

Organising a group retreat

In today's busy world many worshipping groups are just as busy. Individually members may have many demands on them in their personal and working lives, and the group as a whole may share commitments in supporting one another and in social action.

Activity is important as an expression of faith, but it needs to be underpinned by quiet and stillness, reflection and community building, prayer and discernment. Many groups find it helpful to spend time together on retreat, to deepen their experience of prayer, broaden their vision, and strengthen their faith and fellowship.

To be successful, such a retreat needs careful preparation.

Plan well ahead

All of the following need to be considered, but the order in which this happens will depend on your group's priorities. For example, if what matters most to you is that everyone who wants to go can go, you will need to find a retreat house that can provide the necessary rooms. On the other hand, if the starting point is a wish to visit a particular retreat house, you may be happy to let the availability of rooms determine the size of the group.

- 1 *How long?* Any group may benefit from a week together, and a week is usual for individually guided retreats. Most groups, however, will find a weekend more realistic, especially if this is their first retreat.
- 2 *How many people?* Will everyone be able to go? Or will you offer the retreat simply on the basis of first come, first served? If you might have too few people, would you consider joining with members of a nearby church to make a viable number?
- 3 *When?* Choose a date well in advance. Keep it clear in your diary, and make sure that no other church events clash with it. Make it the priority for that week.
- 4 *Where?* Many retreat houses are in great demand: you may need to book eighteen months or more ahead. Will the house you prefer be able to meet your needs? Is it easy to get to with the transport available to your group? Will those who come be able to move around it - for example, are there stairs that would prevent a wheelchair user from attending? Does it have the necessary facilities - for instance, does anyone need a hearing loop? Will the house be able to cater for special diets? Check whether the number is fixed: some houses may be able to take a few more or less nearer the time, depending on their other bookings. Ask about cancellation terms (costs and timing).

- 5 *Who will organise it?* Appoint a small planning group and a retreat secretary. Make it clear whether they are expected to work to a brief or are trusted to exercise their own judgement.
- 6 *What kind of retreat?* What style of retreat will best meet your group's needs? A traditional parish retreat, with devotional addresses? A 'school of prayer', with led prayer exercises and joint reflection? The use of creative activities, such as painting or clay, leading into prayer? A retreat related to nature? An individually guided retreat? A dialogue between different traditions?
- 7 *Who will lead it?* Will the retreat be led by someone from within the group? Often it is preferable to invite someone from outside who has particular skills, a different approach, or a new voice. Will you need more than one leader? On an individually guided retreat, for example, the number of prayer guides will depend on the size of the group. When you first approach the retreat leader, be ready to discuss practical matters such as a fee and expenses, and any materials or facilities that may be required.
- 8 *How much will it cost?* Divide the charge made by the retreat house by the number of paying group members. Bear in mind that you will have to cover the leader's (or leaders') expenses and any fee, and perhaps hire of a meeting room. Estimate transport costs. If you need material such as flipcharts, clay or paints, will these cost extra? Allow for stationery, photocopying, postage and telephone calls.

Nearer to the retreat

- 1 *Publicity* Publicise the retreat as early as possible. Without pressurising people, make the invitations personal. Invite someone who has been on a similar retreat to speak briefly about the experience, or a member of the planning group to say what the group has in mind. Give details in parish magazines, church notices, posters or leaflets.
- 2 *Preparation* Some people will not know what to expect on a retreat, while others who have made a different kind of retreat may have preconceptions. Prepare those who might go, and involve those who might not. You might like to offer opportunities to experience silent prayer: short periods of quiet in public worship, longer periods at prayer meetings and fellowship groups, and the occasional quiet evening or quiet day. Or you might arrange a series of related talks.
- 3 *Application form* Provide a simple application form, including name, address and telephone number. Ask applicants about any special dietary or physical needs. Will they need help with transport? Can you offer any financial support?

- 4 *Bookings and deposits* You may like to ask for a deposit. For some this will encourage commitment, because they have paid; for others it may be off-putting, and they may postpone the decision. If you do collect deposits this will give you some money to work with.

As the retreat approaches

Confirm that everyone knows what to bring, and that they have some idea of the programme. Liase with the retreat house about numbers, special diets and any physical needs. Check transport arrangements.

After the retreat

Arrange a follow-up meeting to review the experience. Often this will be quite different for each person. What did those who attended find helpful? What did they find unhelpful? What have group members learned? (Sometimes all of this becomes clear only gradually, and some weeks or months afterwards.) How could you all develop the experience further in your life together? If the space for shared prayer and reflection has been valued, how could you make this a continuing part of your lives? Would it be good to arrange another retreat? If so, how soon? Would your group like to try a retreat in daily life? As individuals, have they considered ongoing spiritual accompaniment?

Further information

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?
- Time to be

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



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