

Tips for Hosting a Successful Marriage Retreat or Women's Retreat

Courtesy of Jennifer Degler, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Life Coach, Author, and Speaker
Lexington, Kentucky • (859) 685-7753 • <http://JenniferDegler.com> • Jennifer@jenniferdegler.com

- 1) Get a group of people to pray for your retreat--before, during and after. Prayer support makes the difference between a good retreat and a truly unforgettable, powerful, life-changing event.
- 2) Involve as many people as possible in the planning and execution of your retreat. Sometimes pastors try to plan the whole retreat themselves and use church staff to do all the advertising, organizing, etc. Don't do this—every church member who has a job to do for the retreat will have “buy-in” for your event and talk about it to other church members.
- 3) Timing is everything. Check the calendar for possible scheduling conflicts. Since wives are often “dragging” husbands to marriage retreats, be mindful of conflicting events for men, such as sporting events, the opening weekend of a hunting season, etc. If child care is not provided for a Saturday women's retreat, having Dad at home to watch the kids is also a deciding factor for many women. School holidays and breaks, local parades or “days” (e.g., Pioneer Days, Founders' Days) also need to be considered.
- 4) In general, the following weekends work well for retreats:
 - January (2nd, 3rd, 4th weekends)
 - February (all four weekends usually work for marriage retreats, but women's retreats don't work well on Valentine's Weekend. An annual “getaway” Valentines' Weekend Marriage Retreat works very well and leads couples to reserve the date on their calendars year to year.)
 - March (any weekend that is not Easter or Spring Break)
 - April (1st or 2nd weekend unless Easter or Spring Break)
 - May (the first weekend only and just for women's retreats—after this you run into Mother's Day, graduations, weddings, ball games, Memorial Day, etc.)
 - June, July, and August are typically not good times for retreats
 - September (2nd, 3rd, 4th)
 - October (all four weekends usually work unless your local celebration of Halloween falls on a Friday or Saturday night)
 - November (1st, 2nd—after this people are too busy with Thanksgiving and Christmas preparations).
 - December is not a good time for a retreat.
 - Overall, in my experience, people have the least amount of conflicts in January, February, middle to late September, October, and the first weekend in November.
- 5) Decide whom you want to target for the retreat—young couples, older couples, blended families, all couples? Single women, working women, stay-at-home moms, all women? What are the needs of this particular group? Even a simple surveying of your target group

and asking, “What would you like to focus on during a retreat?” can yield helpful programming information and also provide some “ownership” of the future retreat.

- 6) Decide your format: A retreat at the church or a “getaway” retreat at a resort, state park, conference center, etc. You will have more people attend a church retreat—less expense, no overnight child care, less driving, less time commitment, more familiar territory, etc. However, sometimes a “getaway” is what your people are asking for and there are enough people asking to warrant the extra trouble and expense you will have to go through to plan a weekend at a hotel.
- 7) If choosing a “getaway,” pick your location based primarily on a short commute and affordable price. It’s hard to leave work on Friday and drive more than two hours to get some place and then sit and listen to a speaker. If you are having a one-night retreat (as opposed to a two-night), people will definitely kick up a fuss if there is a long commute. Since people will be busy with the retreat, they won’t have time to participate in all the activities a fancy resort might offer (unless you build in an extra day to do so). Also, cost of the room and food is always an issue with some people, so making it affordable is always a good idea. State parks are usually good deals and have buffet restaurants that can feed larger groups. Church denominational conference centers are also very affordable, if usually somewhat “rustic.” Just make sure each couple will have a private room (and no bunk beds!). For a women’s retreat, most women will share rooms, thereby lowering the cost and allowing you to choose a more expensive resort.
- 8) In your promotional materials, be sure to communicate that this marriage retreat will be FUN with lots of laughter—this is attractive to people. I have some great game ideas that will get people laughing and interacting. Try to have a short game or funny skit before each presentation to loosen everyone up and get them laughing.
- 9) A typical **one night marriage retreat** (either at a church or a getaway) schedule might include:

Friday:

6:30 to 8:00 p.m.--Buffet dinner/entertainment/game/music

8:00 p.m.--One marriage presentation lasting no longer than an hour, typically something that is fun such as Communication

9:00 to 9:45 p.m. Knee-to-Knee Sessions (couples with small children can go on home and complete this there)

Saturday:

8:30 a.m. Continental breakfast

9:00 a.m. Presentation such as Passionate Intimacy (to keep them awake!)

