

Gospel Centered Events

Women's Retreat Planning

Whether you are planning a Women's Retreat or a more formal conference, be prepared for months of planning and preparation. Retreats are an opportunity to “*draw back to a place of refuge, privacy, or safety, to escape danger or difficulty*” (Building an Effective Women's Ministry, Sharon Jaynes). It is our opportunity to escape from the busyness of life, retreating for spiritual, emotional and even physical renewal. Retreats are also a relaxed atmosphere to share the gospel. Conferences are more structured and formal. The planning for both, however, is fairly similar.

Retreat Research: *This is a great assignment for someone on your women's ministry team who has the gift of administration, or hospitality. These are planners,*

1) Prayer

- *Is this the right event for our ministry, at this time?*
- *Is this the best use of our time and resources, at this time?*
- *Does this meet a need of the women in our church/community?*

2) Theme

- *A Word or Phrase that represents the idea or purpose of the retreat.*
- *A piece of Scripture that supports the above, or describes the theme on it's own.*
- *A pre-assembled retreat kit, that has themes to choose from.*

3) Length

- *Weekend: Two Days, with Single Over Night Stay*
- *Extended Weekend: Three Days, with Two Over Night Stays*

4) Attendance

- *What is your usual attendance for women's events?*
- *What is your usual attendance for out of town conferences?*
- *How many women are in your your church, 20-25% attendance max*

5) Budget Goal

- *What is an amount you feel comfortable or is reasonable for the women to pay based on your area's economy?*
- *Are there any restrictions on cost from the church leadership?*

6) Location

- *Consider locations within a reasonable driving distances, up to 2 – 3 hours maximum.*
- *If there is a long distance drive, will there be carpool plans or charter bus options?*
- *What locations visually and practically work with your theme?*
- *What locations can accommodate your expected attendance?*
- *What locations will fit within your budget, comfortably?*
- *What does the location include with for that cost?*

7) Meals / Snacks / Beverages

- *Does the location have catering on site?*
- *Is catering included in the accommodation pricing, or separate?*
- *If separate, is it required or optional?*
- *If optional, are there any restrictions on catering?*
- *Is there an option to cook your own meals at the location.*

8) Set a Date

- *Start with an empty calendar.*
- *Block out any dates where there are important activities within the church.*
- *Block out major holidays and the weeks surrounding them, including Mother's Day.*
- *Block out important dates for parents, like Prom, Homecoming and Graduation weeks.*
- *Consider your seasons and weather in respect to your theme.*
- *Comprise a list of several dates, you may need to be flexible with the location due to availability.*
- *Also consider that some locations have "in season" and "out of season" rates, which can help or hinder your budget, this can have a significant impact on your budget.*

Most of the research checklist is pretty self explanatory, but I'd like to address a few things about locations that can be helpful in determining what best suits your group.

Types of Lodging / Locations

Hotels - A hotel has virtually limitless rooms available, but they are going to require a minimum number of hotel rooms to be booked in order to receive any sort of discount. Often booking two nights is as much, and some times a little less, than booking for a one night stay.

Benefit: Everything in one place, meeting rooms, meals, and lodging. Plus fun amenities during down time like pools, spas, gyms, tennis and even beach access. Additionally, there is hardly any set up requirements, as the hotel takes care of those needs. They will set up the tables and chairs for meeting spaces, set up and cleaning up after meals, and some hotels even include decorations for the space from their personal inventory. There are also hotels in every city, of some sort, making it possible to hold a retreat within your own town or short driving distances. Hotel catering can often accommodate dietary restrictions if you should have attendees who are vegetarians, diabetic or suffer from allergies.

Drawback: Price. Since hotels provide more services, they will generally be one of your most expensive options. In most hotels you must use the hotel catering for your meals (unless you plan to leave the property) and that can consume nearly half your budget on it's own. You will also need to budget for tipping the staff that assist you in the course of the event.

