

# Seven Steps for Effective Retreats

by John Pearson

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**R**etreat! The word is filled with excitement, relaxation, and fun. But when “retreat” is coupled with “coordinator,” the very sound of it strikes panic into the hearts of men and women.

Unfortunately, most retreat coordinators are cajoled into their positions with one of these clever tactics:

- It won't take much time; we've already picked the date.
- You're perfect for it, George! You've got a minivan.
- You won't have to do much; you can delegate the work.
- We know you can do it. Here are the menus, schedule, and list of workers from last year.
- You've got to do it! No one else will; it's just two weeks away.
- Brenda, the Lord has led our committee to ask you to be retreat coordinator this year.

No matter what the committee might say, retreat planning is hard work. Individuals who accept the leadership responsibilities must take the task seriously and plan to spend ample time on the project. A poorly planned and executed retreat is far worse than no retreat at all.

Seven steps are described here to give the retreat coordinator a basic framework for planning. This monograph should be distributed to each committee member and retreat leader.

## Step 1: Purpose

A retreat should not be something that happens just because it has happened before. Ben Franklin said, “Living without a goal is like shooting without a target.” A retreat must have a purpose. And that purpose must be carefully defined.

### 1) Write down the objectives of the sponsoring group.

Usually, a retreat is planned to help a group accomplish one or more of its objectives. If one of the objectives of the group is “to challenge youth to consider missionary vocations,” an overnight retreat with a missionary from Japan could be an effective means of accomplishing that.

While this first step may seem obvious, it should not be skipped. If a retreat does not fill a need in the objectives, the leaders should avoid the pitfalls of planning one “because we've always done it.”

### 2) Write down the specific objectives of the retreat.

“Well, we all know why we're here tonight,” is too often the preamble to a retreat planning session. The specific reason for having the retreat must be discussed and understood by each committee member. The use of a chalkboard or large sheet of paper will enable the coordinator to write down the exact purpose of the retreat.

“To have fun” is not a good objective.

“To provide fellowship, recreation, and guided activities so the men of our church will become better acquainted,” is much better.

The best way to evaluate whether an objective is specific enough is to ask, “When the retreat is over, how will we know if the objective has been accomplished?”

### 3) Write down the major events and activities, and compare these with the written objectives.

If the high school group's annual fall retreat features the surprise dunking

of all the freshmen in the lake, the leaders may want to scratch the written objective, “promote unity and cohesiveness among our youth”!

It is essential that each activity and tradition is scrutinized to ensure that the scheduled events harmonize with the objectives.

## Step 2: Promotion

“We're trusting the Lord for 250 people for this retreat” is a great goal. But when only 35 women show up, the whole weekend flops.

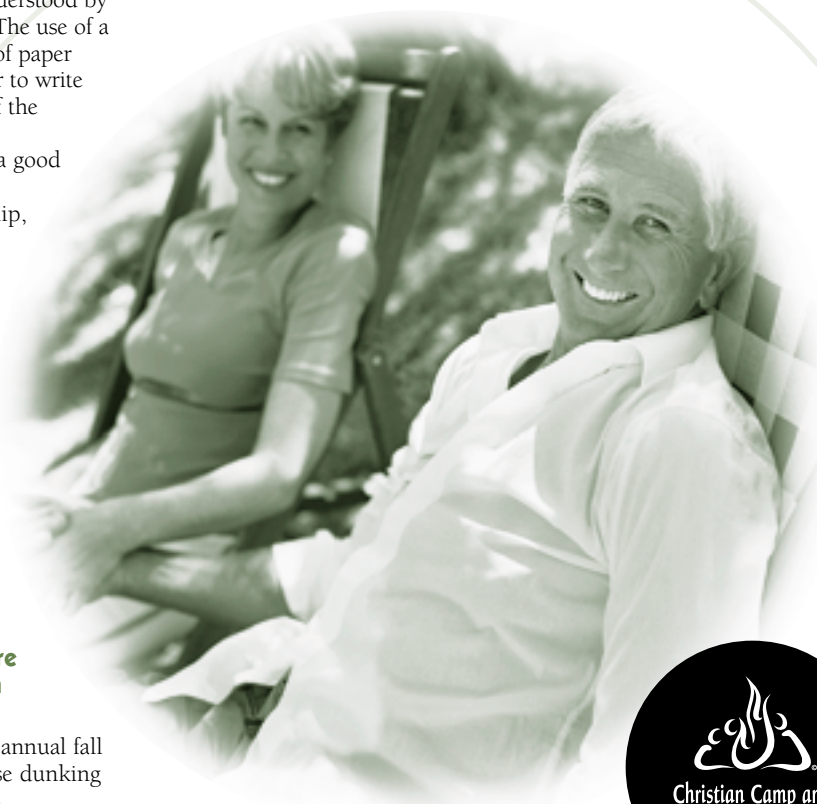
Good promotion begins by setting a goal that can grow as excitement and enthusiasm mounts. Over-inflated attendance goals will only cause disappointment for the individuals who attend.

