

Effective Skills for Youth Retreat Ministry

Retreat Talks

Important Considerations for Retreat Coordinators and Team Leaders

A retreat talk can be given in a variety of different formats. It may be a short, personal witness on how one event in the speaker's life has impacted what they believe, understand or feel about a particular aspect of the Christian faith. It may also be a lengthier presentation on a topic related to the Christian faith journey, given by someone knowledgeable on the theological aspects of the particular subject.

Whether or not a retreat talk contains a theological teaching element, its primary purpose should be to inspire, encourage or perhaps simply affirm retreatants in similar struggles and experiences on their faith journeys. While retreat talks frequently focus on a personal sharing from the speaker's life, they always contain contemporary, concrete examples of living as a Christian in today's world. By bringing the message home to retreatants in their regular lives of school, work, family and friends, a retreat talk becomes a living, breathing vision of our journeys as followers of Christ.

A retreat talk often utilizes a passage from Scripture to help present the aspect of our faith being referred to in the personal sharing. This can help make Scripture come alive for retreatants by bringing the truth of our faith into present experience. It may also stand alone without explicit reference to Scripture. Most importantly, a retreat talk needs to be honest and grounded in a living faith.

Choosing Speakers

Choice of speakers can depend greatly on the nature of the talk. Because of its purpose, a retreat talk that is more educational in nature should generally be given by a more polished speaker who is necessarily knowledgeable about the topic being presented. If the talk is primarily a personal witness, however, the speaking abilities become less important. Because a retreat witness is about sharing something of one's personal faith journey, it is more important that it comes from the heart. This is not to say that a good witness does not need any preparation. It is simply better to work on presentation with a less polished witness who has consciously dealt with real faith issues, than to work on finding an honest witness for a polished speaker to deliver. Keep in mind the words of Scripture: "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God." *1 Corinthians 2:1*

No matter the type of talk, the person giving a talk should:

1. Live the truth about which he or she is going to speak (or honestly struggle with it).
2. Reflect a life of grace to others around him/her.
3. Be driven primarily to share his or her faith story with others, not to entertain.

When preparing to recruit people to give a retreat talk, begin by praying about who you want to speak on your retreat. When you know who you want to invite, do just that—*invite* them. Some people may need encouragement, but no one needs coercion. Let them know why you chose them, where you see Christ in them, what led you to them. You may know them to be particularly knowledgeable in the aspect of faith you need them to share about, have a particular story you are aware of you want them to share, or simply see them as a good role model for the retreatants you expect to gather on your retreat. Either way, if they are uncertain, ask them to pray about it and get back to you in a day or two. If they are still unwilling, let it go and choose someone else. People giving talks or witnesses need to be comfortable sharing their stories.

Working with Speakers

If you have a group of people giving talks or witnesses, use the *Training Session* below to introduce them to the art of speaking at a retreat. Once you have recruited your speakers, give them the *Retreat Talk Worksheet* (in “Participant’s Packet”) and have them read through the introduction. Go over it with them, then have them think of experiences they may care to share about their faith journeys. Show them how to use the *Worksheet* to outline their talks, and then later write their talks out, word for word. This is particularly important for inexperienced speakers. Keeping on schedule becomes very important during a retreat, so communicate to your speakers how much time they have. Ask them to time themselves while reading their talks aloud. Some may be surprised to find their prepared talks are much shorter or longer than expected! Work with them to adjust their talks according to the time allotted.

When they are ready, invite them to read their talks out loud to you, just as they intend to deliver them. Listen to the entire talk before commenting. Ensure they are using good eye contact and voice inflection. Notice nervous habits that may be distracting to listeners (i.e., constant pulling on the ear, throat clearing, hand tapping), and kindly point them out. It may be helpful for some to stand behind a podium and grasp the sides to keep their hands still. Look for places that need more detail as well as those that are unnecessary. Watch for revelations of overly personal information, and make sure they have received permission if they talk about anyone else. Above all, be sure you believe in the genuineness of the speaker.

One session may be enough time to prepare, or you may need to ask them to practice some more in front of a mirror before meeting with you again. Once you are satisfied with the talks, ask them to memorize them and deliver them again. This is so much more effective than reading it. For many it is helpful to have an outline written out on note cards, but they should not be reading it word for word. If the speaker must periodically refer to written notes, at least be certain he or she makes eye contact when driving home the primary point of the talk. All this may seem like a lot of work, but it is well worth it. A well-prepared talk or honest witness from the heart can change souls.

Tips for Preparing Speakers

1. Do not let a speaker tell you in general terms how the talk will be given. Be sure to listen to the talk as it will be delivered.
2. While it is helpful to notice the previously mentioned nervous habits, do not make them of primary importance. What is more important is that they are giving their talk from the heart.
3. Be sure the point of the talk is clear. Imagine yourself hearing the talk without knowing what the objective of the talk is supposed to be and see if the speaker drives that point home.
4. Notice eye contact. It is crucial that eye contact is made at least when the primary points of the talk are being made.
5. Ensure the speaker really believes what he or she is saying. If retreatants question the integrity of the speaker, the effectiveness of the retreat can be jeopardized.
6. Time the talk. Listen for things that can be cut out if it is too long, or areas that need to be fleshed out if it is too short. You may discover that the talk is good the way it is. If so, change the schedule to reflect how long the talk will take.
7. Pray with them and for them. It is not they who will change the lives of the retreatants. It is the Holy Spirit.

Training Youth and Adults as Retreat Speakers

LESSON PLAN

Objectives:

By the conclusion of this workshop, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the purpose of a retreat talk
2. Identify some elements of a poorly given talk
3. Identify some of their own poor speaking habits
4. Identify the do's and don'ts of a retreat talk
5. Create an outline for their particular talk or witness.

