

Pastoral Care *Newsletter*

For Member Care Committees, Ministry and Counsel, Overseers, and others who provide pastoral care in unprogrammed Friends meetings

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Building the Meeting Community through Retreats

by Charlotte Fardelmann

*Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness;
and bearing one with another,
and forgiving one another,
and not laying accusations one against another;
but praying one for another,
and helping one another up with a tender hand.*

Isaac Pennington

Meeting retreats offer Friends extended time for building strong community through worshipping, learning, talking about issues of concern, taking walks, playing games. It is a time when both new attenders and long-term members have a good chance to come to know one another more fully. Retreat time may also be set aside so that issues which divide the community may be taken up with a strong focus.

In addition to retreats for the whole meeting, many meetings hold smaller retreats for special groups in the meeting, such as women's or men's retreats, youth retreats, and silent retreats for the contemplatives among us.

Susan Corson-Finnerty, who along with her husband, co-led Germantown (PA) Meeting's first retreat, says, "In a large meeting such as ours, we must work at ways people can encounter each other." There had been indications that the meeting needed to focus on the query "Is Germantown Friends Meeting a caring community?" The meeting took steps to address this in a number of ways, one of which was to plan a meeting retreat, with the theme, Creating a Caring Community.

Tracy Booth of Portland Meeting in Maine describes a meeting retreat which helped that meeting to face a major issue. An interior ceiling had

collapsed in April and people had been meeting since then to decide what to do. Each time they met, different people appeared, new questions were raised, and no decision was made. At the meeting retreat in November a good number of members, including three architects, were present. Having that extended time to consider the options proved to be what was needed. The meeting retreat paved the way for the decision to move forward to rebuild the meetinghouse.

What Are the Steps Needed to Plan a Meeting Retreat?

The first step is to ask why do we want to have a retreat? What are we hoping for? The answers to those questions flow into questions of what will be our theme and whom shall we ask to lead the retreat. How will our children fit into the retreat—as full participants in a multigenerational retreat or with a special, age

appropriate program for children? Where will we hold it? How much will it cost and how will we meet that cost? How will we publicize it to the meeting and elicit members' participation? How will we report back to the meeting and integrate what we have learned into the ongoing life of the meeting?

In this article I will tell you of the experience of my meeting, Dover Monthly Meeting in New Hampshire, and of other meetings, mainly in New England Yearly Meeting, who have shared with me about their practice of having meeting retreats. I hope that our experience can point the way for your meeting in planning a retreat.



Charlotte Fardelmann

Theme and Leader

If the meeting does not have a regular practice of holding retreats, it is helpful to bring the proposal to the meeting and seek the meeting's commitment to deepening the community in this way. The theme is a question the whole meeting can decide with particular input from the meeting's pastoral care committee. Or the planning committee, with its finger on the pulse of the meeting, can propose a theme for approval by the meeting.

Andrew Nash, a British member of Friends Meeting in Cambridge, has led a number of meeting retreats in England. Wherever possible, these have focused on a theme of importance to those in the meeting such as a topic already under discussion or a concern shared by members of the meeting. Nash says, "I prefer to find out in advance what is a live issue for those who will attend, because that will be more engaging for them. I try to create a safe structure in which people can relax and in which they can begin to take gentle risks."

Early in the process the planners have to resolve the question of whether to invite someone from outside the meeting or someone within the meeting to lead the retreat. The answer may depend upon the topic chosen as the theme. If there is a person within the meeting who is well versed in the topic and has the gift of leading retreats, the committee may choose to invite that person to lead. An outside leader not only may bring knowledge and skills on the topic, but can bring a freshness of view and can release all the members of the meeting to full participation in the retreat.

New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) has a Traveling Ministry and Intervisitation Committee with a list of recommended leaders who are willing to travel to lead a retreat or workshop within the yearly meeting. Perhaps your yearly meeting has a similar listing. Another resource is the Traveling Ministry Program of Friends General Conference (1216 Arch St., 2B, Philadelphia, PA 19107; 215-561-1700). An outside leader will usually expect an honorarium and possibly travel expenses as well, thus potentially increasing the cost of the retreat. The NEYM Committee and the Traveling Ministries Program have some funds to help meet these costs.

