



Leading A Meaningful Retreat

For College Students

In the introduction of Priya Parker's book *The Art of Gathering*, Parker says that "gathering – the conscious bringing together of people for a reason – shapes the way we think, feel, and make sense of the world." (ix) Retreats are an opportunity to gather college students together to create meaning, and significant thought and intention should be given to planning and leading these gatherings.

Begin With Purpose

Before you decide on logistics, or form, or location, think about the purpose of your intended retreat. Why are you gathering these students together? Hone in on the primary purpose for the retreat and set a goal for the time together. For example:

- **Rest.** The primary goal of the retreat is for students to rest – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually – in the presence of God.
- **Contemplation/Spiritual Practice.** The primary goal of the retreat is for students to practice their spirituality in intentional ways and/or learn new spiritual practices.
- **Community-Building.** The primary goal of the retreat is for students to get to know each other, build trust, and form deeper relationships with one another.
- **Discipleship.** The primary goal of the retreat is for students to explore their faith through learning, conversation, and a specific tool/focus.
- **Leadership.** The primary goal of the retreat is to nurture the gifts of student leaders and to forge bonds of trust and empowerment in these leaders.

While there may be multiple reasons why you are gathering, it is important to choose one main purpose so that all other activities and intentions can build on the primary goal of the retreat.

Be Intentional About Time

The schedule for the retreat should serve your main purpose, allowing ample time to move toward the primary purpose for the retreat. First, you will need to decide the overall timeframe for the retreat. While there are many factors that may contribute to this decision (cost, location, availability of students, COVID-19, etc.), use your main purpose *before* considering these factors to discern the ideal timeframe for the retreat and then make accommodations as needed. A retreat can be as long as a week and as short as a few hours. The question to ask about overall timeframe is this: What amount of time will allow for this primary goal to be fully recognized?

Be Intentional About Activity

After deciding the overall timeframe, begin mapping out a detailed schedule by blocking off at least 50% of the time for activities that serve the primary purpose of the retreat. Plan these activities first, thinking intentionally about how these work together to foster your intentions.

Guard your primary purpose carefully! If the goal is **rest**, then at least half of the retreat should offer students the chance to rest. It will be very tempting to schedule all sorts of things that might be fun or engaging, so use your primary purpose as a lens to decide which activities have a role in this particular retreat and which can be saved for later.

Especially if your purpose is **discipleship** or **leadership**, be sure to build in a bit of agenda-less time so that students (especially introverts!) have space that is theirs to shape.

Once you've decided how to structure the 50% (or more) of time that will serve the primary purpose of the retreat, build the rest of the schedule in a way that serves secondary goals. You may wish to include the following:

- Devotionals, spiritual practice, or prayer time
- Worship (perhaps with Communion)
- Quiet time
- Group bonding activities like games, team-builders, or recreation activities (like hiking or a campfire)

Be sure to think through how you will open and close the retreat, and build in rituals for these thresholds. Ask:

- How will you introduce the group to one another?
- How will you set the tone for the time?
- How will you send the group off with a sense of closure?
- Depending on your timeframe, also consider how you will use meals and travel time: who will cook or prepare food?* Will you include others in the cooking, possibly forming small groups to work as teams? Will the students transport themselves or travel with others? How can you use the travel time to create relationship? Meaning is made in these times, too.
- In terms of transportation, how will you keep people safe in line with your organization's guidelines or insurance policies? Are there university policies in place you need to abide by? If you all travel together, will you use your own vehicles or rent a van? Consider cost implications, safety, and liability in all of these decisions and plan ahead.

In all activities, be aware of the tension between newcomers and folks who have been around awhile. If there are long-standing rituals and traditions that you want to incorporate, be sure to educate newcomers about them so that they don't feel left out. If this retreat is an annual occurrence, plan to keep some things consistent for the sake of building trust.

**The food that you plan and serve is important to making all feel included. Try to offer customizable options (like burrito bowls, sandwiches, or a baked potato bar) for picky eaters, and ask for dietary preferences in the registration form. Plan substantial options for vegan, vegetarian, gluten free, or allergy-related diets. If you are cooking, choose recipes that are easy to make if you are asking students to help.*

Limiting Capacity with Generosity

It's in our nature to want to include anyone and everyone in our programming, especially as our Presbyterian theology tends to be one of openness relative to other campus ministries. There may be times, however, when generous exclusion helps shape your retreat toward the primary purpose. For example, if your goal is to build and empower leadership, the retreat should be open only to leaders and not to other students. If your goal is to build community and you have a large campus ministry, it might be worth considering limiting the retreat to first year students only or capping the retreat so that people have the opportunity to deepen relationships. Give some thought to this before opening the doors to all.

Additionally, think through your response if a student asks if they can arrive late or leave early from the retreat. If this coming and going will significantly disrupt your time together, interfere with the primary purpose, or create a lot of difficult logistics, you may want to say no.

Choosing a Location

Maybe you already have a location in mind for your retreat. Maybe you've been utilizing the same space year after year; maybe you are seeking a location. In seeking out space for this retreat, keep in mind the following question: How will the location lend itself to the primary purpose of the retreat?

If the primary purpose is rest and there are no spaces where students can be alone in solitude, you may need to reconsider your location. If the primary purpose is community-building, you will need to find a location with a comfortable and appropriate space to gather together communally. Before considerations around budget, travel time, or anything else, think about what is most important in a space and plan accordingly.

Once you secure a space, think intentionally about how to set it up in a way that moves you toward your primary purpose. Thinking through these questions and offering clarity will make students feel more at ease throughout the retreat.

- How will you arrange seating?
- Where will people sleep (if this is an overnight experience)?*
- How will you utilize outdoor spaces in addition to indoor (or vice versa)?
- How will you establish boundaries around public vs. private space?

**Idea: Let students self-select where they sleep. Particularly if you have students who identify as LGBTQIA+, allowing self-selection (with your guidance and oversight) is the optimal way to guarantee that students are comfortable in overnight settings. Create a covenant to guide overall behavior and expectations.*

Your Role

In planning the retreat, take some time to discern your role as a leader, and take care to delegate and set expectations for other leaders (interns, student leaders, Board members, additional chaperones, etc.). As Priya Parker says, “don’t be a chill host.” (71) Set clear expectations, communicate openly and often, and be direct about the intentions of each period of time (even if the intention is to spend time without agenda). Assert yourself with generous authority.

Potential Retreat Themes:

- Exploring the Enneagram
- Sabbath
- Anti-racism
- Embracing queerness in the church
- Spiritual Practices
- Sex and Sexuality
- Vocation and Call
- Silence, Stillness & Solitude
- Confirmation 2.0: The Theology of the PC(USA)

Resources:

- *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why it Matters* by Priya Parker
- *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by Adrienne Maree Brown
- *The Power of Ritual: How to Create Meaning and Connection in Everything You Do* by Casper ter Kuile

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