



EFFECTIVE ANNUAL LEADERSHIP RETREATS

One of the potential dangers for church leadership teams is that they often spend so much time working *in* the ministry that they rarely take time to work *on* the ministry. In other words, they get so caught up in responding to immediate needs that they rarely take time to pause, step back, and evaluate the overall health of the church, the clarity of their vision, and the effectiveness of their discipling strategies. Another danger is that they can get so focused on their *responsibilities* as church leaders that they take little or no time to develop their *relationships* with one another as fellow Christians. As a result, they often lack the kind of unity and trust that is so essential to healthy leadership teams. A well-planned and well-executed Leadership Retreat can be an effective tool for facilitating the kind of healthy reflection and relationship-building that every church leadership team needs.

WHAT IS AN ANNUAL LEADERSHIP RETREAT?

Well, the name sort of says it all...

1. It's a retreat.

The word "retreat" means "to withdraw to a quiet or secluded place." Your church building, complete with ringing phones, drop-in visitors, and busy programs hardly qualifies as "a quiet or secluded place." To truly do a retreat, you must actually retreat! Get away from your normal meeting location, preferably to a place with a beautiful outdoor setting, a relaxed atmosphere, comfortable overnight accommodations, and access to a few good restaurants (or a kitchen if you prefer to handle your own meals). Some good location options include lake houses, ranch houses, beach houses, and Christian family camps/retreat centers. You may have members in your church who would be happy to share their vacation homes with you for a day or two. But even if you have to rent a place for a couple nights, it will be well worth the expense, because it is in these kinds of getaway environments that friendships form most naturally and fresh ideas flow most freely.

2. It's an annual event.

A Leadership Retreat is an opportunity to reflect on the blessings and challenges of the previous year and to consider what adjustments should be made and what initiatives should be pursued in the upcoming year. This kind of purposeful reflection helps to ensure that your annual church calendar and your annual church budget are not just filled with cut-and-paste items from previous years. Rather, every calendar event and every budget item will be part of a larger, carefully considered and thoughtfully prayed over strategy that is unique to the season you're in.

3. It's for leaders.

Within a church, you may have many leadership roles including pastors, elders, deacons, ministry directors, and small group leaders. And there may be good reasons to schedule periodic leadership retreats with any one or more these groups, depending on your context. But if you had to schedule just one leadership retreat per year, I would recommend that it be a joint retreat for your pastors and elders. Here's why. Although we often differentiate between paid pastoral staff and lay elders for organizational purposes, broadly and biblically speaking, they both fulfill the same primary shepherding role within the church.¹ In most churches, volunteer lay elders oversee the doctrine and direction of the church while paid pastors oversee the day-to-day operations and teaching ministries of the church. This is a reasonable and functional way of doing things.² If churches aren't careful, however, this healthy division of labor can result in an unhealthy division of purpose.



Many problems within the church stem from a lack of communication and a lack of unity between the pastoral staff and the elder board. An Annual Leadership Retreat helps to counteract that by ensuring that pastors and elders are coming together regularly for an extended time of prayer, relationship-building, and brainstorming.

WHAT DO YOU DO AT AN ANNUAL LEADERSHIP RETREAT?

An Annual Leadership Retreat is an opportunity to look in five directions:

1. Look Up (Prayer & Praise)

Be sure to build plenty of time into your Leadership Retreat for unhurried prayer and praise.

- Praise the Lord for His goodness and faithfulness to you as a church.
- Pray that you would be wise, loving, and godly leaders.
- Pray that God would make your church effective in producing healthy, mature disciples of Jesus.
- Pray for the needs of individual sheep within your flock, especially those who are struggling or hurting.
- Pray that God would give you His wisdom at this retreat as you make plans for the upcoming year.

2. Look In (Self-Evaluation)

Paul instructed the Ephesian elders to *“keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers”* (Acts 20:28, NIV). An annual Leadership Retreat is an opportunity, not only to consider the spiritual health of your “flock,” but also to take a good look at your own spiritual health as leaders by asking questions of yourselves like the following:

- How am I measuring up to the leadership qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:2-3? Where am I doing well? Where do I need to grow?
- How am I doing in the areas of spiritual disciplines, moral purity, and marriage/family time?
- What lessons has the Lord taught me over the past year?
- What are specific things we can be praying for one another about?

3. Look Back (Year in Review)

Spend some time looking back to reflect on what God accomplished through your church in the past year and surface areas where you may need to grow. Recall stories of individual life change and churchwide spiritual growth. Be sure also to recall some of the previous year’s more challenging and disappointing episodes to see if there are lessons to be learned. In addition to telling stories, this is also an appropriate time to take a look at some key objective measures including:

- Conversions
- Baptisms
- Discipling relationships
- Small Group involvement
- Ministry Team involvement
- New leader development
- Worship attendance
- Church membership (Who joined? Who left?)
- Giving (percentage of members giving, distribution of giving)

Being able to look at these areas will, of course, require that you have a system for collecting this kind of data and that you will have compiled it in advance of this retreat for review. You will also want to spend some time evaluating how effective you were in accomplishing the goals that you set forth in the previous year’s retreat.



4. Look Around (Church Health Evaluation)

This is an opportunity for you to evaluate the current health of your church. It might be good to have each leader complete the [“Four Helpful Lists” worksheet](#) prior to the retreat and then use that as a tool for group discussion. The questions that this brainstorming exercise encourages you to explore for your church are:

- What’s right? (What can we strengthen?)
- What’s wrong? (What do we need to change?)
- What’s confusing? (What do we need to clarify?)
- What’s missing? (What do we need to add?)