And bad promotion can reduce attendance significantly.

Rarely does a group have 100

**Retreat leaders: Order extra copies of this for each member of your planning committee. Go over the details in your first retreat planning meeting.**

**Camp and conference directors: Order a year's supply of this so you can give one to each guest group that uses your camp. Give it to the group leader when you send out the rental agreement.**



Christian Camp and  
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percent of its members attend a retreat. Yet too often the promotion is slanted to suggest that the leaders will be very disappointed if everyone doesn't attend: "We're doing a lot of work for you kids, so you better come and appreciate it."

Consider the suggestions below as you prepare promotional pieces.

**1) Be specific about the purpose.**

If the retreat is a study weekend on the doctrine of God, the promotion should not mislead youth into thinking it is all volleyball and swimming. And tricking kids into attending an evangelistic weekend hardly squares with the ethics of the gospel.

A brief paragraph in the church bulletin or the retreat flyer should spell out exactly why the retreat is planned. People who are truly interested will register.

**2) Highlight the registration deadline and late fee.**

If Christians had to send in registration cards for heaven, many would never make it! Numerous leaders have found that a registration deadline and a \$5 late fee for registrations received after a certain date encourages promptness. A nonrefundable deposit should also be required.

**3) Publish a detailed program with a time schedule.**

Reading the schedule in advance will get the group excited about each special feature. It will also effectively communicate the retreat's purpose. As members of the group review the activities, two responses will be common. "Hey, this retreat is just what I need," or "No way am I going to waste my money on that."

If everyone responds negatively to the schedule, the retreat committee should go back to the drawing board. Distributing the schedule in advance of the event is an excellent opportunity to get pre-retreat feedback on needs and personal preferences.

**4) Designate three people to personally invite others.**

The personal touch is still the best sales approach. Mail is discarded, announcements are not heard, and gospel blimps only work in good weather. The coordinator should carefully select three people who are excited about the retreat and willing to invite others.

These "recruiters" should divide up the list of group members and prepare a timetable for contacting each one. The retreat coordinator should set a date for reporting back and personally encourage each recruiter often.

**Step 3: Personnel**

Which is more important—the left or right wing of an airplane? Which is more important—the program or the personnel?

The answer, of course, is that both are essential to a quality ministry with people. Retreat planners know that a good program alone will get no further than a one-winged airplane. Quality leaders are a vital ingredient to the success of a retreat.

**1) Provide orientation, training, and motivation.**

The task of recruiting leaders will be much easier if prospective volunteers know they will be trained for their responsibilities. Too many people are recruited for retreat jobs under the guise that "you really won't have to do much."

If willing and capable volunteers cannot be found, the retreat should be postponed until all the positions are filled.

