

Planning and Facilitating Retreats for Children

BY KEVIN LEE

In 1989 we began a new retreat program called Junior Yearly Meeting Elementary Retreats under the care of New England Yearly Meeting (NEYM) for children in grades two through six. We provide five retreats during the school year held at larger meetings around New England, and two retreats, spring and fall, at Woolman Hill Retreat and Conference center located in western Massachusetts.

As the elementary aged retreat attenders eventually outgrew our program it became clear that the spiritual community of transitioning children needed to be sustained in what soon became the Junior High retreat program, for youngsters in grades six through nine. I coordinated both programs for four years, eventually turning the Junior High Retreat program over to other emerging leaders so that I could focus more closely on the younger retreat program. Today, both programs function simultaneously with their own coordinators, staff, and bare-bones budgets. The sixth grade year serves as a bridge, with some children staying with the elementary aged retreat community, and some heading off to the Junior High program. The choice of which retreat to attend is made by the 6th grader (with parental/caregiver assistance, of course).

After Junior High Yearly Meeting Retreats, young Quakers then head off to be in the NEYM Young Friends program, which is headed by Christel Jorgenson, Youth and Education Secretary for NEYM. Coordinators of the Elementary and Junior High Retreat programs receive a stipend for each retreat led, while the high school program, which offers a dozen or more retreats and other programs throughout the year, is coordinated by a fulltime staff person. All youth



Photos: Junior Yearly Meeting Retreat, May 10-12, 2002. Woolman Hill Retreat Center, Deerfield, MA. Photos by Kevin Lee.

programs, from retreats to annual sessions, receive oversight and support from the Youth Programs Committee of NEYM.

Each of these retreat programs, considered both individually and as a whole, provide wonderful opportunities for children, preadolescents and teens to be in a safe, loving and spiritual community among their peers through virtually all of their school-aged years. (Friends can learn more about our JYM Elementary Retreat program by visiting our website at www.jymretreats.org)

For certain, the presence and grace of the Holy Spirit makes the way open. Here's what we do to help the process along:

1. *Who's Coming?* It's important to determine what population a particular retreat is for and stick with the age and grade guidelines you create. In New England Yearly Meeting, we've found the grade divisions we have in place to work very well in terms of theme delivery, psychosocial and emotional development.

2. *Staff Development:* This piece is crucial and requires careful preplanning, oversight and guidance. In NEYM, we use a formal retreat staff application and reference form process. Adults who express an interest in staffing with us must first submit an application. Provided the applicant is suitable, they next must supply three written references on forms we supply before coming on board as staff. In our elementary retreat program we maintain a six-to-one child to staff ratio. Older retreat programs generally can run with wider ratios. Having plenty of staffers on hand though is enormously important. More staff allows for increased personal care of children, reduces staff fatigue, and helps the retreat to run more smoothly.

Most of our staff pool consists of adult parents. We are additionally blessed by a handful of adults who are not parents, but who otherwise have demonstrated and known gifts of working with children. In our program, we're fortunate to be able to say that most of our staffers are with us for several and sometimes all of the retreats we run in any given year. It's also important to keep looking for ways to develop and attract new staff people so that ongoing resource leaders don't burn out. Over time, ongoing staffers develop a sense of their own community and stay in touch with one another through trainings, emails, cards, calls, etc. Again, the net effect of this inner circle of staffers helps to sustain and strengthen the spiritual community that exists during and between retreats.

We employ the use of "staff notebooks" that are used from retreat to retreat. Notebooks are tailored for the various staff positions and are filled with humorous notes, jokes, prayers, list of attenders, thematic support materials for small groups, schedules and related youth worker guidelines. Staff positions are specifically identified with additional support materials for retreat chef, retreat "nurse," (not usually an R.N.), staff coordinator, music ministry, arts and crafts and outside games. Over the years we've found that adults who volunteer their time to serve on staff function better if they know what is expected of them and have the resources available that they will need.

3. *Retreat Location:* Location is everything! We've held retreats in medium sized and larger meetinghouses and at retreat centers. Look for locations that have adequate breakout spaces for both large and small group activities. Think rain, or foul weather, and how a potential location

would work under these circumstances! Structures, whether sizable meetinghouses or conference centers have a certain “feel” to them. Some locations just seem to consistently work out better, and this may not necessarily be due to such factors as size and amenities.

How’s the kitchen? Is there an adequate stove available with working oven and counter space for preparing large amounts of food? Are smoke detectors installed and working? When considering outside spaces, be aware of available unobstructed space for play and running. Where’s the traffic, and does it pose a hazard to young people? Also, it’s important to be mindful of the physical location of the retreat. Rural settings require an awareness of natural hazards such as poison ivy, barbed wire, cliffs, etc. Urban retreat locations necessitate attention to security issues, preventing intrusion and the like. Because our program ministers to younger children, our policy calls for staffers to be stationed outside whenever children are out of doors.

4. Theme and Program Development: Establishing a theme for each retreat creates an opportunity to learn and explore new topics. Our themes are selected a year in advance and reflect or touch upon in some way our yearly meeting’s book of Faith and Practice, Scripture and other spiritual teachings. Over the years we’ve found that certain themes attract and encourage participation and leadership of staffers who are gifted in areas related to an upcoming theme. Themes run the gamut from peace and social justice issues, our relationship with the Spirit, environmental subjects, to playful and whimsical topics as well. Variety and balance here are key.

5. Getting the Word Out: All of the materials we use are available online or as hard copy. Ninety five percent of all of our advance fliers, first timer information, health and safety forms and retreat sign-ups are done through our website. Each year our utilization of the Internet saves enormous amounts of paper, time and money that would otherwise be spent on printing and postage.