Children's Program

The goals of the program and the theme that you choose will have a bearing on how you integrate children and young people into the program. Teenagers may welcome the opportunity to take part in the adult program. Younger children often prefer an age-appropriate program that is parallel to the adult

program. Some meetings organize all or part of the program to include adults and children on an equal footing. Carolyn Terrell of Mt. Holly Meeting reports an experience of several years ago:

I was leading a retreat on religious education, and at the beginning of the evening session, a participant came up to me to say that the child care person hadn't shown up, could I include the children in what I planned to do. What could I say but "yes"? I began as I had planned with asking participants to draw two pictures, one illustrating how they felt about God when they were young and the other illustrating how they felt now. When they were done with their drawing, I asked who would like to start the sharing about their pictures. Right away a boy who couldn't have been more than four years old, offered to share. He displayed his first picture, and talked about it and then said "this shows how I felt about God when I was young" and then talked about his second picture and said "and this is how I feel now." I will never forget the reverent silence that surrounded that moment, as the grown-ups accepted his offering of himself.

The children's program for the Dover Monthly Meeting retreat was run by two teams of meeting members, each with a teacher and an assistant teacher. The teams rotated leadership of the children's program times, so that all teachers could participate in half of the adult program. When funds are available, the meeting may choose to hire an outside facilitator for the children's program as well as for the adult program.

Date, Location, and Cost

It is advisable to begin planning a meeting retreat about a year before it happens as the most popular retreat centers book over a year in advance. The following considerations can help in looking for an appropriate setting:

- * How many people do we expect?
- * What facilities do we require?
- * Do we want to pay for meals or cook our own?
- * How luxurious do we want the accommodations?
- * How well will this retreat facility work for our members with disabilities?
- * What would be the cost per adult and per child?

In considering the cost of the retreat it is important to keep in mind those with limited finances. The meeting might provide some funding for scholarships or for equalizing costs for those who have large families or travel from a longer distance. However, some people hesitate to ask for equalization funds especially if they have had to do it many times

before. One meeting tells the community the average cost per person and invites each one to contribute what they can, encouraging those who can give more than the average to do so to cover those who give less.

Two years ago my meeting began to plan our retreat to build a stronger community life. The committee's first job was to book a date at a retreat center. We chose to go to a lakeside conference center in the spring before the busy season. Our building held about 30 people in motel-like units, plus a large living room and a tiny kitchen. This space turned out to be too small for the number of people who wanted to attend. Several people were left on the waiting list.

We did our own cooking. We brought pot luck dishes for Friday night. The children made pizzas for us for Saturday lunch. Saturday night we made a huge batch of spaghetti. On Sunday we ate leftovers and sandwiches. This plan proved to be less than satisfactory. The kitchen was very small and not well stocked with pots and utensils. While cooking together was fun, this tiny kitchen did not work well. Though this set up was relatively inexpensive (\$40 per adult, \$15 per child) we did not go back the next year.

The following year Dover Meeting chose a location which could take up to fifty people. We had more than enough room for all who wanted to come. A large basement recreation space proved invaluable for the children's program when the weather turned rainy. This center, run by Roman Catholic brothers, provides meals at a very reasonable cost. While the fee for this retreat was higher than the previous year's fee, (\$75 per adult and \$45 per child), participants appreciated having the meals cooked for them. Five meals were provided, three on Saturday and two on Sunday. Friday evening people arrived at different times, depending upon the length of the drive and when they get off work. Participants brought bag suppers.

The least expensive option, which has worked well for some meetings, is to hold a retreat at the meetinghouse itself. Participants can either sleep over in the meetinghouse or commute from home. Meals can be pot luck, prepared onsite, or catered. This has the obvious advantage of saving the cost of overnight accommodations, it also can save on travel, and can embrace the meetinghouse itself with the good feelings of the retreat. The disadvantages are that the meetinghouse may not have adequate space, it doesn't have the freshness of a new location, and it may tempt people to drop in and out rather than participate for the entire time. Sharon Ellsworth, who led a Stillness Retreat at her own meetinghouse in New Haven, reported, "Spending this time at the meetinghouse deepens my worship the following Sunday."

