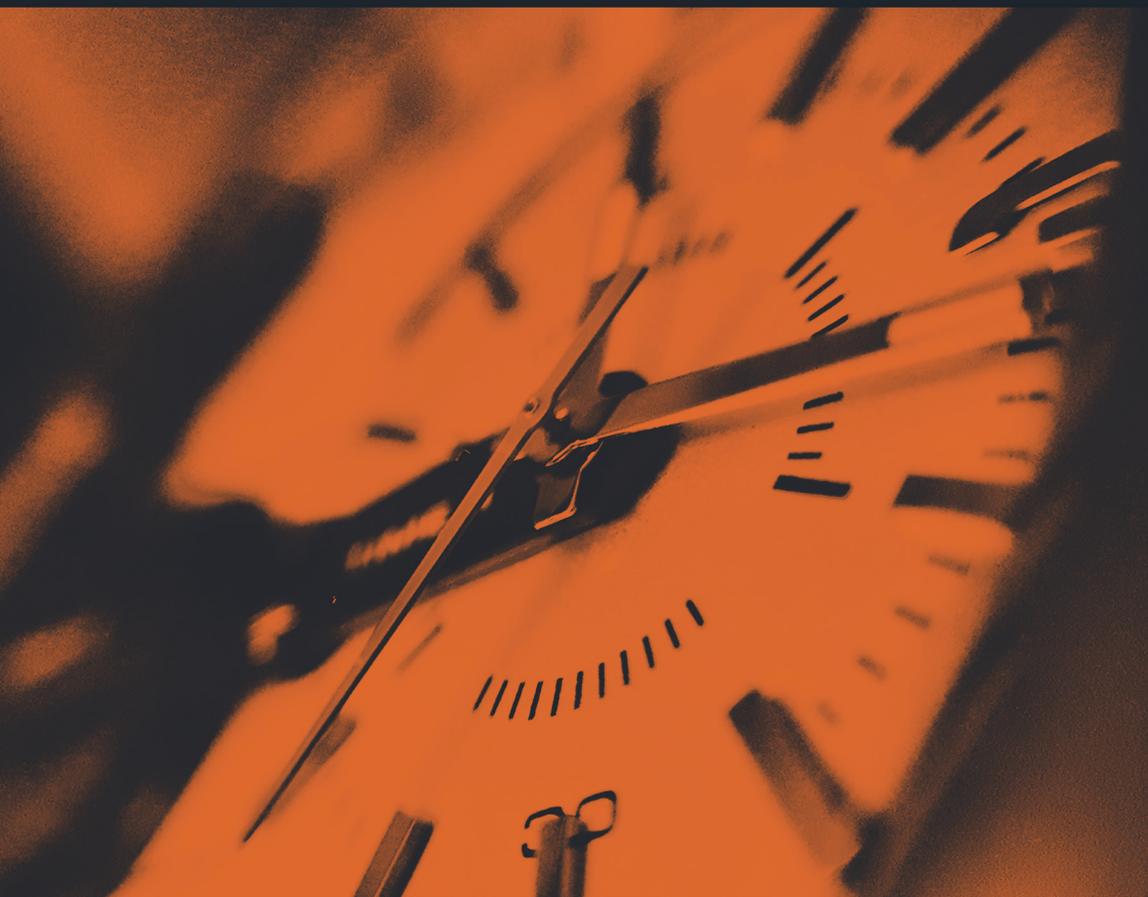


CRASH COURSES *in* YOUTH MINISTRY TRIPS & RETREATS

by Chris Wilterdink



UMCyoungpeople.org



DISCIPLESHIP MINISTRIES
The United Methodist Church

A crash course (in training or education) condenses lots of practical material so that you can read and understand it quickly. A crash course is not where we strap you behind the wheel of a youth ministry bus, point you downhill towards a target and say, *“Hope you don’t crash!”* as you hit every bump possible on the road ahead.

Each of these crash courses in youth ministry are loaded with practical tips and basic wisdom that you can read today and put in to practice tomorrow. If you are a part-time or no-time (amazing volunteer!) youth worker, these crash courses are especially for you. (They’re also great for anyone leading a youth ministry. Just saying.)

Additional crash courses are available at:

UMCyoungpeople.org/CrashCourses

Further training for a variety of leadership roles in ministry is available in the e-learning section of Discipleship Ministries’ store at:

store.UMCdiscipleship.org/product-category/elearning

INTRODUCTION

SAY IT WITH ME: “TAKING YOUTH ON A TRIP OR A RETREAT IS NOT A VACATION.”