SESSION OUTLINE (90 minutes)

10 min. **Welcome, introductions, session overview, prayer**

10 min. **Identify some poor speaking habits**

The facilitator will prepare a short talk on any topic, solely for the purpose of demonstrating poor speaking habits, e.g., constant fidgeting, speaking too quickly or softly, saying “um” or “you know” frequently, shifting weight, etc. After just a couple minutes, invite the group to identify as many bad habits as they could about the talk. Write them up on a chalkboard or newsprint, then identify any others that perhaps they did not see.

15 min. **Speaking exercise**

Divide the group into pairs and ask them to each talk to the other about how to do something they do well. Let one speak to his/her partner for one minute before inviting the listener to kindly critique the presentation. Have them switch roles and repeat the process. Gather again for large group processing. Ask them what they learned about their style of speaking and how they may be able to improve.

15 min. **What is the purpose of a retreat talk or witness?**

Pass out the *Speaker Preparation Sheet* and briefly describe what each talk is about, as discussed in detail on the sheet and in the first two paragraphs of the section entitled *Retreat Talks*. In addition to going over these general guidelines, the facilitator should point out particulars unique to the retreat, i.e., length, objective, theme (faith, love, reconciliation, etc.). Because the talk needs to be written in this context, this would also be a good time to explain what will follow their talks. Whether it is a small group discussion, activity, prayer service or some other process which helps retreatants to bring the talk into their own faith experience, the speaker can better prepare with this in mind. The speaker may even help design this talk follow-up. Either way, ensure the speakers understand how their talks fit into the context of the retreat and its theme. Encourage questions or clarifications before inviting them to begin working on their own talks.

10 min. **Break**

25 min. **Initial preparation**

Go over the guidelines of should's and should not's on the *Speaker Preparation Sheet*. Pass out the provided worksheet and explain the suggested preparation process as detailed above in *Working with a Speaker*. Invite them to turn the sheet over and start working on their talks. Depending on your time situation you may be able to spend a lot or only a little time with this. Have Bibles available, particularly ones with good topical indexes to find passages on certain themes. Walk around the room and help individuals as they work on their outlines.

5 min. **Closing**

Choose times when you or another retreat leader will go over each speaker's talk individually, using the guidelines listed above in *Working with a Speaker*. Invite further questions/clarifications. Close with prayer.

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Participant's Packet

Speaker Preparation Sheet

Before you begin to prepare your retreat talk, read the following, then use the accompanying worksheet to aid you in your preparation. Good luck and God bless!

Introduction

You have been chosen prayerfully, so trust in prayer as you prepare. Ask others to pray for you. Retreat leaders will be praying for you as you give your witness. You may even consider opening or closing your talk with a prayer.

Whether or not your talk contains a theological teaching element, its primary purpose should be to inspire, encourage or perhaps simply affirm retreatants in their struggles and experiences on their faith journeys. While retreat talks are often primarily a personal witness from the speaker's life, even those which are presentational in nature always contain contemporary, concrete examples of living as a Christian in today's world. Whether you use examples from your personal life or the lives of others, bring your message home to the retreatants in their regular lives of school, work, family and friends, so your retreat talk becomes a living, breathing vision of our journeys as followers of Christ. Consider choosing a passage from Scripture to tie in your talk with our faith tradition. This can also help make Scripture come alive for retreatants by bringing the truth of our faith into present experience.

If a personal witness is being incorporated into your talk, it is good to use an event distant enough from your experience to have reflected on it well. It is often useful to also choose an event that is recent enough to have relevance to where you are now on your faith journey; however, sometimes a more distant event is more appropriate in order to relate to the ages of the retreatants.

Reflect on these questions as you prepare:

If your talk is primarily a personal witness...

- In what event of your life did you most keenly experience God's presence?
- What happened? What did you learn? How were you affected, changed?
- How did you become a better, more faithful person and Christian as a result?

If your talk is more presentational in nature...

- What is my objective? (What do I want the retreatants to learn or understand by the end of my talk?)
- Why should the retreatants care about your objective? How is it relevant to them today?
- What personal story can I share to help the retreatants relate this learning to their daily lives?

Depending upon the length of your talk, it may be a good idea to incorporate some active learning. Rather than simply talking at retreatants for the allotted time, you can introduce your topic or bring it home using a variety of techniques that get your audience moving and engaged. Numerous resources are available to assist you with ideas. Contact your local youth ministry office, parish youth minister or high school campus minister for appropriate and helpful resources.

Basic Talk Guidelines:

1. Trust in prayer during the preparation of your talk, and consider tying it in with Scripture.
2. Keep the objective of your talk simple and focused to keep retreatants engaged and attentive.
3. Stay within the allotted time frame. It can be difficult to make up for lost time on a retreat.
4. Use a story or illustration to make it more than simply informational.

What a Retreat Talk Should Not Be:

1. Sensational. This is not about impressing people with an amazing event in and of itself.
2. Emotional: an outpouring of personal troubles or present, here-and-now struggles and difficulties of a very personal nature is better suited for family, close friends or therapy.
3. Preachy: even a topical presentation is not primarily an instruction in Christianity.

What a Retreat Talk Should Be:

1. Relevant: keep it real (connected with experiences to which the retreatants can relate).
2. Age-appropriate: speak at the level of your audience, but be challenging.
3. Hopeful: even serious topics must leave retreatants with a sense of hope, not discouragement.

May God's blessings be with you as you prepare your talk!