The coordinator should recognize that greenhorns in retreat min-

istry will need constant encouragement and motivation. Some reticent helpers will get last-minute cold feet and offer 17 reasons why they can't come. A thorough training and orientation session several weeks before the event will pay off in leader preparedness and confidence.

**2) Provide each leader with a written job description.**

The retreat coordinator has the hardest and easiest job. The hardest job is listing all the tasks that need to be done. The easiest job is sitting back after the work is delegated and watching the retreat run smoothly.

Before others are recruited to help, the coordinator should divide the work into groups of tasks that can be handled by individuals. Written job descriptions will prevent misunderstanding and overlapping of responsibilities.

Write down even obvious tasks. Consider this: A husband and wife were recruited to be counselors. When the couple arrived at the camp, they were shocked to find out that they couldn't sleep in the same room. No one had told the husband that a counselor was supposed to sleep in the room with the campers. A job description would have promoted understanding.

**3) Ask each person to make a time commitment.**

The time required for volunteer work should never be underestimated. All personnel should be asked to give of their time before, during, and after the retreat.

Prior to the retreat, leaders should meet for planning and orientation. Each person will also need to set aside individual time for prayer and preparation.

Following the retreat, some time will be needed for evaluation, thank-you letters, finances, follow-up of decisions and new people, and reporting.

The effectiveness of a retreat is not seen in what happens at the camp, but in what happens in the weeks and months after the event.



Volunteers should be sure they have the time to give and that their continuing responsibilities, family life, and spiritual life will not suffer because of an added task or two.

#### **Step 4: Program**

While most people do not have natural abilities in putting programs together, almost everyone will have opinions on the programs they have seen. The following are basic guidelines for what ought and ought not to happen on a typical retreat.

##### **1) Program begins at the departure point.**

The retreat has started when 13-year-old Sydney shows up at the church two hours before the registration time. With her two suitcases and bulging sleeping bag, Sydney may spend the first two hours of her retreat without another companion.

It may be that the 90-minute bus ride from the church to the camp is filled with shouts, screams, and threats to the kids from the hired bus driver. Meanwhile, the retreat coordinator is thinking that the retreat's official beginning isn't until the 9 p.m. snack at camp. When the bus arrives on site, most kids have already formed a mental picture of how good or bad the retreat is going to be.

The leaders need to program carefully for each event—scheduled or unscheduled.

##### **2) Inform the speaker and leaders of the objectives for the retreat.**

If a speaker is part of the program, the coordinator should suggest the topic(s) or thrust of the speaker's messages. Once again, the objective for the retreat should be the guiding factor in the selection of a speaker and other leaders. The temptation too often is to select a speaker who is popular—and then let him or her select the topics.

If the committee has prayed and agreed that certain objectives for the retreat must be accomplished, the speaker must understand the importance of helping to meet those objectives.

##### **3) Plan for the "Monday morning after."**

The effectiveness of a retreat is not seen in what happens at the camp, but in what happens in the weeks and months after the event. Perhaps the greatest danger of retreats is that individuals make serious commitments to Christ on the weekend and then are so emotionally and physi-

cally exhausted by Monday that their first week as renewed Christians gets off on the wrong foot.

The retreat schedule must allow for proper rest so that both campers and leaders don't return home completely drained.

While many youth leaders cherish the Sunday evening service as a great time for "camp reflections" from returning retreaters, maybe youth should go home Sunday afternoon and catch up on their sleep.

##### **4) Utilize a variety of resources and idea books.**

Retreat planners must always look for fresh ideas. It can be good to plan the traditional annual retreat without looking at last year's schedule.

Tremendous resources are available for retreat planners today. Budget some funds from each retreat so new books and resources can be added to the retreat coordinator's file.

#### **Step 5: Place**

The selection of the retreat site is an important decision. Some groups enjoy using the same site year after year. Others select three or four camps and rotate each year for variety. Contracting for a site, though, is much more complex than reserving the dates and submitting a deposit.