Christian Campgrounds – These locations are generally used by youth groups and Christian summer camps. But, throughout the year, they will often rent out their cabins to other ministry groups and churches. Most of these camps are set up with a meeting space that has one or two dorm or bunk house style rooms for sleeping. They will also have a mess hall for your main meals, and occasionally may have a small camp store that carries snacks and toiletries.

Benefit: The bunk houses will sleep quite a few women, 20-40, and you are most often renting the space not the beds. Therefore your lodging costs are a flat rate for the number of cabins you need to rent. However, you will pay per person for the meals, if the camp is providing them. Some camps will allow you to handle your own food needs, but they may not permit an outside catering service. You will need to inquire if the cabin has a full kitchen or not.

Drawback: These types of campgrounds are usually outside of major cities, therefore you can expect to travel. You will need to decide if you are going to charter a bus, or carpool. Be sure to discuss parking with the camp, as limited spaces may make carpooling a

requirement. If your group is small, and only taking up a few cabins, you may find that there are other events on the property at the same time. Sleeping accommodations in most of these camps are bunk beds, which require you to bring your own bedding. This may also impact which ladies from your church are able to attend, due to age, health, or physical concerns. If you use the camp catering, you may find it harder to meet any dietary restrictions when it comes to the menu, but you might also have the option to provide those alternate meals yourself. This will vary camp to camp. You will also be limited to the number of people each cabin or bunk house can hold. You wouldn't want to rent another 40 person cabin for 10 extra people. You will also have to set up your own meeting spaces, the camp is fairly hands off.

Vacation Homes - If you have a small group, under 20, consider looking into vacation homes. These locations will have flat weekend rental price, but you will be limited to the number of people the house or cabin will comfortably sleep. There are vacation rental home websites that you can use to search for properties, based on the number of people you need to house and the price you would like to spend. You can sometimes get lucky and find cabins that are right next to each other, or smaller houses, that you can book together. Don't let the size surprise you, they are often unexpectedly affordable, when you break it down to the per person price. You will also have a full kitchen, should you decide to prepare the meals yourselves, or cater in the affair.

Benefit: Affordable, usually found on a beach or lake front property, or local to touristy areas that your attendees can visit during down time. These locations may have swimming pools, hot tubs and media rooms to use during down time. Frees up your budget for other elements for the retreat.

Drawback: There will not be formal meeting rooms, with tables and chairs. Expect to pile into the living room, or sit on the patio for your group sessions. Sleeping arrangements can also be awkward as inevitably you'll end up with 4 women in a kids themed room with bunk beds, while the other ladies are in regular rooms with regular beds.

Each of these locations are perfect locations for retreats, but your choice will impact your budget, amount of planning time, set up and clean up time, etc.

When planning a retreat it is really easy to allow the details to get away from you, and therefore it is important to have a clear budget. It is also really easy to allow the down time and fun to overtake our time with God, we must be very intentional about keeping this event gospel centered. A conference, by it's very nature is going to be more scripture, worship and focused on God. Weekend getaways, can frankly get away from us really quickly.

This is why having a retreat committee is really important to the process. This team may be comprised of women from the women's ministry team, but it may also include women from your church who are gifted with talents towards these types of events. Not only do they want to be included, it is a great way for the team, and church, let everyone woman know that she has something valuable to contribute.

Your committee is going to be comprised of a leader who spearheads the planning, and women with an assortment of spiritual gifts. If you don't already have a prayer team praying for the retreat, make sure you include that in your committee assignments.

A committee structure might look something like:

