

IDEAS FOR INCORPORATING THE THEME INTO A RETREAT

The theme is the unifying concept to your entire weekend. It is meant to drive home the main point of the retreat and to be the main teaching element. To have all things - meals, meetings, games, activities - revolve around one theme leaves an indelible impression on every individual involved. It is true that long after the retreat, people will not remember the words of the speaker or every song that was sung, but they will remember the main theme.

The main thing to consider in working out a theme with the specifics of the retreat is that detail is important. Pour through each meeting time, meal, free time, speaker's message and ask yourself with each event, "How can I make the theme clear in this time?" Soon you will find yourself immersed in creative ideas of how to tie in the theme. The following are suggestions to spur you on to even greater creativity.

MEALS: Oftentimes retreat planners overlook the potential of creativity at mealtimes. Natural fellowship occurs at meals and a generally relaxed atmosphere is almost always present. Caution is given that nourishment still be the main focus, but utilize all possible times of input is good.

- Backwards meal: All members must dress backwards and meal may be served backwards (dessert first). Possible themes include "What life is like without Christ," or "Alienation."

- Hat meal: Have each person wear a hat to the meal. A contest voted on by retreaters to determine the most creative hat, etc., would be a good idea. Theme suggestions could be "God as Covering," or "Crazy for Christ."

- Single Utensil meal: Give each person one eating utensil. These can either be uniform such as a spoon or each person could be given something different from the kitchen. Possible themes: "Dependency," "Handicaps," or "Thankfulness for the Things we Have."

- Bible Character meal: People must dress like a Bible character in order to receive their food. This could be used with any theme, but is especially conducive to the study of a book of the Bible. People would dress like the characters of the book being studied.

Having people dress up as characters, athletes, members of other countries, each other, etc., is easy to tie in to the theme and can be very successful.

Other examples of tying the theme would be having people feed each other or choosing some to be waiters and waitresses for a theme of servanthood. Fasting around the dinner table and having a time of prayer and discussion about the needs of other countries is effective. Eating foods from other countries is a good idea for a missions theme, to help them learn more about the country and identify with how missionaries must feel. Also, giving some tables more food than others can be effective in understanding poverty, giving away what you have, etc. To describe how those without felt is crucial to such a meal. A monk meal where everyone eats in silence can be used for a meditation retreat or a retreat studying different religions. Even such small things as having a birthday cake to celebrate the King or having candles to illustrate the light of the world are good and don't take much effort or time.

Although certainly not exhaustive, these ideas show how one can incorporate their theme into the so-called "ordinary" parts of a retreat.

ACTIVITIES: Activities are crucial to any retreat; big or small, family or youth. Because of the importance of this part of the retreat, it is imperative that the theme be present in each programmed activity.

- Sports: Any sport such as baseball, basketball, volleyball, hockey, soccer can be made to fit a number

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of themes by simple suggestions or adjustments. For example, one could play a baseball game in silence and tie into a theme of “Communication,” or “Observation,” as they watch how the interactions change.

By doing a simple sport using only one arm is excellent for “Dependence,” or “Handicaps.” Blindfolding some for a game can illustrate how we are in darkness without Christ and what it means to be in darkness. A simple scavenger hunt can be used to show appreciation of all that God has given us in creation. A hike can do the same.

- Games: With a “Win, Lose, or Draw” - type game, it is very possible to communicate your theme by simply having all of the things they are to draw be from a category which reflects your theme. For example, if you were using a theme of peer pressure you could have categories for things like “Just Say No,” beauty pageant, drugs, alcohol, dating, examinations, “Everybody’s Doing It,” gossip, football, etc.

A game of “Simon Says” can also be adapted easily to a theme of “Dating,” or “Peer Pressure.”

The “Ungame”, or an adaptation thereof, can be used under themes of “Unifying,” “The Body of Christ,” or “Openness/Vulnerability.”

Almost any game can be modified to fit your theme. It simply must be both verbalized by the leader and acknowledged by the participants to have effectively communicated the theme.

- Special Games: The “Pony Express” is an activity in which there are many stations with stunts such as swimming a lap of the pool, shooting a basket, eating a cracker and then whistling, etc. Two teams compete, each having a runner who travels to one station, waits until the stunt has been performed and then proceeds to the next station. This is a fun event because it is not typical and because no one feels excluded for not having a certain skill. It can be tied into a theme by naming each station or having what stunt is done at each station be smaller parts of the bigger theme itself.

Having an “Off Track Meet” where participants sign up for seemingly the typical events only to find out that they are anything but typical is good to speak of running the race for the Lord. For example, one who signs up for the shot put might be surprised to discover the item to be thrown is a 7 foot medicine ball. The 50 - yard dash could be a race walking with a box of washing detergent on their head (from “Dash” brand detergent). Again, this event is good because it does not involve doing one thing which some people might not be able to do, but instead involves a number of semi-skills. Doing a track meet this way, too, allows for some hilarious fun.

“Brain and Brawn,” is good to use for themes like “Knowing the Bible,” or “Ministry to the Whole Person.” Brain and Brawn involves having a representative from each team attempt to answer a question about the Bible before the opponent gets it. Whoever answers the question (by either knowing it or looking up the reference before the other person does) then gets to go on to the “Brawn” section. This part involves accomplishing things like standing up from an Indian-style position with a cup of water on your head (not using your hands), or carrying a broom on your fingertip for a designated distance. This is an activity good for all ages.

