



Opening Hearts to the Spirit

*Suggestions for Successful Church-Related Meetings & Planning Retreats
by Miranda Lovegren*

A key element of church-related planning and meeting retreats is providing and creating an environment where the Spirit of Christ can break in, enter hearts fully, and move us toward goals guided by God's agenda working through us. It is this environment that is the special gift of such times set aside for planning meetings/retreats/conferences.

Contrary to popular belief, great meetings aren't directed by a well-planned agenda or a leader who simply keeps everyone "on task," but by the positive synergy of the Holy Spirit breaking in and being allowed to guide the group. At church meetings, we usually open and close with prayer, asking that the Spirit guide us. Some-times it works, and we know the difference immediately in one of those "empowered" meetings where God broke in and synergy happened.

But, as is often the case, sometimes we ask God to do things for us that God has already done or given us the tools to do, and we miss out on the full opportunity to realize God's blessing. The Spirit of God is freely given, always. We don't need to ask God to "be with us" or to "bless this meeting" because God always is and always does. It's just that sometimes we are too focused on other things to open our hearts to God's presence and guidance.

This paper outlines some conceptual "tools of the trade" that camp/retreat leaders use to lead good retreats, and we have found them to be extremely effective for church meetings held at our sites. There is an observable night-and-day difference in success between meetings that incorporate these spiritual practices and those that don't. But even more important is the practice of spiritual disciplines that allow for deeper connections with God and the building of relationships in Christ with one another.

To fully take advantage of being in a wonderful camp/retreat setting and the time you have carved out of your lives to focus on whatever task is before you at your meeting, we encourage you to incorporate these practices into your time together. This is "being the church" at its best. Please feel free to take the practices to your churches and use them there too!

Core Concepts

- **Building Christian community.** Developing a sense of being part of the body of Christ among participants is essential to productive retreats, laying the groundwork for the Spirit of Christ to be fully realized among you. These activities help break the ice that has formed on hearts from being in "un-kingdom-like" environments. Ice-breakers and community builders help people feel comfortable enough with one another to risk being open to sharing what "holy nudges" they may be feeling without fearing being ridiculed. Fear of ridicule and of rejection by dismissal before even being listened to are major barriers to Spirit-led synergy in any group.
- **Good Bible study** has all kinds of potential to build groups, open hearts, lead to discernment, provide assurance that your work is scripturally grounded, and, as an added benefit, help people deepen their appreciation of this living Word. Take time to prayerfully contemplate and/or thoughtfully discuss Scripture stories, passages, or concepts that may give direction to your group. The strategy I prefer with such Bible study is not to select something that gives rise to obvious answers; choose something that makes people wrestle with the text and discover answers for themselves.
- **Engage the group in discussion that models a preferred working style** during the meeting (prayerful discernment, no dumb questions or ideas, good listening to one another, encouraging everyone to participate). Effective strategy to maximize participation and impact: Divide the group into groups of three to five to discuss the Scripture together; then have each group share with the whole body any special insights. You may also give each group a different assignment (a different angle to look for in the same text, or different texts related to a theme) to report back to the whole group. If you don't have time for the Bible study, incorporate a shorter version of it into a worship service.
- **Taking the time to worship together** is key to creating an environment of sacred possibility where hearts are opened to God's Spirit. Incorporate different kinds of prayer into your worship, music, and lessons from the Scripture studies; or add related Scriptures to share. A short lesson, homily, or guiding words to set the tone for the meeting by the leader can be added. These spiritual disciplines help open our ears to hear God's sometimes gentle Word. Worship services need only be five to twenty minutes for the purposes outlined here, but length is at your discretion. For an opening worship experience, include moments of quiet prayer and meditation on becoming aware of God's presence and discerning God's will for your group. For a community-building worship service (usually in the middle of your time together), uphold one another with an affirmation activity. Communion can be incorporated powerfully here to bring people together in Christ. Emphasize the concept of the body of Christ, everyone doing his or her part to make the whole group the best it can be. For a closing worship service, celebrate the work you have accomplished, the community you have built, and the ministry ahead of you. The mood should be celebratory and high-energy. A commissioning of people assigned to specific tasks — or the whole group as it goes forth to do the work of the church — helps to validate and empower people to go forth with holy boldness into the world.
- **"Break-in Break" & Creative Expression.** Take a special break to do something that allows God's Spirit to "break in" to your mind, your heart, your body; then take

some time to express creatively the Spirit that touched you during this exercise.

