

# CHURCH LEADERSHIP RETREATS

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I've just come back from a six-day solo retreat. Actually, I don't like calling this kind of activity a retreat – that sounds too depressive and negative. I much prefer to think of my quarterly planning and study “get-a-ways” as advances, because invariably, that's what they turn out to be – occasions for great personal and professional progress.

Leadership retreats have become pretty much a standard part of church and corporate life these days. Organizations of all sorts recognize value in their executives and leadership teams taking time-out for intensive thinking and planning together. At least, that's true in the corporate world of business and commerce. It's not always true, however, in the corporate life of the church.

One of the reasons for that – at least among conservative evangelical churches – is that church leaders don't really know how to conduct a retreat. In their minds, it's just an extended business meeting. And given the general weariness with meetings, and the already overcrowded schedules of busy professional people, the annual or bi-annual retreat never comes off.

That's a tragedy. Church leadership retreats are very much needed. They can be and ought to be times of tremendous creativity, spiritual refreshment, visionary insight, empowering and unification. There are things that can happen in a Spirit-led church leaders retreat that can never happen in a secular business equivalent. For when church leaders get together in the name of Christ, he is there with them. And when Christians spend time with their Lord in a spirit of faith, love and openness, wonderful things can happen.

How can this kind of retreat (or spiritual advance) happen? Let me give some suggestions. These are born out of my own experience of enormously fruitful personal spiritual advances. They may reflect my own character, calling and gift to a measure, but I'm persuaded that they nevertheless express universal spiritual principles applicable to all Christian leadership structures.

## **I. BEGIN WITH SEEKING GOD**

The first thing needed in a Spirit-led, God-blessed retreat is to get in touch with God and with one another. That's the step we too easily overlook. True, at most church planning retreats someone will usually start proceedings with a sermonette or devotions. And likely as not, there will be some singing and prayer. But all these can be little more than opening formalities. Something much more is needed. If a retreat is to yield fruit, participants have to take time to draw near to God. And that calls for unhurried time spent waiting on him – both alone and together.

Often this is especially needed because of the sheer hustle and bustle that's been involved in getting together for the occasion. Extra effort has been needed to be get time free from work and family commitments. People arrive hassled and tired, inwardly resenting this intrusion into their time. Added to that, there's a group that's a bit grouchy because the All Blacks are

going to be playing later in the day and they had plans to go and see them. There might even be one or two who are struggling with personal and family life at the moment, and they are a bit down in the dumps about that. Worse still, there might be a couple in the number who have not repaired a serious argument they had six months ago. You would hope not, but this, nevertheless, is the stark reality of life within the church, even the leadership of the church.

And the first thing needed is to be aware of that reality and help everyone get right with God, with themselves, and with each other. Nobody needs to be vindictive and judgmental of others. Life is spiritual warfare for every Christian, and if you are not struggling at the points a brother or sister is, you are likely to be somewhere else. So the first thing that needs to happen is to take time to draw near to God. That's something you can do alone, or together. The best idea is to blend a combination of the two.

The key thing is not to hurry too quickly into business. Your first need is to get in touch with God and with one another. It may be best to begin with a sharing and testimony time. Or it may be useful to break into small encouragement groups<sup>1</sup> that you will return to at strategic times during the retreat. One way or another – even if it requires open confession of sin and struggle, or the restoration of strained relationships – get the communication channels open between both God and man and man and man. Nothing of spiritual value will happen if that doesn't take place.

## **II. FOCUS STUDY, THOUGHT AND PRAYER**

Once that's been achieved – and sensitive spiritual leaders will know when it has – take time to focus minds and hearts on the general concern of the retreat. Don't make the mistake of rushing too quickly into planning and organizational sessions. They come later. You first have to have something to organize before you can do any organizing. Getting that "something" is the most important part of any retreat.<sup>2</sup>

How can you go about it? Here's what I have found helpful. Set apart a sizeable block of time for focused study, thought and prayer. This can be done either on an individual or small group basis. Have everyone do the same thing. Identify the main theme or issue that you want to think about over your time together, and assign everybody (or the small groups) with the task of reading, thinking and praying about it. It's always best to use the Scriptures as the basic resource, but it may also be helpful to use a prepared study or something someone has written instead.

The basic process is to get people to open their hearts to what God is saying about the concern that brings you together. This takes time, reflection, and prayer. It can't be, and shouldn't be, hurried. Theoretically, that's what makes a retreat so distinctive anyway – you are taking time out so you can give concentrated yet unhurried attention to some aspect of the leadership task. If you make this a priority, encouraging people to seek after God and be open to what he is saying, amazing things can happen.

Let me illustrate. Suppose you are part of a leadership team that has decided to have a retreat to consider the ministry of evangelism in your church. It's something that is just not happening, and it concerns you all deeply. It comes up repeatedly at your regular leadership

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<sup>1</sup> See my "*Spiritual Encouragement Groups*"

<sup>2</sup> It is recognized that some retreats may be purely organizational in their design. This is not the kind of retreat in mind here, however.

meetings, but you never seem to have time to deal with it properly. So you have decided to make this the key concern of a special leadership retreat.