It is important in choosing any site to know the location of the nearest hospital as well as driving directions to get there. Also, check in advance with the meeting's insurance carrier about a rider to cover the event. Many retreat centers require that groups have their own insurance.

Publicity and Registration

Meeting members need ample notice to make plans to attend a retreat. Dover meeting finds it helpful to get the flier to meeting members five or six months before the retreat. Other meetings send out a "save the date" notice several months in advance but distribute registration material about six weeks before the date.

For Germantown Meeting, a very large meeting without a custom of holding retreats, committee members split up the address list and telephoned each person to see whether there would be interest in a meeting retreat and to solicit ideas. In the end 160 people registered for the retreat.

The following information is useful in a flier:

- *date and time of arrival and departure
- *theme and leader's name
- *location, with some details (e.g., woods, open areas, trails for walking)
- *directions by car or public transportation and arrangements for carpooling
- *program (worship, discussion, art activities, music, games, etc.)
- *a listing of things participants might need such as flashlights, things for a talent show, swimsuits
- *children's program with leader's name and child care information
- *cost per adult; per child (ages); equalization or scholarships available
- *meals included
- *maximum number of participants
- *name, address, phone number of registrar
- *tear off sheet for participants to fill out and send to the registrar: names, address, phone number, email address, children's names and ages, requests for special needs (dietary, beds, wheelchair accessibility, etc.) space for volunteers to help with children's program or special needs. The form should also say what amount of registration fee is expected to be sent in with the registration and the date the balance is due.

When you make the tear off sheet, make sure no essential information is on the back of the portion that will be torn off and returned.

Most often, the registrar handles the fees, with checks to be made out to the meeting and the bills paid by the meeting treasurer.

Special Needs

Handling special needs is an important pastoral care issue. Every meeting has people with special needs: parents with young children, people with mobility issues or hearing problems. If these needs are met, people are more apt to go to the retreat, enjoy it, and come back next year. Jana Noyes, who handles the special needs for New England Yearly Meeting sessions, shared her insights for accommodating special needs at monthly meeting retreats.

Preparation is important. On the registration form, have a space for special needs and a space for people to sign up to help with special needs. If your meeting includes someone in a wheelchair, Noyes advises going ahead of time to check the facility. Check the distance between handicapped parking spots and the meeting rooms, dining room, and sleeping rooms. If the distance is too great, consider different options, such as bringing a golf cart or checking to see if one can have permission to drive a car right up to the buildings.

Noyes notes that dietary needs should be listed on the registration form. There are vegetarians, vegans, people with gluten-free or sugar-free requirements, and other restrictions. Plan to meet or have a phone conversation with the dining staff to check what options are possible. If the kitchen isn't able to accommodate all the special needs, people can be invited to bring their own special food. Some cafeteria staff agree to list all the ingredients in each dish so that people can read and choose what they can eat.

For the hearing-impaired, a Friend might sit next to the hearing-impaired person and write down any message which is spoken. An alternative is to have a person with a laptop computer typing out the message. Where there is need and funding is available, it is wonderful to have a sign-language interpreter present to allow a hearing impaired person to participate as fully as possible.

If there is someone with chemical sensitivity, ask that person for guidance in advising participants about not using perfume and checking the site regarding fresh paint, new furniture, carpets, etc.

Women's Retreats and Men's Retreats

Women's retreats and men's retreats offer a specialized form of community building. Portland Monthly Meeting in Maine held its first women's retreat about fifteen years ago. Since that time the retreat has been broadened to welcome all women from the quarterly meeting. Women have particular things to talk about and meaningful things to share. They need time out from daily life, a time separate from family. One retreat led the women in a study of

liberation theology. Another retreat focused on spiritual journey. Another centered on drumming. The format can include a presentation by a leader followed by small group discussion. There is usually creativity of some kind, painting or music.

