

Planning Adolescent Retreats

By John Roberto

The following guide is meant to integrate many of the insights and elements of effective retreats into a series of steps that a leader or team can use in their work. We will examine the specific ingredients in effective retreat planning. Providing an effective retreat experience for young people requires, like any other worthwhile venture, a great deal of time and effort in both planning and executing. There are many practical considerations that must be taken into account in such planning. It is well worth the time and effort.

Prior to using this guide, it would be helpful if you reviewed the foundational chapters in this book, especially Chapters 2, 3, and 4; and the guidelines presented in Chapter 7. Material in these chapters will not be re-presented in this planning guide.

Despite bibliographies, resources and sample models of retreats, there is no such thing as a ready-made retreat that will meet your needs right out of the “box.” Developing your own tailor-made retreat program to meet your specific purposes is a lot of work, but it is also filled with fun, excitement and challenge. Planning is a “process” that takes time and the involvement of many persons. The first thing to keep in mind regarding any specific retreat is that you must begin well in advance of the actual event so that each step of the planning process will have adequate time to be accomplished. The planning process should begin at least six months in advance of the retreat. Facilities may not be available if your planning begins too late; the leadership you want may not be available at short notice; the finances you need may not be available without some prior fund raising efforts.

Step One: Select a Retreat Planning Team

Your most important resources are the adults and teens who will serve in preparing and conducting the program. Begin your planning process by carefully selecting a retreat planning team. Include youth and adults in this group. Keep the group small so it can function well. It is not essential that every member of the planning group also conduct the retreat. The number and variety of your retreat team for a given retreat experience is determined by the objectives of the program and the number of participants. You may find that you will have to broaden your planning team in order to conduct the retreat experience.

Step Two: Establish Purpose and Objectives

The planning process for a specific retreat begins with the development of a general purpose statement and a list of retreat objectives. If that purpose statement and the various objectives are in place, then the planning for a specific retreat can begin. First, be sure to identify the type of retreat experience you are planning: evangelization, catechetical, or spiritual development; and how the retreat will be integrated within the overall youth ministry or campus ministry. This will shape your purposes.

In planning the objectives and determining the type of experience to be provided, be sure to integrate the retreat into the overall youth ministry for the year. If the participants have been working with a particular theme(s), perhaps that could well serve as a springboard for planning the retreat and selecting appropriate activities. If this is intended as a catechetical retreat, what

faith theme will you explore?

The retreat team develops the overall purpose statement, brainstorms potential objectives to carry out the overall purpose, and then selects realistic objectives based on their young people's needs. You may want to test these out with more youth and adults before making a final decision.

Consider the following questions in your planning:

Why have a retreat? The task here is to explore some basic questions concerning the rationale and purpose for having such an event.

Who will be involved? Spend some time examining the characteristics of the participants: their religious and social background, their ages and maturity levels, their familiarity with one another. Ask: "What are the current concerns of the young people who will be attending this retreat?" What are the interests of those who will attend? What are the faith needs of those who will attend?

What are realistic objectives? This is a very important part of planning, and it revolves around determining specific objectives and weighing realistic potential for achieving these objectives, given the nature of the participants and the resources available. Determine here what the group needs, what the group is ready for, and how far you can realistically expect them to come within the limitations of the program.

Step Three: Program Content and Format

Once the purpose and goals are developed, the planning team develops the program design: program content and format. Once again the type of retreat (evangelization, catechetical, spiritual development) will shape the theme, program content, and style. The task is draw up a schedule of events and activities that follow a logical progression and that flesh out through specific activities those objectives determined earlier in the planning process. Your team can easily adapt the two retreat formats in Chapter 4B and the variety of models in Chapter 9 to construct the flow of events and activities on the retreat.

Be sure to vary the activities in your retreat: community building and social activities, small group interaction, staff presentations, audio-visual presentations, individual reflection or journaling, physical activity, liturgical (Eucharist, Reconciliation) and prayer experiences. Remember that the best learning happens when the young people are taking part in the learning process.

Determining the program's content and format leads to a set of logistical questions:

When should you have the retreat? Some of the things to be considered here are the length of time the retreat will last, the length of time needed to achieve the objectives, the "attention span" of the participants in a retreat setting, and the best time of the year to conduct the retreat. Coordination of the retreat with overall church or youth ministry programming is important so that it is compatible both in program and in timing with other major events.

Where should you have it? Investigate various facilities that might be available for retreat purposes. You do not have to be limited to those places listed under retreat houses in the Yellow Pages. However, wherever it will be, consider both your physical requirements (sleeping quarters, kitchen facilities, recreational opportunities, meeting rooms) and the administrative detail of securing, through some kind of a written contract, the facility that is to be used on the specified dates. In brief the retreat team should review available sites, select the site, determine budget needs, and visit the site.

What do we bring? Depending on the type of experience to be provided, there could be a considerable list of materials that will be required ranging from markers to portable altars, from food to name tags.