Having a penny carnival with all different sorts of booths is a good way to celebrate the King.

- Other: These suggestions are also good concerning the activities part of your schedule:

Carnival -- to celebrate life or the King

Skits -- to symbolize some aspect of the Christian life

Air Band Competition -- for a music theme or to show that being a Christian doesn’t just mean having rules

“Anything Goes” -- a semi-talent show with not much time to plan acts; shows creativity God has given us

Talent Show -- could be centered around one theme (all acts); i.e. Bible characters, spiritual gifts.

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RULES: Given in a positive manner and tied to the theme, these can be a joyful instead of a dreadful thing. For example, on the first night someone crazy could dress like Moses and carry two tablets with the “Ten Commandments” for the weekend written out. If the theme was peer pressure, people dressed up in gang attire could come out and enact a skit showing positive peer pressure that obeying the rules is how you fit in. Also, for the same theme, someone dressed up like “The Fonz” from Happy Days could come out and talk about how it is cool to follow the rules. Using a little creativity can tie any theme into a unique way to give the rules of a particular retreat.

HOUSING: Nothing major in this area can be done taking into consideration that the retreaters need somewhere where they feel comfortable processing all that is happening. Yet, just as aforementioned, small adjustments can powerfully bring home the theme. Relevant Scripture verses could be put up in posters on the walls or a cross could be erected in a focal point. For a retreat emphasizing fruits of the spirit, a piece of fruit could be put on each person’s bed or a basket of fruit could be left in the center of the room as a reminder.

MUSIC: This is most definitely an area where preparation is needed, yet is very often neglected until arrival at the retreat site. Very often even then it becomes, “Oh, by the way...” Music is a very important part of any retreat, no matter what the ages are. It is easy to find songs relevant to the subject. Although not all groups would find this desirable, secular songs about the subject could be listened to while members are collecting.

Then Christian songs which combat those lies with truth could be sung or used in skits. After all, music tells the story of our world. Themes of loneliness, sex, money, material world, suicide, guilt, etc. abound. Why not use them to show the desperation of a life of sin and then sing a joyful and worshipful song to show the celebration of being a Christian?

The musical choices of a retreat can bring a fragmented theme together. Therefore, it is suggested that a charismatic, capable leader be chosen to lead the songs. A person who is adept on the piano or guitar is needed as well. The two should then work together in preparation for the retreat. Mood is crucial to your meeting times and the music before will determine said tone.

TRANSPORTATION: The retreat actually begins when the cars leave the parking lot. How you arrange your drivers and people in the vehicles is important. You could choose a leader beforehand who will take each vehicle and lead a number of games. Preferably choose leaders of the youth group or church itself. The theme should begin to be set here. If the theme is the body of Christ, you might even want to stage a breakdown or running out of gas just to see the group come together. If you have a theme of cliques, you might break up some known cliques by assigning them different cars and talk to the members about how they felt afterwards. For a theme on peer pressure, you might let conversation go as it may and have leaders in each car sort of mentally record what is happening and discuss the peer pressure (positive or negative) which occurred in each vehicle.

SETTING: In choosing and planning a theme for a retreat, one of the best and most necessary ways to incorporate the theme is to use the setting of the retreat facility itself. For example, if the place has a number of hills, the whole retreat could be a study of the different aspects of Psalm 121, “I lift up mine eyes to the hills...” Or if you are having a summer or early fall retreat and there are good swimming facilities, the theme could be one on the cleansing of Christ. If it is a center in the woods or has a great deal of nature surrounding it, using themes like “All creatures wise and wonderful” or “Solitude” can be excellent. If nature is present, use it. After all, many of the greatest spiritual fathers have had great revelations or milestones in their faith in the wilderness with the Lord. So many people today, especially youth, spend so little time alone actually listening to or meditating on the Lord. Jesus Himself often went into the woods to pray and seek God. Thus, we have a great example of reasons for having a retreat as well as using nature to the benefit of all.

SPECIAL: Special events are a must to any retreat. The speaker’s message should definitely tie into the theme. Most people consider this, but often forget how a good movie choice or good concert choice

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for a retreat can put more meat on the bones of a retreat theme. If your theme is suicide, a movie could be shown which contains a suicide in it. Analysis afterwards of the different aspects of the movie is necessary in order that the proper truths about the theme be communicated. Never leave people questioning without taking them to the truth of Scripture first.

A concert, too, is great to demonstrate to young Christian people that being a Christian is a lot of fun not the “drag” that some make it out to be. Clue the concert-giver beforehand to your topic and you’d be surprised how well themes can tie into all sorts of music.

Other ideas for incorporating the theme into a retreat schedule include:

- (1) how you arrange chairs at a meeting (think about how well that would work with a theme cliques!)
- (2) role playing
- (3) having members write letters to God that you will send them later in the year. The letters would, of course, be concerning the topic which you have been studying.
- (4) A commitment service where members commit themselves to change or meditate on the things that need worked on in their lives. Using candles or other symbolism at such a meeting is essential. Atmosphere of the meeting could make or break it. A foot washing service could be done with a theme of servanthood.

There are many other ways to incorporate a retreat theme into the format of the retreat itself. This has been designed to simply spark ideas. Sometimes the smallest things make the biggest difference in bringing home the real truth of what is being taught. Just remember that even the most “ordinary” events or activities can be made to fit virtually any retreat.