Men's retreats or retreats for men and boys can be times to explore concerns of men such as relationships between fathers and sons and the meaning of work. Retreats for men and boys are a gift for all of the boys, especially those who are growing up without a father in the home. They can be held in the meetinghouse or in a rustic place that allows for hiking or a sweat lodge or other physically challenging activity.

Silent Retreats

A silent, contemplative retreat is a way of deepening the spiritual life of the meeting. For the last twelve years New England Yearly Meeting has held silent retreats known as "Stillness Retreats" under the care of Ministry and Counsel. The term "stillness" refers to an inner stillness which comes as one drops outer speech. Small groups of Friends spend twenty-four hours together in worshipful silence. My experience has been that in this time of extended worshipful silence I reach a deeper level spiritually and often receive insights and divine guidance for my life.

In our Stillness Retreats participants gather on Friday evening for a pot luck supper, with conversation. After supper the group has meeting for worship. Just as in any meeting for worship people may be led to speak out of the silence. Following worship on Friday evening, people enter the silence and remain silent during Saturday. There is a meeting for worship right after breakfast followed by a good chunk of open time in which people proceed as led. In the late afternoon, participants gather for a worship-sharing time in which they each have a chance to share something from their experience. Eight people is a good size for these retreats.

People spend the time in a variety of ways. Some sleep late or take naps during the day. Others take walks, pray, write in journals, paint, play with clay, write poetry, and read. Some people are afraid to join a silent retreat, wondering if they can keep silent with other people around them. At the end they report that the time was deeply relaxing, and often truly inspiring.

Youth Retreats

Dover Monthly Meeting has been privileged to have a woman who loves children of all ages and works wonders with groups of young people. Jill Taylor has been leading overnight retreats for the young people for a number of years. She started it as a way to relieve tension at a time when there was some strife among the kids---the older kids against the middle kids.

Having an overnight retreat at the meetinghouse drew the children together and made the meetinghouse feel like their home.

These youth retreats are held in the winter. Older youth act as counselors. The children go sledding or sliding if there is snow. After supper on Saturday evening, the kids bring treats to share, candy, cookies, popcorn, for what they call the "pig out." One moonlit night Jill took the young people out into the graveyard next to the meetinghouse. The group was divided into two teams, each with an adult, sneaking up on each other in the dark.

The children settle into their sleeping bags for lights out about midnight or one o'clock. Morning comes early, time to get up, eat breakfast, and clean up the space to be ready for meeting for worship. It has been a time of having fun together and bonding closer to one another under the guidance of an adult who loves them.

A Community Gathered by the Spirit

While there are different forms of meeting retreats, all of them are aimed at deepening the spirituality of the participants and bringing them into a more loving sense of community gathered by the Spirit.

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SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR A MEETING RETREAT

Friday Supper: Brown bag or informal buffet allowing for variation in the time that people are able to arrive.

Friday evening: Welcome and housekeeping announcements, followed by intergenerational ice breaker games and fun OR keynote presentation by retreat leader. Bring song books for evening singing after the program is over.

Saturday morning 6:30 a.m.: Optional yoga, tai chi, or early morning prayer before breakfast.

Saturday Morning Program beginning at 9:00 or 9:30: Worship with children included for first 20 minutes. The adult leader makes a presentation followed by small group discussions.

Saturday afternoon may include a quiet rest time followed by crafts programs, hikes, softball games, and any other activities. Possible late afternoon program planned by leader.

Saturday evening is a great time for a talent show or games, music, or dances. For a talent show, invite participants to sign up when they first register on Friday. There should be an effort to get all ages involved. If there is a campfire option, this might be a great Saturday night activity for all ages, with singing and marshmallow roasting. Or someone can lead the group in stargazing after dark.

Sunday morning: Worship, wrap-up time, and evaluation followed by lunch before people pack up to go home.

One Meeting's Experience:

Retreats Hold Vernon Meeting Together

Retreats are glue that holds our far flung meeting together in the Spirit. Since we began having retreats more than ten years ago, Friends report that retreat times are the most rewarding of everything we do. It has deepened our relationships and deepened the spiritual understanding amongst us.

