



By Jason Raitz Let me cut right to the chase, I can't imagine not incorporating retreats into our student ministry. How else can I say it? I will never kiss retreats good-bye. I have been a youth pastor for 11 years and in that time, retreats have provided more Ebenezer moments for our ministry than any other activity, program or event we hosted. Retreats that we have done have provided life-changing moments that have given students an opportunity to draw closer to God and to draw closer to each other.

Retreats are biblical, let's start there! Ok, I guess the first retreat didn't start off on the right terms, but Adam and Eve did take a retreat of sorts from the garden, didn't they? Noah took his family on a cruise for their retreat, Moses took his whole youth group on a pretty detailed retreat and let's face it, Jesus was always taking his boys on a retreat. Maybe my first point is a stretch but here is why I will never kiss retreats good-bye.

Retreats are all about Getting Students Away

I know kids are busier than ever before. They have sports, travel sports, family vacations, drama, band, homework, college prep, work, and so many other activities. That is why it's so important for our ministries to take students away from all of their normal travel and hectic life and get them away for the weekend. There is something incredibly powerful that occurs when students are taken out of their normal environment and given a chance to experience something new. I have seen kids that are normally incredibly busy, just able to relax and slow down enough to connect with God and their peers in a way they normally could not achieve.

As youth workers we need to become extremely creative once we get our students on the retreat: spend time planning for the retreat, organize a planning team, brainstorm a theme, be creative with programming, schedule in plenty of down time, and make sure your volunteers know this weekend is about making the retreat memorable for your students. We have done everything from leaving roses and a 'thanks for being here' card on the girl's bed, to leaving a bottle of Mountain Dew on the guy's bed. Students love to get away, why not use that time to make it the best experience that we possibly can.

Now, I know how difficult it is to schedule a weekend retreat that will work for the majority of your students and their families in your ministry; but with an adequate amount of planning and vision casting, I believe you won't have to struggle with getting students to attend a retreat. The first retreat might be the hardest one to get students to attend, but if your team does a great job and students feel loved, they will be back. It's especially important to cast the vision for the retreat to parents as well. Start publishing the dates a year early, yes you read that right, a YEAR early! Ask parents to write it on their calendars and hold a special meeting just to explain the importance of your retreat. Spend time casting the vision and clearly explain the benefits of sending their son/daughter with the church for the retreat. Those benefits may include: meeting new friends, getting connected with an adult leader, growing in their faith, having fun, and the list goes on.

One summer we were planning a retreat called Chaos for middle school students, again, you read that right; a retreat called Chaos. Well, my prayer was to be able to bring a 7th grade guy in our ministry named Johnny. Johnny was dealing with an incredible amount of family sickness and his parents felt getting away would be great for him. You see, his dad was dying of ALS, his mom had breast cancer and his little brother was autistic. Johnny was the man of his family and he did more to take care of them than most 22 year olds. I was so glad he was able to come and get away from the 'chaos' of life for a week and Johnny told me as he left camp that he had never felt so loved by God and by our volunteer leaders and students. This is just one example of why retreats are so fundamentally important, they can change lives for the better and give students a courage and self-confidence that

they may not have had before.

Retreats are all about Relationships

Retreats can be about THE relationship. The Huntington University Link Institute with the help of the Association of Youth Ministry Educators completed research to discover what evangelism factors are most commonly present among adolescents who have recently come to faith in Christ. Their results, published in Network Magazine (Volume 24, Number 1), found that the most mentioned influence in becoming a Christian was believe it or not, a Church Camp/Retreat or Special Event Conference. Huh, how about that? Why could I kiss retreats good-bye when they have so much potential for being a catalyst to help students start a personal relationship with Christ. The same research study also found that the most important factor in becoming a Christian was their friends (non-verbal) and then friends (verbal). Let's do a quick re-cap. According to students-the reason we are in ministry, retreats can be a key influence for them to start a relationship with Christ. Then if we combine the power of retreats with the most important factor for them becoming a Christian, their friends, explain to me again why would I kiss retreats good-bye?

Retreats are all about Growth

Tony Compolo once said that he would trade all 52 weekly Sunday School classes for one retreat. I echo his thoughts and I have seen what incredible impact retreats have had on our students and our ministries. I have seen shy students blossom into social butterflies because they met new friends and they were loved by adults. I have seen students who were struggling with personal problems leave the retreat with a renewed sense that God cares and will steer them through the troubled times. I have adult leaders gain new perspective on why they were serving kids. I have seen the momentum in our ministry swing into an extremely positive direction because of retreats. I have personally seen incredible growth in students, adults and myself on retreats and because of that I will never kiss retreats good-bye.