

Facilitating Fruitful Retreats



**New Congregation and Growth Resources
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Select versus Open Retreats

Two basic types of retreats exist: retreats to which a select group of attendees is invited, and retreats where attendance is open. Examples of select retreats include those for the board, leadership, or both and those for the long-range planning committee, a search committee, or some other specific committee or task force. Retreats that are open may be for the entire congregation or for an affinity group, such as a women's group.

The Task ↔ Community-Building Continuum

The goals of any retreat include a mixture of accomplishing tasks and building community among those attending. Invitational retreats tend to be weighted heavily toward accomplishing tasks. However, these retreats are often undertaken specifically to add a community-building component not ordinarily present in the group's routine meetings.

Open retreats may have a greater variety in the mix of tasks and community building. Some open retreats are held so the congregation may focus on a particular issue—for example, developing a mission statement or congregational vision, welcoming a minister, or wrestling with a particular problem in church life. Some retreats focus on particular work projects. Issue- or work-oriented retreats will have a substantial task component. We may think of them as being in the middle of the task↔community-building continuum. Many open retreats, such as all-church retreats and affinity group retreats, are primarily community building.

General Planning Issues

The first step is deciding who the retreat is for and what its purposes are. Is it for a particular committee (select) or for the congregation at large (open)? Are the goals to set the board's agenda for the year and build working relationships among the board members? Are the goals to provide opportunities for spiritual reflection and for sharing theology? Is the goal to build community within the congregation? Is it to nurture a men's group? Once you know who the retreat is for and what its purposes are, these answers will become your touchstones throughout the planning process and during the retreat itself.

The next pair of issues to be decided are where you're holding the retreat and how long it will last. This is where we encounter the twin restraints of cost and time. Many congregants' schedules more easily accommodate weekend retreats. Invitational, task-oriented retreats are usually held at a conference center, as it lessens the distractions of other church business. Open, issue-oriented retreats, such as those on mission and vision, are often held in the church's own facility to increase participation, as cost and travel time are minimized. Often these

participants sleep in their own homes. Sometimes general church retreats are held on the congregation's premises for the same reasons, with some participants camping on the church grounds. Most often, a conference center will be selected, both because of more comfortable accommodations and because it allows for the retreat attendees to separate from their ordinary time and space. Your district office may be able to help you locate a conference center near you.

The planning group's next task is to settle the dates. For a board or committee retreat, congregational and individual calendars need to be consulted and compared with the availability of the facility. For larger retreats, it is helpful to include the local school calendar in the planning. It can be helpful for the planners to begin talking with people about the retreat at this point, finding out who might be interested in attending and taking their schedules into account, where possible.

Now the planners for any retreat have two areas to deal with: programming and logistics. Planners of open retreats have the additional task of publicity.

A number of resources available to help plan the programming are listed in the "Additional Resources" at the end of this text. In general, for a select retreat, the board or committee can develop an agenda. Will the retreat include worship? Will it entail children's programming? Who will facilitate the retreat? Your district office may be able to help you find a facilitator for a board or leadership retreat, or for congregational visioning processes. You may want to find an outside speaker to deliver a keynote address at a congregational retreat. Perhaps someone within your local community will take on this role.

If you are working with a conference center, successful logistics will center on an effective liaison between the planners and the center. You will provide the center with a head count and the size and number of meeting rooms needed. You will also provide participants with driving instructions and packing lists (for example, do they need to bring their own bedding and towels?). Questions about food and accessibility should be addressed. The planners generally handle any scholarships, as they are part of the budget to be managed. To ensure confidentiality related to scholarships, the minister could handle their disbursement.

If the retreat will be held in your own facility, you will need to coordinate sleeping, bathroom, and meeting spaces. You must plan for food to be purchased, cooked, and cleaned up. You may need to arrange for child care. Arrangements for cleanup at the end are also very important.

Publicize your open retreat as broadly as possible. Use your church newsletter and weekly bulletin or order of service, make posters, and give announcements. Visit with various interest groups in your congregation, at meetings or gatherings, and tell them about your hopes for the retreat. Be persistent.

During the Retreat

The ingathering, or convening, and opening meal are crucial to community building at any retreat. Pay attention to setting off the retreat time from ordinary time. Make sure that attention is paid to being inclusive.

In a large retreat, or any retreat at an outside facility, there should be an identifiable person or persons who participants can go to with problems. It is very important that everyone know whom to contact.

Someone from the organizing group should work closely with the site staff. This is true whether you are at a conference center or in your own facility.

Avoiding Problems

Invitational retreats for boards or committees occasionally run into problems with "sunshine" laws—occasions when official decisions that must be made with public access are made behind closed doors, without due notice to those concerned. Always consult your bylaws, and know what you are permitted to do at retreat; for example, know what kinds of decisions you can make at a retreat versus decisions that must be made at a duly called congregational meeting or a board meeting. Both of these sorts of meetings must be publicized for transparency and openness. Most important, good communication before and after the retreat should minimize these problems.

Retreats that are open but involve travel will sometimes be criticized as being exclusionary. Some of this criticism can be blunted by taking care to publicize the retreat as widely as possible in the congregation and providing scholarships, if possible. It is acceptable to remind the congregation that it offers different activities for different people. However, if a retreat is attended overwhelmingly by the same group of people year in and year out, perhaps it needs to be reevaluated.

Additional Resources

All-Church Retreat Example

www.ezwebcalendar.com/pbuuc/viewEvent.cfm?EventID=30721

All-Church Retreat Planning Aid

www.ferrybeach.org/programs/church_retreats.html

www.murraygrove.org/group/index.html

www.mountaincenters.org/cong_retreats.html

All-Church Retreat Programming: Curriculum

www.uua.org/programs/justice/antiracism/jtwsunday/2001-02%20Supp%2003.pdf

www.uua.org/re/reach/winter02/curriculum/family_heritage.html

Board Retreat

www.uua.org/ga/ga01/3089.html

www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol8-2-leadership.html

Board Retreat Manual www.murraygrove.org/toolkit.html

Coming of Age Retreat www.uua.org/ga/ga01/2041p.html

Finding a Site

www.uua.org/administration/all.php

members.aol.com/JlagerCU2/uucamps.htm

Men's Retreat

www.uua.org/re/reach/fall00/adult/planning_your_first_mens_retreat.html

Ministerial Search Committee

www.uua.org/programs/ministry/settlement/resourceguide/III.html

New Staff

www.uua.org/ga/ga01/3059.html

www.uua.org/interconnections/nourishing/vol6-4-nourishing.html

Vitality

www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol3-4-leadership.html

www.uua.org/interconnections/leadership/vol4-3-leadership.html

www.uua.org/cde/education/weekends.html

Young Adults (also a good general guide to putting on a conference)

www.uua.org/ya-cm/ocx/programs/conference.php