a couple of adults to set up their sleeping areas and possibly do an activity while others on the leadership team get ready.

Toni Papp is the Director of Youth Ministry at Holy Family Catholic Church in Dale City, VA, and has been there full time since 1999. She lives in Manassas with her husband and has one very grown-up son. She loves outdoor adventures, anything involving water, and strives to make even the smallest trip into an adventure. Her Summer Friendship program gives her lots of experience in planning fun, local trips especially with a limited budget.