

Theme Retreats

Creativity and Prayer

Each of us has many facets, and it is good to bring all of them into prayer. Not only can we speak the longing in our hearts and minds: we can also model our love in clay, paint our anger, dance our joy, or delight wordlessly in the natural world.

Each of us is made in the image of God; each can be creative in what we do and how we respond to the world around us. Yet many of us have lost touch with, or are even afraid of, our own freedom and spontaneity. Theme retreats foster renewed exploration of these aspects of our humanity.

Some facets of ourselves will be highly developed, others hardly recognised. Often it is the parts of ourselves we know least that are most important in growing prayerfully into complete people. What matters in prayer is the willingness to be fully ourselves, and that will often involve experimenting - playing can be praying! As we try out entirely new activities, or new approaches to familiar activities, we may discover unknown talents, let go of 'oughts', trip over our feet or make a mess. It doesn't matter: what counts is not excellence but freedom.

What is a theme retreat?

Creativity, imagination and play can be parts of any retreat. On a theme retreat, however, they are central: a group of people, often from more than one denomination, meet to share their Christian faith and to take pleasure in a common interest. No expertise is assumed; beginners and professionals meet and explore side by side, encouraging and helping one another.

Central to the retreat may be a daily Eucharist, but much of the rest of the time, usually in quiet, is given to the shared activity. Learning and exploration in this interest are framed by prayer and silence; and each aspect informs and inspires the others.

The retreat may be led jointly by a tutor and a chaplain. The tutor is a specialist, able not just to teach skills but also to communicate enthusiasm for the theme. The chaplain shares this interest and takes part in the activities, but also helps to bring to awareness the spiritual elements of the retreat.

People commonly experience that being alongside others in this way evokes peace and inspiration, a greater appreciation of mystery, and a deepening consciousness of their unity as members of the body of Christ. Some may meet each other repeatedly on different retreats, and friendships may grow.

Examples of themes

Many themes, and combinations of themes, are possible. Painting may bring together people who, using a wide variety of media, respond together to a still life indoors or the natural world outside. In embroidery and calligraphy people may quietly settle into contemplation as they become more deeply aware of the image or words they are working on.

Other people play with words. In the patient honing and tightening of the text in creative writing or poetry, there is time to deepen perception as one casts round for the language that will best express it.

Delight in the natural world can be fostered through nature study or bird-watching. These may be combined with the more strenuous activities of gardening or walking: physical activity can free the mind and spirit for prayer and meditation. So too may music appreciation; and music and movement may come together in dance.

No qualifications are necessary!

You do not need any prior skills or experience. Why not have a go?

Some theme retreats do have other requirements, however. Before booking one, make sure you know what is involved. A walking retreat, for example, may assume that all participants are fit enough and adequately equipped to walk along rough tracks and in poor weather. Check also whether you need to bring anything, such as paints, pens, binoculars or gardening tools.

A typical day

If you are considering a particular retreat, feel free to ask exactly what is going to happen. Often the retreat leaders will be able to supply a leaflet giving details.

Much of the morning will be spent in quiet on the activity. Usually the whole group will be together, though in some cases, such as walking or outdoor painting, individuals may prefer to go off by themselves. Afternoons are often kept free.

After tea there may be reflection on the day's activities, discussion of the subject, and sharing of ideas, skills and mutual support. In the evening there may be a talk, general discussion, a prayer workshop, or even a party. The evening may close with prayer together, in compline or an epilogue; and silence will resume for the night.

The Creative Arts Retreat Movement

The Creative Arts Retreat Movement (CARM) promotes retreats that involve creative arts such as painting, embroidery, calligraphy, creative writing, poetry and music appreciation. The organisation arranges around 40 retreats each year, in retreat houses and religious community houses in Britain and abroad. Each retreat has both a chaplain and a tutor.

A programme is published annually in the late autumn; members of CARM have priority in booking. Many events are listed in *Retreats*, published by the Retreat Association. For more information and membership details, write to: Jeff Witts, CARM Membership Secretary, Newlands, Norwich Road, Edgefield, Norfolk NR24 2RL, secretary@carmretreats.org

Information from the Retreat Association

As well as publishing *Retreats* in December each year, the Retreat Association produces a number of leaflets like this one. Other titles that may be of interest include:

- Have you thought of making a retreat
- So what happens on a retreat?

The Retreat Association aims to foster the growth of the spiritual life by the practice of retreats. For information contact:

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