If you ever need back-up in a church staff meeting after you return from working twenty-four hours per day every day of a trip, I’m there for you. Trips take extra time, effort, organization, and funds; and they are absolutely not personal vacation or “recharge” time. We, as the leaders, need recovery time after such a major undertaking, so why do we offer short-term mission trips, mystery trips, overnights, and retreats as part of our youth ministry plans?

Time away from a regular faith setting can create opportunities for new and different faith formation in youth ministry. Religious experiences away from a youth’s home church can be “paradigm shifting.” If you’re unsure what that means, picture a chick developing inside an egg. The inside of the egg is all that baby bird knows, until the shell begins to crack open. The chick hatches and finds itself in a new reality. Sun, air, walking— it’s all new from the perspective of this baby bird. Likewise, you have the chance to help youth grow beyond the experiences they have in their regular rhythm of life. Retreats and trips can “crack the shell” that surrounds youth and expose them to new ways of experiencing and understanding God.



01 BRAINSTORMING (START WITH WHY, THEN WHAT AND HOW)

YOU ARE FUNCTIONING ON LIMITED TIME, ENERGY, AND FINANCES IN MINISTRY.

Therefore, in any planning that you do, always start with “why.” (That is a great link to a post about intergenerational ministry and the process of how they found their “why.”) The concept itself comes from Simon Sinek’s “Golden Circle.” Why does this trip or retreat need to happen as a part of your intentional plan for youth ministry? Spending time to understand why you’ll pour time and resources into this effort will ensure you know the purpose and can share the purpose behind every aspect of the experience. Your answer to this “why question” will then invariably lead you to questions about what the experience will look like, the hoped-for outcomes, and how you’ll actually pull it off. Make sure the time and energy you give to a trip or retreat fits in the vision of your ministry.

When brainstorming, remember, there are no wrong answers...yet! Come up with timeframes and locations that would best help you accomplish your “why” of an offsite experience. Consult youth in leadership roles and other stakeholders in the church as you consider trip and retreat possibilities. Think about the level of commitment required by participants and ministry



leaders on the trip (time, travel, expense, focus during the event, etc.) as well as church, school, and community calendars as you try and find the right time and place. Theme work will come later; this time is all about practicality. How will you make an offsite experience fit in the calendar and keep it accessible to participants? Then you can start to create buy-in for the event and get into your detailed planning.

02 BUDGETING

CREATING A BUDGET THAT BREAKS EVEN SHOULD GET DONE BEFORE YOU ADVERTISE COSTS FOR THE TRIP.

Developing a trip budget will also help you identify fundraising needs, so budget well in advance of the actual trip. Main budget categories to consider include:

Rooming Costs

Are you using a hotel? Church floors? Cabins? What is the per night and per person cost of sleeping arrangements?

Food Costs

How many meals need to be arranged during the trip? Are you pre-purchasing (or having parents donate!) snacks for travel time, or are these costs to be passed on to individual participants?

Supplies

On a programmatic retreat? Activity and craft supplies for your sessions. Mission trip? Building supplies and fees or donations to partner organizations. Outdoor adventure? Campfires, gear for courses, etc. Fun trip? Admission and registration costs for any paid activities.



Adult Guests

Can you lower the cost for adult volunteers in any way? Volunteers are already giving their time, so lowering their costs can help get other adults involved. Are you inviting guest speakers? Better count up honoraria and the cost to host guest speakers. Are there background checks or training costs for adults who will be on the trip? Include these administrative costs in your budget.

Travel

Calculate mileage and fuel for all vehicles needed for the trip. How many seat belts do you need to legally transport everyone? How much luggage space do you need to account for? Do you need to rent a trailer or have a vehicle just for bags? Are you chartering a bus or flying? You'd better get quotes and lock in great rates as part of planning how to get from here to there. Do you have travel insurance or additional insurance needs that the church can provide? Yes, count those too!

Donations & Gifts in Kind

Depending on where you travel, a donation to the host facilities of your trip may be appropriate. If you land on a theme or purpose that your participants can support financially, consider including a few dollars per participant to be given to an organization that is working in areas related to your theme.