##### **1) Select a site on the basis of the retreat objectives.**

A camp with lots of tempting recreational areas and equipment will only frustrate retreat-goers if the purpose of the weekend is to sit, listen, discuss, and think. Conversely, if 150 kids have available only one Ping-Pong table and a checkerboard, the group could conceivably get restless!

Coordinators should ask, "What type of place do we need to more effectively accomplish our objectives?" Other factors to consider include: weather, age of the group, accommodations for leaders and speakers, travel time, regulations of the camp, and the possibility of sharing the site with other groups.

##### **2) Visit the site.**

Camp directors are delighted to meet with retreat coordinators and go over the use of facilities in advance. Careful advance planning at the site will eliminate last-minute confusion and wasted time. And a quick tour of the buildings noting room capacities will greatly help the leader.

Items to be jotted down and noted for the committee's orientation could include: travel directions, parking areas, off-limits areas, camp direc-

tor's name, and emergency medical aid information.

##### **3) Read through the camp rental agreement at your leaders' orientation meeting.**

Each camp has special details, rules, and traditions. If Camp Pine Tree requires guest groups to clear their own tables, the program leader will have to allow time for that. The recreational leader should know if the camp provides or rents recreational equipment.

Too many retreat coordinators fail to communicate the special details to the entire retreat committee. The result is disappointment, anger, and unhappy campers.

##### **4) Discuss the menu with the camp in advance.**

When a camp provides foodservice for a retreat group, the group leader has the right to see and approve the menu in advance. Food plays a very important role in a retreat. If the weather is bad and the speaker is long-winded, top-notch foodservice can save the day!

If campers at the last camp enjoyed roast beef and ham dinners, they will expect the same fare at the next retreat. If the camp's best meal is "Macaroni Surprise," leaders have two options: pay more and request better food, or find another camp.

##### **5) Arrive at the site one hour before the campers.**

Ask any camp director to describe the typical retreat opening, and he or she might say something like this: "Well, first the bus pulls up and 50 kids pile out and swarm all over the camp. Then I ask the bus driver where the leader is. He says he's the leader. Then he asks where he can set up for registration. Two hours later, he has located all the kids and has given his discipline lecture twice and has threatened to send five kids home already."

The early arrival of the leader (or the registrar) provides a more relaxed and organized setting for the arrival of the campers. Many experienced leaders would call this practice a prerequisite for effective retreats.

##### **6) Give the camp director a written evaluation of the site and the services.**

Camp directors can best serve guest groups by knowing their likes and dislikes. If the site and personnel were substandard, the retreat

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coordinator has the responsibility of communicating this to the camp. Complimentary letters can also be sent and are always appreciated by the management.

### Step 6: Price

The problem of setting a realistic fee for retreats is clouded by the demand to keep it low enough so “everyone” can afford it. Understanding basic concepts in pricing will enable a retreat coordinator to have reasonable arguments for making ends meet.

#### 1) Give scholarships instead of reducing fees.

A popular concept in many summer camps today is to set fees so families who can afford camp will be paying what it actually costs. A scholarship assistance plan is made available for campers who need financial help with part or all of the fees.

Implementing this plan provides a way for people of all income levels to enjoy the retreat.

#### 2) Budget for a profit.

If the actual retreat costs are \$85, some groups charge \$95 as an added precaution against unexpected expenses. In addition, a small surplus will be available to use as a deposit for the next year’s retreat.

#### 3) Determine policies on honorariums.

Groups generally want to have popular speakers at their retreats. Coordinators who aim to book the top speakers in the city, state, or country need to honestly evaluate their honorarium policies.

If a speaker is popular, he or she is busy. And if the speaker is busy, that person usually has become dependent on speaking engagements to provide for a portion of his or her annual income.

Leaders should frankly discuss the financial arrangements with speakers in advance. A written request to the speaker should include the:

- amount of the honorarium;
- amount provided for travel expenses; and
- availability of space for spouse or family, and if there is a charge for family members.

