

# Why Church Retreats?

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Church retreats are a tradition that goes back to the origins of camping itself and the “Brush Arbor” movement early in the previous century. But why exactly are church retreats so effective? In a word, it is the lack of distractions. Retreats are so productive because a retreat provides the opportunity for a concentrated time focused on spiritual objectives and relationships in a setting removed from the distractions of everyday life.

Let me give an example. Not long ago I was involved in what turned into a protracted process to work out the details of a lease for some camp buildings. The process took almost nine months, mostly because of the delays in dealing with each message and proposal as they worked themselves between two principals and their attorneys. A message to the principal could wait for hours or days depending on the work load of the principal. After consideration, the message would then be passed to their attorney who was dealing with it along with his other clients. A response would eventually filter back through the same process in reverse, get passed back to us and on to our attorney. It took months.

By comparison, a good friend of mine’s father was a partner in a major development and construction company, which was involved in building and sometimes owning downtown sky scrapers and shopping malls. When negotiations commenced for a project they all met in a neutral setting for several days of face to face negotiations with all the parties and lawyers at the table. In a matter of days, they processed complexities light-years more advanced than my lease project. The difference; no distractions, no interruptions, no other clients, no other competing priorities, and no family responsibilities during that time period. As well, the productivity resulting from the trust relationships built in these face-to-face settings was not possible at the end of e-mail, telephone calls, and brief meetings.

Retreats are similar. A weekend retreat is worth months of Sundays and mid-week meetings because of the lack of gaps and distractions. Add to this the relationships built as you share the retreat experience with others over a concentrated time, and the effectiveness of the retreat is even more pronounced.

The concept of a retreat is not unlike that of a vacation. You set aside all the distractions of everyday life for a time away dedicated to a particular purpose, which often includes developing and deepening relationships with family and others. Add to this the pleasures of someone else doing the cooking, serving and clearing tables, taking care of the dishes and child care in some cases. It is almost like going out to eat five times in one weekend with a group of friends. There is ample opportunity to sit around the tables and have a nice chat. There are no pressing needs. You are away from it all.

Retreats work for all ages and for a variety of purposes. Adult retreats, especially women’s retreats, are great for building relationships and focusing on spiritual needs. That is why they are so effective for groups like Alpha. Youth groups also benefit especially because of the opportunities for leaders to build relationships with students during the course of a weekend, which is simply not possible two hours at a time with a week in between.

Church retreats are a great way to accomplish many of the objectives of church ministries through a period of time away focused on relationships and spiritual development, without the daily distractions of our busy lives.