What rules do we need? Establishing rules is an important element of program design. The retreat team should review parish/school policies, review retreat center policies, establish guidelines, and then communicate the guidelines to participants and their parents. (See Chapter 13 for additional suggestions.)

Step Four: Leadership Recruitment

After the planning team develops the content and format, it is time to consider the retreat's leadership needs. Three roles are suggested: the Retreat Coordinator, the Program Leaders, and the Logistical Leaders. Every retreat needs a *Retreat Coordinator* who supervises the overall preparation and implementation of the retreat. This person is usually the retreat director as well. *Program Leaders* prepare and conduct the retreat with the Retreat Coordinator. They lead small groups, present talks, lead activities, etc. *Logistical Leaders* handle facilities, transportation, cooking, etc.

For some retreats the same people must manage all three areas of need; for others, you'll have different people working in the three areas. It is a good idea to have one youth and one adult on your planning team to be responsible for working with each leadership group.

Youth involvement as *peer ministers* on a retreat has been an essential component of youth retreats. Retreat experiences provide a unique opportunity to make a constructive and positive use of peer group influence. Adolescents who are authentically struggling to find the place of God in their lives and who are willing to communicate their experiences of faith are very influential witnesses to their peers and can make a solid impact and contribution to the quality of the retreat experience for the participants.

Adult leaders also have a lot to offer and are absolutely essential to a retreat. They provide experience, wisdom, expertise, spiritual direction, information and stability. Since youth look to the adult world for direction, stability, models of behavior and authentic faith experience, the greatest contribution adults can make is to share their faith, their prayers and their love. However, beware of the adults who *need* "the kids," who wind up feeding off them, meeting their own needs, rather than ministering to others.

Peer ministers and adult retreat ministers must receive adequate training for their roles.

Step Five: Budgeting

Determine the cost and set a definite budget which will allow you to determine a specific cost

for the young people participating in the retreat. Determine what financial subsidy or fundraising options are available to the group. It is a valuable operating principle that the participants in the retreat should pay some, if not all, of the entire cost of the retreat. Using the questions below estimate your retreat expenses, determine your income sources, and determine the amount to charge the participants.

1. Projected Expenses (Based on estimate of _____ participants)
 - Program needs
 - Leadership material needs
 - Recreation supplies
 - Audio-visuals
 - Planning team expenses
 - Retreat Center
 - Basic fee
 - Per person fee
 - Other
 - Transportation
 - Van/bus
 - Gas for cars
 - Commercial bus
 - Other
 - Food (if not included in retreat center charges)
 - # of participants X food cost
 - Insurance (if not included in retreat center charges)
 - # of participants X insurance cost
2. Projected Income (Based on estimate of _____ participants)
 - Fees from participants
 - Income from church/youth ministry budget
 - Fund-raising events
 - Special scholarship gifts
 - Other sources

Step Six: Publicity and Promotion

Publicity and promotion are essential procedures which must not be overlooked. Disseminating information, spreading publicity, and seeking support on all fronts is the next crucial step in encouraging the young people to participate in the event. Cooperation from parents should also be elicited. Determine a process of registration that will reflect, wherever possible, this cooperation. Be sure to notify the participants about what they *should* and *should not* bring to the retreat.

Consider the following steps in preparing your promotion plan:

1. Initial announcement. (3 months in advance)
2. Detailed flyer including retreat theme and description, costs, registration information, and permission slip. Send a flyer and invitation to potential participants; send a flyer and letter to parents. (2 months in advance)
3. Personal contacts and telephone contacts. (several weeks after mailing)
4. Reminder announcement. (several weeks before the retreat)

Step Seven: Parental Involvement

An important, but often overlooked, step in the planning process is parental involvement. While some parents might be on the planning group, all parents should be kept informed regarding the retreat plans. This may take the form of a pre-retreat meeting for parents (or for parents and youth). Parental involvement might take the form of a special letter or newsletter to the parents explaining retreat policies, goals, etc. It is also important to report back to the parents as a part of the follow-up to a retreat. The parents should know what goals were accomplished. Consult Chapter 12 for family and intergenerational approaches.

Step Eight: Evaluation

An important part of every retreat experience is a thorough evaluation. An evaluation not only provides a solid check on the achievements of the stated goals, but it also provides a much needed opportunity for debriefing, not only for the participants, but especially for those who were so very much involved in the planning and execution of the retreat. An opportunity to reflect on the significance of the experience they had oftentimes results in an updating and enhancing of that experience by reflecting on its significance and value for individual people. Consult Chapter 14 for evaluation suggestions.

Step Nine: Follow-Up

The last step in the planning process is really the beginning of a whole new cycle of programming. It is essential that the retreat should not be an isolated event. It is a deeply significant religious experience; it is a time of new beginnings. Adults involved in youth ministry must be keenly aware of this growth and know how and where to lead it to further growth. It is very important that the retreat be integrated into a comprehensive youth ministry or campus ministry. Any new follow-up programming should be integrated into this broader ministry. Retreat follow-up activities should not be separated programs.

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