In this case, one of the best things you can do is to begin your time together by focusing on a section of Scripture like the Acts of the Apostles. You might agree (or have someone decide beforehand for you), that you are all going to read and pray over the first eight chapters of the book of Acts. You are going to do so with a view to seeing what the Lord has to say in these chapters about evangelism. You are not going to get side-tracked onto tempting or pet issues that intrigue you. Your purpose is clear. You want to hear what the Lord has to say to you about evangelism.

So you read, and you reflect, and you pray with that in mind, noting every helpful insight or glimmer of light that comes to mind. I find it useful to list every related idea that I come across in the process of such reading. Often I will end up with 50-60 notes on the topic – often just short statements such as “The Holy Spirit given to empower” (Acts 1:8), and “Prayer a priority” (1:14). These become seed ideas that the Spirit can take and bring home to mind and heart in ways that relate to your special circumstances.

Don't be concerned if some people don't appear to get much that is original and inspirational from this exercise, especially if it's being carried out as individuals. Spiritual gifting comes in at this point. Some people have special gifts in the area of leadership, and are much more sensitive to what the Spirit is saying in the Word - and consequently seem to see much more - than others. This is fine. It's what the body of Christ is all about. There is nevertheless still great value in everyone taking time to read, reflect, think and pray over the same section of Scripture. It puts everyone in the same spiritual field as it were, and is an important condition for the development of unity in what follows.

### **III. POOL AND NURTURE INSIGHTS**

Once everyone has had opportunity to soak themselves in the word and prayer with a focus on a common theme, it's time to bring people back together to focus and pool insights. This is often a tremendously exciting and stimulating experience. People are thrilled to discover others coming up with the same (or different) insights to those they had received. Or the insight of one person might suddenly make something fall into place for somebody else. When a group of well-prepared people brainstorms together, the possibilities are endless. The Spirit of God often works in these settings to create something surprising and very special.

There is something else very important that happens through this process. It becomes a great means of uniting people together in a common course of action. Leadership can easily degenerate to a visionary individual trying to convince others to buy into their personal programme. Sometimes God uses that means of leading his people, but it's not the only way he does so - nor necessarily the best. No matter how humble a visionary leader may be, or how hard he tries to communicate his vision, others find it difficult to buy into something they've not actually had the experience of hatching. It's not a matter people wanting personal credit for the outcome. It's just a sense that the idea, vision, or programme is, after all someone else's, not their own.

But that changes when there has been a team approach to developing a vision or plan. The various individuals don't even need to contribute anything personally to a strategy or vision to

feel part of the outcome. What results belongs to them just as much as to anyone else. And that's a tremendous gain.

This process generally results in the group as a whole agreeing on a number of distinct ideas. They might be in the form of a new emphasis, a new activity, a new series of sermons, or a new leader. All sorts of schemes can come to mind and visions that can begin to take shape as a result of pooling and nurturing insights. And when that happens, the group is then in a position to get down to some definite planning.

#### **IV. GIVE SHAPE AND FORM TO IDEAS**

Visions and schemes come to nothing unless they are translated into workable programmes with definite plans. This step is vital if anything is to come of the ideas that have surfaced in the earlier part of the process. What is more, this step can't really happen before this point. It's only when a leadership team has a clear vision with some definite strategies to achieve it that they can set about organizational planning.

I often liken this to the process of sermon preparation. There is nothing more futile, more energy sapping, or more exhausting, than trying to outline and write a sermon when you haven't got a clear sense of where you want to go and what you want to say. You end up having to invent as you go along. And that's haphazard at best. But how different it is when you have a clear message to deliver. You are gripped by a central, significant, practical truth, have lots of supporting and illustrating ideas teeming about in your mind, and you have a very clear idea of what you want to happen as a result of what you say. What's needed in this situation is simply order being brought to the tangled materials in your mind. You don't have to worry about inventing something to say – your task is essentially that of organization.

The same is true in the leadership process. The earlier steps are equivalent to the process of "invention" in a message or sermon. Once you have a vision, some goals, a strategy, then you can set about designing how it is going to happen. You need to think of who you can involve, what material and financial resources are needed, the teaching programmes and communication links that need to be established, and the time frames you need to work within.

This is where those with special organizational gifts come into their own. Often they will not be the people who had the clearest insights in the earlier phases of the process. Those with the conceptual gifts critical in recognizing ideas are often not those with the strongest practical abilities for translating them into action. That's where others kick in, uniting and cementing the whole team together. And in this way too, the whole body of leaders comes to have a sense of ownership of the vision and its plans.

The leadership team is now in a position where it can pack up and go home. It has reached a clear, biblical consensus on what needs to be done, and how to go about doing it. What remains now is to go back to the church and share the vision and excitement with others. And nothing is more likely to make this happen than a group of united, enthused, assured leaders who know that the hand of the Lord has been upon them (see Neh. 2:17,18).