Vernon Monthly Meeting stretches over a vast area of interior British Columbia, Canada. We meet only two Sundays a month in Vernon: once for worship and business once for worship and discussion. The average attendance at these meetings is about eight people. Members travel as much as three or four hours to come to meeting so there is not much time for visiting and getting to know one another when Friends are facing a long drive home. On the other Sundays members meet in three worship groups in that require less travel. Some

people in the worship groups never get to Vernon for meeting. When we gather for retreats we have fifteen or more participants.

We decided to hold weekend retreats in order to increase our knowledge of each other. In some retreats we take up a topic that will help to ground us in the Spirit such as, "What does 'God' mean to you?" Other times we have sought together on a vexing issue in the meeting such as "What do we expect of the meeting and what do we expect of our clerks?" At other times our focus has been community building. On one of those occasions we did the informal version of the Myers-Briggs personality inventory and noted that we had the challenge of creating community in a group made up mainly of introverts!

The programs are led by members of the meeting. Initially we had several children and young people in

attendance and intergenerational activities were the focus of the retreats. However, there are now few children and we pay the teenagers to care for the younger children during the times when the adults are meeting separately. This is not an entirely satisfactory solution, but it is the best we have come up with.

In the summers we meet at the farm of a meeting family. It is a beautiful organic orchard along a river with space for Friends to camp. There are a few indoor beds for older Friends and others with special needs. Participants bring the food. It is a low-cost and restful event that allows a lot of opportunity for informal visiting over a walk along the river or while preparing and clearing up after meals. In March we meet at a bed and breakfast where we gather around the wood stove in the lounge. With meals prepared for us we have more time for the formal topic, though less time for informal visiting.

The meeting budgets \$500 per year for retreats which is funded by members' regular contributions to the life of the meeting. The \$500 pays for the rental of the bed and breakfast for the March retreat and helps with travel and meal costs for those who need support to be

able to come. We remind one another that the financial support is available, and Friends who need it feel free to call on it.

Our retreats have been a boon to pastoral care. It is difficult to provide pastoral care in a far flung meeting such as ours. A person could go through a difficult time without others in the meeting knowing until after the fact. At retreats we get to learn more about one another's lives and to check in with one another informally. Since we have been having retreats, people are more open with each other and want to share with each other in ways we just didn't in the past. We phone one another more often. We support one another with clearness committees and committees of care for work in the ministry. When someone is ill, Friends phone and write and there can be a sense of being supported by the whole meeting.

Retreats have helped us to create a climate of trusting and caring.

Sarah Chandler
Lesley Robertson
Vernon (BC) Meeting

Resources for Planning Retreats

Embraced by Other Selves: Enriching personal nature through group interaction by Charles Stevenson. Australia Yearly Meeting, 1998. *#

Fostering Vital Friends Meetings. Part One: A Handbook for Working with Quaker Meetings and Part Two: Resources for Working with Quaker Meetings by Jan Greene & Marty Walton. Friends General Conference, 1999.*#

Just Do It! How to plan and staff a youth gathering by Ralph "Cookie" Caldwell and Margaret Bernstein. Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1990*.*#

Listening Spirituality. Volume II: Corporate Spiritual Practice Among Friends by Patricia Loring. (Particularly chapter 7). Openings Press, 1999. *#

Retreat Handbook by Virgil Nelson. Judson Press, 1976.#

Youth Retreat Handbook compiled by Ian Ford. New England Yearly Meeting, 1996. *#

*Available from the FGC Bookstore, 800-966-4556.

#Available from Philadelphia Yearly Meeting Library, 215-241-7220. Friends outside PYM can subscribe to the library.

Questions for Reflection

1. Do members and attenders regard our meeting as a caring community?
2. How could we use a retreat to further deepen connections in the meeting?
3. What topics for reflection would help draw us together?
4. What issues under discussion could benefit from the extended focus of a meeting retreat?
5. When did we last hold a retreat? What can we learn from our experience to guide us in planning another one?
6. What could we do to facilitate the participation of families with children, single people, people with disabilities? How could we make the retreat financially feasible for members with budgetary limitations?
7. Who on our committee or in the meeting could do preliminary planning and bring a proposal to the meeting?

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