Fliers for each retreat (whether online or printed) introduce the theme to be explored, the retreat location (with directions!), staff who will be present and applicable contact numbers, etc. Children who are coming to their first retreat receive a special welcoming note the week before. Parents also receive extensive “First-Timer Info” that answers many of their questions. Posting fliers annually in monthly meetings and getting listed in our yearly meeting’s quarterly newsletter also help to spread the word. Once a program has been up and running for awhile, the very best promotion comes informally, child to child, parent to parent.

Maintenance of health and safety forms, which must be completed and be on file prior to a child’s first retreat and updated before each subsequent retreat, is especially important. The forms contain info on possible allergies (including foods, bugs, plants, meds, etc.) what medications are being taken, emergency contact numbers, health insurance info and emergency sign-offs.

6. Retreat Schedules and Timelines: Some years ago one of the children on retreat, with wristwatch firmly in place, checked our posted schedule and announced in all seriousness, “I’ve checked the schedule, and it looks like we’re running 45 minutes late!” It’s also not uncommon for younger children to ask, usually sometime late Saturday afternoon, “what day is it?” The point is maintaining a schedule and keeping it posted helps to keep both children and staffers orientated with what’s supposed to be happening at any given time. We post everything, from approximate

wakeup and mealtimes, cleanup, discussion groups, outside games, free times, to when quiet hour will be happening.

A typical retreat weekend begins with sign-in on Friday starting at 5:30 PM and concludes by 1:00 PM on Sunday. Friday evening mainly involves getting children settled in, fed, sharing whole community introductions, announcements, games, free time, enjoying dessert and bedtime followed by staff meeting. On Saturday morning following breakfast and cleanup, we begin small groups, play games, have free-time and do arts and crafts, etc. On Saturday afternoon we finish our final two small groups, have time for outside games and/or free-time, followed by “quiet hour” for all from about 3:00–4:00 PM. (Quiet hour gives the whole community “permission” to crash for naps, reading or writing, so long as quiet is maintained for one solid, blessed hour!) On Saturday evening, we usually have some kind of planned music program or talent show. Sunday morning following breakfast and cleanup, we discuss upcoming retreats, thank our staff, do “lost and found,” and prepare to join the host meeting for meeting for worship. (And yes, all our children remain in meeting for worship for the hour!) Following lunch and cleanup, children leave with their parents by 1:00 PM, and staff pack up and leave by 2:30 PM or so.

7. Group Dynamics, etc.: Everyone, including staff, wears nametags throughout the weekend for obvious reasons. Wearing nametags also allows us to celebrate birthdays (with stickers!) and identify who’s in what small group using colored dots. Most importantly, when people arrive after traveling long distances to get to an unfamiliar location, it’s human nature to appreciate seeing your name on a nametag ready to be clipped on! Avoid using pins when selecting nametags for children. We no longer use the “shoelace” strings either, which can become “rope-burn” and choking hazards for running, tree climbing children. Gimp works well, as do colorful and cheap plastic snaps like the ones used on inexpensive key chains. These considerations are less significant for junior and high schoolers. These young Quakers typically resist nametags altogether! When they’re asked to use them, look for them dragging near the floor or buried under two pounds of fabric!

Retreat themes are explored in small groups that meet three or four times during the weekend. We’ve found it much easier to establish small group composition before the retreat begins, being careful to balance gender and ages. Siblings usually like being in different groups and separating known cliques is always advisable! Small group clusters provide for a change in group dynamics that children really enjoy. Youngsters stay in their same small group and rotate to new topics and new staff leaders throughout the course of the weekend. We also try to vary mediums and activity levels from one small group to the next, using recorded music, clay, painting, movement, etc.

8. What’s For Supper? In our program, we call our beloved chef, Wendyl Ross, (also a professional chef in real life) the Supreme Kitchen Goddess! Why? Because when nutritious and tasty food is created and presented with love, everything else about the retreat weekend just seems to go more smoothly! And while it’s important to be able to meet everyone’s dietary needs, including meatless and vegan, spaghetti and garlic bread, salads, sandwiches and PBJ never disappoint, either. Be sure to offer lots of liquids, fruits and light snacks between meals as well.

9. Expenses and Fees: So that we can provide enjoyable meals, purchase necessary supplies and cover stipends and administrative overhead expenses, we charge \$45.00 per child for the weekend.

Sibling discounts are offered as well. Because we also stress that money should never keep anyone away we also offer partial or full scholarships for anyone who asks. In addition, it's not uncommon for meetings to also provide financial assistance for their member children to attend retreats. The elementary and junior high retreat programs in our yearly meeting do not receive an annual budget. Our expenses are expected to be covered by retreat receipts, though yearly meeting and other donations cover shortfalls now and then.

10. Final Blessings: One of the most rewarding joys that we experience as staff is to see and feel the glow of happy and fulfilled children being reunited with their parents after lunch on Sunday. When it's hard for them to leave, when children say, "this retreat should last longer!" and when parents struggle to get them out the door and into the car, then we know that it's been a good retreat! We also pay close attention to the written evaluations that all children complete prior to leaving. Even days and weeks following a retreat, we frequently hear encouraging feedback from parents and young people alike. It is then we realize, with a sense of certainty and prayerful appreciation, that spiritual community did in fact blossom once again. And that, a blessing really, provides the way to begin planning our next retreat.

For more information, visit us on the web at www.jymretreats.org. We are happy to share any of our forms and related materials with Friends wishing to learn more about retreat ministry. May God bless and cherish our children.

Kevin Lee is a recorded minister and member of Westport (MA) Friends Meeting, NEYM, and is the Coordinator of NEYM's Junior Yearly Meeting Elementary Retreat Program. You may reach him at Kevin@jymretreats.org

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