"Break-in Break": Consider a walk in the forest, sitting by a stream, quiet time in your room, looking out at the forest, contemplating Scripture, meditating, exercising, fishing, talking with Jesus — whatever works to help you let go of time and work and allows God to enter in.

Creative Expression: Then do something to express and share the Spirit of God that broke into your life today. Create something with your hands; write a poem; write down insights or inspirations that have come to you; share a special moment with another person; write a letter to a friend/spouse/child; allow God's love to flow through you to another, be it a person or another part of God's creation. Some people will spend most of their time doing the "break-in" activity; while others will spend more time in creative expression. It doesn't matter. This is your *Kairos* time with God. I would suggest that you allow ninety minutes or more for this special time; then gather back together for a worship time of sharing and celebrating God's immanence in our lives before starting into the next segment of your meeting.

- **Energy modifiers** are quick activities that help to bring up, mellow out, or refocus the energy of your group. They are good ways to have a quick break without letting people leave the meeting or to gather after breaks. Some of the most popular: Music, even if it is singing familiar hymns/songs *a cappella*, is a great energy modifier. Choose a song that matches the mood you want to create. During the meeting, remind the group to keep in mind "how God is speaking to us right now." Stretching exercises and/or body movement can be effective in slowing things down if you want to calm or refresh a group or perking things up if you want to energize a group.
- **Quick group-builder games**
 1. During the meeting, divide into small groups of people interested in particular action items in order to explore in more depth; then share back with the whole group.
 2. Stand up, turn to your right (or left), and scratch (rub) the person's back in front of you (only use with groups who are comfortable with personal touch).
 3. Turn to your neighbor and share about . . . (leader chooses a topic). The topic can be a personal question to help your group know one another better, or it can be related to your agenda item at the moment as a way to shift energy if you get stuck. (This is a good way to encourage people to discuss something they may initially be shy about sharing with the whole group.)
 4. Prayer concerns/joys (effective to do these one-on-one by turning to a neighbor rather than the whole group).
 5. Ask someone to tell a joke.
 6. Look at other ideas available in resource books located at the camp/retreat sites or use *[GroupBuilder Games and Activities for Youth Ministry](#)* (Group Publishing, 2000).
- **Implementation:** In advance, invite different members of your group to lead the various components of this program. Leadership should not be handled by just one person, if at all possible. Let people practice being spiritual leaders! If you need help with specific programs, games, music, worship materials, and so on, your camp

directors and staff will be happy to assist you! May God bless your meeting with great joy and spirit-filled guidance!

(Note: This material may be shared with others if you include the following notice: "This article is adapted from material by Miranda Lovegren, Director, Alton L. Collins Retreat Center and Wallowa Lake Camp, Oregon-Idaho Conference of The United Methodist Church, miranda@gocamping.org.")

| [Camp/Retreat Memo Contents](#) | [Mel Moody 1914-2003](#) |

| [The Legacy of Leadership Fund](#) | [The Legacy of Leadership Fund Contribution Form](#) |

| [In Honor/Memory](#) | [Congratulations](#) | [Gathering Histories](#) |

| [Opening Hearts to the Spirit](#) | [Mark Your Calendars](#) |

| [Improvisation Papers](#) | [Share Our Worlds](#) |

| [Retreat-Planning Steps for Local Churches](#) | [Recommended Resources](#) |

| [Camp/Retreat Memo Archives](#) |

| [Camp and Retreat Ministries Home](#) |