If a speaker has these details, he or she can then decide if the opportunity can be realistically accepted. Many speakers find that after adding up costs of gas, preparations, babysitting, and the like they actually lose money by presenting.

Group leaders should set the retreat fee high enough so a speaker’s honorarium and expenses can be met. The alternative is not to have a speaker from outside the group.

#### 4) Consider policies on cancellations.

On Monday morning the retreat coordinator calls Camp Swane and reports, “We will have 165 people at our retreat next weekend.” On Friday night, only 112 campers show up and the group discovers they must pay the camp for the 165 reservations. How the leader handles a potential \$4,770 deficit (53 no-shows at \$90 each) should be determined early in the planning stages.

Group leaders have suggested these options:

- Require full payment in advance and no refunds or cancellations.
- Require non-refundable deposits with a commitment to pay the full fee in the event of a last-minute cancellation.
- Refund fees to emergency cancellations only if the camp allows some deviation from the final reservation count.

Leaders should be certain they understand the camp’s contract and then set a reasonable policy.

### Step 7: Post-Retreat Evaluation and Follow-Up

“Whew, I’m glad that’s over,” is the typical benediction of most retreat coordinators. However, if the retreat was planned with specific objectives to accomplish, the ministry of the retreat will continue for some time.

Evaluations don’t have to be time-consuming, lengthy, or critical. An effective review of a retreat can be helpful, encouraging, and even inspiring.

The suggestions below will enable retreat leaders to guarantee that the retreat will continue to have an impact on people’s lives long after the suitcases have been unpacked.

#### 1) Request feedback from campers and leaders.

As part of the retreat schedule, each person should be asked to participate in a brief evaluation period. This can be done on a prepared sheet, or with an open-ended request, such as, “List the good and bad points of this weekend.”

Other leaders prefer brief small-group discussions with a person from each group recording the comments. Even a show of hands for likes and dislikes regarding food, program, site, and other elements is better than no evaluation at all.

Allowing the entire group to

express their views gives each person a sense of responsibility and provides for excellent year-round communication. Some leaders watch for individuals who offer solid suggestions so that they can recruit them for retreat planning for the next event.

#### 2) Prepare a written report to be read and filed.

Unless they are reviewed and used, evaluations are a waste of time. Mistakes are made every year by novice retreat coordinators only because, for example, “no one told me that 10 percent of the people cancel at the last minute.”

A brief outline of job descriptions, promotion, timetables, schedules, menus, site evaluations, and costs can provide tremendous assistance to the leader for the next retreat. The retreat coordinator should meet with the committee no later than seven days after the retreat to gather ideas and recommendations for the report.

Budgeting a modest amount to treat the committee to breakfast at a restaurant is an excellent way to show appreciation and to get the leaders’ evaluations and feedback.

Finally, the coordinator should write a report, distribute it to committee members, and place it in the group’s records where it will be available for use by the next committee.

#### 3) Follow up spiritual results immediately.

While it is important that the evaluation indicate the spiritual results of the retreat, the most important post-retreat activity is follow-up. The impact of the retreat on individual lives should be noted in terms of the retreat objectives.

A plan for personal follow-up should begin at the retreat and not wait until a committee meets three weeks later to think about it. Individuals should receive literature and regular phone calls or visits by a person who cares about their spiritual growth. Leaders should be assigned to communicate with those new to the group.

All of this work is just as important as the retreat itself. Planning adequately for the important work of follow-up is critical.

These seven steps of retreat planning will perform no magic for a retreat leader unless there is prayer and hard work. And a cooperative committee must believe in the importance of accomplishing the retreat objectives.

An effective retreat can be a life-changing experience for every participant. With proper planning, the results will more than reward the leader for the time invested. ➤

Coordinators who aim to book the top speakers in the city, state, or country need to honestly evaluate their honorarium policies.



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