- Committee Chair /Head/Leader (*oversees all positions and functions of committee*)
- Prayer Team Leader (*praying over retreat, prayer team for during retreat*)
- Publicity Leader (*assembles brochures, fliers, submits church announcements, facebook, etc*)
- Speaker Coordinator (*finds and coordinates the speakers for the event, tends to speaker at retreat*)
- Worship Leader (*plans the worship time- including finding singer/musician, printing lyric sheets, music for other presentation times, and tends to the worship performers during retreat*)
- Tech Team (*coordinates the audio visual needs for the event, hires tech team, learns tech, etc*).
- Treasurer /Finances (*collects money for event, keeps track of budget, receipts, reimbursements*)
- Registration/Name Tag Coordinator (*premakes the event ID's and signs women into the retreat as they arrive, distributes any conference materials needed*)
- Gifts & Door Prize Coordinator (*obtains any prizes or gifts to be given away during the retreat*)
- Decorations Coordinator (*if there is any decorating to do, she will plan it and put together a volunteer list to execute the plan*).
- Games & Activities (*icebreaker, group activities, optional activities, anything "fun" being offered*).
- Food & Beverages (*coordinates with location the menu, prepares the DIY menu: for meals, snacks, beverages, and other needs*).
- Accommodations Coordinator (*arranges the lodging for attendees, guest speakers, etc*)
- Break Out Session/Small Group Leader (*coordinates any structured learning or discussion time outside of the general sessions*)
- General Session Leader (*arranges for the meeting spaces, seating charts, order of events, etc*)

There may be specific positions that need to be added, based on your event location or needs.

- Follow Up Team (*if you are going to have response cards, to follow up with the ladies after the retreat, or they may review and compile data from end of event surveys*)
- Retail Sales (*in some instances if you hire in a speaker, who is an author, she may have books she'd like to bring for sale. Sometimes, speakers will bring their own assistant to sell the merchandise. Or, they may use a volunteer from your ministry team. Please make sure this is something you are comfortable with, and your church approves of. And, let your attendees know this will be available. If the speaker isn't allowed to sell books at the retreat or conference, you may find the speaker fee is higher.*)

Conferences tend to be more formal, and you will likely hire in at least a keynote speaker. However, retreats are more intimate and are often filled with personal testimonies from women in the church. I have experienced retreats with paid speakers, with speakers from within the church itself, and a mixture of both. The question is, which fits your theme and purpose of the retreat best.

You might also find that due to the location you select, it may make more sense to combine some of the suggested committee positions (some may not be needed at all). The simpler you make the process the better for everyone.

Due to tourist and wedding seasons, seasonal rates, and the size of your group, it is important that you begin this process early. Even if your group is small, if you want to ensure you can hold your event during a certain month, you can't wait until the last minute. Most retreat planners will suggest eight

months. For myself, I wait about two or three weeks after the current year's retreat has concluded and start working toward the next one.

When you begin your planning stages early, it also gives plenty of notice to the women in the church. They may need to move a vacation day, start budgeting for the registration, or arranging for childcare. It also affords the ministry the opportunity to put together a payment installment plan, which I have found very practical for larger expense events.

Once you have the basics (date, location, theme, price), starting promoting. Have a women's brunch to announce the retreat, and use this as a time to sign up volunteers for the event. It also ensures that your information will be included on the church website, in Sunday bulletins, in plenty of time for the women in the church to invite coworkers, friends and family members. I also encourage the women's ministry team to pray over 10 specific people that God lays on their heart to personally invite to the retreat.

Something your team will want to consider, as well, is: do we want to only invite our church and women they personally know - or - do we want to extend an invitation to other local churches who might be interested? Do we want to publicize it on the radio or in the local paper? I would recommend not taking on more than you can handle. If this is your first event, keep it small and personal, and allow it to grow naturally. Eventually, you will find yourself able to handle a much larger function. A one day retreat might be a great starting point for a small ministry, a first time retreat, or even for a ministry in an area that is struggling financially. While the steps are the same, you are filling in a shorter schedule, and working with a simpler budget. Often single day retreats can be held in your own church, but if you need more space, look into local Women's Clubs, Rec Centers and rental halls in your community.

Final thoughts, if you have been considering putting on a retreat for the women in your church... but you are really uncertain.... talk to other women's ministry leaders. Is there a church that is already planning one? Ask if you could sit in on their planning meetings, and shadow their team as they go through the process. It might be something you can accomplish over a lunch or coffee meeting, where the other leader can give you some pointers & share their experiences. Or purchase a retreat kit, like I mentioned earlier, as they will give you a step by step guide to executing a successful event.