These questions are designed to surface core issues that need to be addressed in your church. In addition, questions like the following may be helpful:

- How well are we living up to our core values and mission statement?
- How effectively are we obeying the Great Commission. Specifically:
 - Are we effectively reaching lost people with the gospel? If not, why not?
 - Are we effectively assimilating newcomers into the life of the church? If not, why not?
 - Are we effectively discipling believers toward spiritual maturity? If not, why not?
 - Are we effectively developing new leaders? If not, why not?
 - Are we effectively sending out workers from our church into the harvest fields? If not, why not?
- Do each of our ministries have a clearly defined purpose that serves the Great Commission? Are they still effectively fulfilling that original purpose?
- Are there clearly defined and clearly communicated pathways in our church for people to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ?
- How are our leaders doing? Are they getting burned out? Are we adequately training, resourcing, coaching, and celebrating them?
- Is our church marked by a healthy spirit of unity right now? If not, why not?

5. Look Forward (Future Plans)

A major goal of an Annual Leadership Retreat is to identify your major objectives and ministry initiatives for the coming year. These can be discerned through prayer and by asking questions like the following:

- What are the major obstacles preventing us from more effectively reaching lost people and making disciples right now? What practical steps might we take to overcome them this year?
- What are the most prominent needs in our community? What practical steps might we take to help meet those needs this year?
- What are the most significant spiritual health issues facing our church right now? What practical steps might we take to address those issues this year?
- Where should we think about planting a daughter church? What steps can we take in that direction?
- Thought experiment: If we knew we were going to double in attendance by the end of the year, what steps would we start taking now to prepare for that? (Developing more leaders? Starting more groups? Hiring more staff? Expanding our facilities?)
- Thought experiment: If money and manpower were not an issue, what would we like to see God accomplish through our church in the next 3-5 years? What steps can we start taking now in that direction?
- What are the top 3-5 things that, if we accomplished them this year, would make the greatest positive impact on our church’s ability to effectively accomplish its mission? What SMART goals can we establish to help make them happen? (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant, Time-bound)
- How do the decisions that we’ve made at this retreat impact our church calendar and our church budget? What resources do we need to allocate to make them happen?



TIPS FOR MAXIMIZING YOUR ANNUAL LEADERSHIP RETREAT

- Overnight retreats lasting between 36-48 hours are usually best. Any shorter and you'll feel rushed. Any longer and it will be difficult for people to get time off work. Starting or ending your retreat on a weekend will help to minimize the impact on work schedules.
- Build breaks and some extended free time into your schedule, especially if you're in a location with opportunities for outdoor recreation (football, ATV's, canoes, hiking, fire pit, etc.). Those breaks not only keep you fresh mentally, but they create space for non-ministry conversations and personal connections to happen.
- Encourage your team members to bring their favorite snacks and keep your meals simple. Dining out at a nice sit-down restaurant at least once provides a nice break. If you dine in, you might consider delegating different meals to different members of your team. But you don't want to spend all your time doing meal prep, so have everyone pitch in to help and choose simple menus. (Frozen lasagna for dinner, breakfast tacos in the morning, cold cut sandwiches for lunch, etc.)
- Send out the retreat agenda, complete with the questions you'll be discussing as a team, at least one week in advance. This will enable each team member to do some independent thinking ahead of the retreat which will make your group discussions at the retreat more productive.
- Bring hard copies of the retreat agenda, including any data you want to consider and any questions you want to discuss. This will enable participants to take personal notes.
- Be sure to include the expenses for this annual Leadership Retreat in your annual church budget.
- After the retreat, summarize in writing the ideas that were discussed, the goals that were set, and the decisions that were made. Create a detailed follow-up action plan (what, who, when) for the initiatives you decided to implement. This will ensure that your big ideas get translated into tangible actions, and it will enable you to measure your success at next year's retreat.

A SAMPLE AGENDA FOR AN ANNUAL LEADERSHIP RETREAT

Thursday

- **12:00 PM** - Meet at church building, stop for lunch on the way
- **2:45 PM** - Arrive, unpack.
- **3:00 PM** - LOOKING BACK (Year in Review)
- **4:00 PM** - Break
- **4:30 PM** - LOOKING AROUND (Church Health Evaluation)
- **5:30 PM** - Dinner in
- **6:45 PM** - LOOKING IN (Self-Evaluation)
- **8:00 PM** - End of day

Friday

- 8:00 AM** - Breakfast in
- 8:45 AM** - LOOKING AROUND (Church Health Evaluation, continued)
- 10:00 AM** - Break
- 10:30 AM** - LOOKING FORWARD (Future Plans)
- 12:00 PM** - Lunch in
- 1:00 PM** - Free time
- 2:30 PM** - LOOKING FORWARD (Future Plans, continued)
- 5:00 PM** - Dinner out
- 7:00 PM** - LOOKING UP (Prayer and Praise)
- 8:00 PM** - End of day

Saturday

- 8:00 AM** - Pack up
- 8:30 AM** - Breakfast in
- 9:15 AM** - Wrap-up discussion, closing prayer time.
- 10:30 AM** - Departure

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¹ The word "pastor" means shepherd. But 1 Peter 5:1-2 and Acts 20:28 tell us that that all church elders (whether they go by the title of "pastor" or not) fulfill the same broad congregation-wide shepherding/pastoring role within the church.

² 1 Timothy 5:17-18 indicates that while there should be a plurality of elders in any given church, not every elder will play exactly the same role, have the same degree of responsibility, or receive the same degree of remuneration.