10:00 to 10:45 a.m. Knee-to-knee (which includes time for transit, bathroom break, snack and private discussion)

10:45 to 11:45 a.m Presentation such as Conflict Resolution

11:45 to 12:30 p.m. Knee-to-knee (and checkout of rooms if at a hotel)

12:30 to 1:30 p.m. Buffet Lunch

1:30 to 2:30 p.m. Presentation such as Time Together (something fun to end the day)
2:30 to 3:00 p.m. Knee-to-Knee
3:00 to 3:30 p.m. Share Time and Wrap Up

10) A typical **two night “getaway”** marriage retreat schedule might include:

Friday:

6:30 p.m.--Buffet dinner/entertainment

7:30 to 8:00 Icebreaker/Couple Games/Music

8:00 p.m.--One marriage presentation lasting no longer than an hour, typically something that is fun such as Communication

9:00 to 9:45 p.m. Knee-to-Knee (in individual hotel rooms)

9:45 p.m. Free Time (Some couples like to get together at this time and play games or visit, but many prefer to stay in their rooms and enjoy time together).

Saturday:

8:00 a.m. Buffet breakfast

9:00 a.m. to 10:00 a.m. Presentation such as Passionate Intimacy (to keep them awake!)

10:00 to 10:45 a.m. Knee-to-knee in hotel rooms (which includes time for transit, bathroom break, snack and private discussion)

10:45 to 11:45 a.m. Presentation such as Conflict Resolution

11:45 to 12:30 p.m. Knee-to-knee (in hotel rooms)

12:00 to 1:30 p.m. Buffet Lunch

A FREE AFTERNOON! Couples love to have time to relax, take a nap, etc. I encourage you to not provide too much activity (such as organizing golfing, shopping, etc.) during this time. These activities tend to be segregated with the men golfing and the women shopping. Remember, the purpose of the weekend is to connect as couples and most people need some serious “downtime.”

6:00 to 7:00 p.m. Buffet Dinner

7:00 to 7:30 p.m. Games/Music

7:30 to 8:30 p.m. Presentation such as Time Together (something fun to end the day)

8:30 to 9:00 p.m. Knee-to-Knee (in hotel rooms)

9:00 p.m. Free Time

Sunday:

8:00 a.m. to 9:15 a.m. Buffet Breakfast (couples appreciate a relaxed Sunday schedule, so make breakfast as late as you can)

9:30 a.m. Praise and Worship

10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. Presentation (this is a good time to offer two or more specialized sessions that couples could choose from, such as Love and Limits with Kids, Finances, Blended Families, etc. I encourage couples to go to the same presentation rather than split up).

11:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. Wrap Up

11:15 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. Knee to Knee and Check Out of Hotel Rooms

11:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. Buffet Lunch and Head for Home

11) The women's retreat I do usually follows this schedule at a church:

Saturday:

8:30 a.m. Registration/Donuts and Coffee

9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. First Session/20 minute break/Second Session

12:00 to 1:00 p.m. Boxed Lunch or Buffet Lunch

1:00 to 4:00 p.m. Third Session/20 minute break/Fourth Session

You can start registration at 8:00 a.m. if your church has a 5:00 p.m. Saturday service for which you need the church.

The women's retreat can also be done as a "getaway" with the first session occurring Friday night, the second and third Saturday morning, and the fourth after lunch.

12) **Knee-to-Knee times are crucial to your marriage retreat.** Couples consistently report that this time of focused, guided conversation was the best part of the retreat and where the most change actually happened in their relationship. I provide 4 or 5 questions for couples to discuss and include instructions for them to pray together at each knee-to-knee. Sometimes this is the first time a couple has ever prayed together. If you are having your retreat at a church, it is very important that you assign each couple a place to go for their knee-to-knees (otherwise they will spend all their time looking for a private place). When they arrive, give them a map of the church with room numbers and highlight "their" room on the map. If you play some soft "cover" music in the sanctuary, you can let several couples spread out in there.

13) Couples do not like to be rushed. It's better to have fewer presentations and more time for knee-to-knees than vice versa. We can only absorb so much information.

14) Provide snacks and drinks at the beginning of each knee-to-knee break. Couples will often grab a soda and a cookie to eat while they talk.

15) Door prizes are a great way to get people back on time. Inform people that you will be giving away door prizes promptly at the beginning of each session and you **MUST** be in the room to win. Watch them hoof it back in record time! Don't go buy a bunch of things—just ask people and businesses for donated prizes. It's amazing what people will donate and even if it's kind of unusual (like a bag of cleaning supplies), people will love it and you can have fun giving away odd prizes. If you have the budget, giving away \$20 babysitting vouchers (they can turn them in to the church to be reimbursed for their babysitting expenses) with restaurant certificates/movie tickets is really thoughtful.

16) You will have your best response to a church marriage retreat if you provide free childcare. Also, parents appreciate you providing dinner for the kids on Friday night and lunch on Saturday (pizza, Happy Meals, etc.).

17) For a women's retreat, turn the men's bathrooms into women's bathrooms to help with long lines (just put some silk ferns in the urinals—women will get a kick out of them!). Be sure to leave one bathroom on another floor for the men who might be helping out that day (and clearly mark it as a MEN ONLY bathroom).

18) If you want people to register in advance for your church retreat, be sure to include a financial cost for waiting to register at the door (e.g., \$25 in advance and \$35 at the door). If you don't provide for this "late penalty," many people will wait to register at the last minute or at the door, making planning difficult.

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