03 GETTING HELP & INVITING PARTICIPATION

THE SAYING GOES, “*MANY HANDS MAKE LIGHT WORK.*”

Lean into the possibility of sharing the planning load based upon the gifts and interests of likely adult volunteers. Do you have someone who is amazing at cooking for events at the church? If you’re heading somewhere you are fixing your own meals, invite that person along as the menu planner and head chef! Taking a mission trip somewhere a member of your congregation has lived before or has family there? Invite that person to help with local logistics and identifying places to stop on the way to or from the destination. Have someone that loves taking photographs? Have them set up a photo-sharing app, or group on an existing church social media account, and task them with taking and sharing great pictures and documenting the entire event. Perhaps they’d even create a short video for the congregation after the trip is completed.

Honestly, the possibilities become endless as you build relationships with members of your church and the wider community. As always, adults who volunteer should be have background checks and should have completed Safe Sanctuaries[®] training, where they learn about your church’s policies for abuse prevention



and reporting procedures. Retreats and trips may require additional considerations because of sleeping arrangements, extended periods of interaction time, and the potential for out-of-the-ordinary responsibilities of onsite supervision. Detailed suggestions for travel with youth are available in [Mission Trips for First Timers](#).

Likewise, as you develop young leaders, you will want to create opportunities for them to lead. How can youth provide leadership during the trip? Can they be charged with devotions, worship, or mixer activities? Can they create the theme and any swag (t-shirts or other goodies) for the trip? Can youth be partnered with any of the adults you identify from the paragraph above to be mentored by them and support their efforts during the trip?

It is important that you create an atmosphere of shared leadership and effective planning well before the actual trip or retreat itself to enable you to bear less of a burden. On a retreat or trip, it is not wise nor sustainable to expect you to be “on duty” twenty-four hours a day. Schedule yourself breaks where you can have some time to yourself, touch base with family at home, fellowship and build relationships with other participants, or even (dare I say) take a nap!

04 THE SCHEDULE & THE CALENDAR

THE SCHEDULE FOR YOUR TRIP OR RETREAT LISTS THE SCOPE (WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO ON THE TRIP) AND SEQUENCE (IN WHAT ORDER YOU'LL DO THOSE THINGS) IN AN EASY-TO-ACCESS FORMAT.

As you build the schedule for the trip, consider:

- How much scheduled time do I need to accomplish my “why” for this experience? Hours? Days? Weeks?
- What is the balance between “scheduled time” and “unscheduled time?” Truly divine and memorable moments come during free time or downtime. Also, the amount of content and programming you need to create is directly related to the amount of “scheduled time” you include.
- Lights up and lights out times. How can you encourage (enough) sleep for participants?
- Processing and reflection time. Retreats and trips are ideal places to have some paradigm-shifting “WOW!” moments. They also afford you extended time to help participants make sense of those moments by reflecting on how the presence of God was felt. Provide times to reflect on scripture and



share with one another. Scheduling intentional worship or devotion times during a trip is a must.

- How does every activity on the schedule help accomplish the purpose of the trip?
- What will you include in the schedule to connect back to the discipleship system at your local church after the retreat is finished?

The calendar consists of the actual dates and times of the retreat or trip. Communicate this well in advance when people are in the decision-making model and figuring out if they can participate. Share this calendar with parents and guardians. This will keep them at ease about what their youth will be experiencing and can indicate specific times to be in prayer for the trip.

- How does this trip fit in with family, church, school, and community calendars? Is it interfering with any other important items or limiting participation because of other important events or holidays?
- When are you leaving and when will you get back? Not only is this important information so that youth can get to the church (and get picked back up) on time, but it is also important because it communicates to your volunteers and to the church when your responsibility to all participants begins and ends.

- Is this trip or retreat an annual thing? Do you want to establish a tradition of it always happening on a certain weekend or set of dates? Can you possibly get better deals if hosts and locations know you will be back next year?

For a more detailed look at calendaring and budgeting, refer to our [Crash Course on Administration](#).

05 CREATING BUY-IN, OR MARKETING & COMMUNICATION

IT'S TIME TO GET APPROVAL FOR THE TRIP FROM LEADERSHIP TEAMS, MAKE SURE THE WHOLE CHURCH KNOWS ABOUT IT, AND GET PEOPLE SIGNED UP!

Approval

Ensure that you have buy-in and support from your core group of youth and adult leaders in youth ministry. Their participation and ability to invite others increases the chances of filling up every space that you make available and helps to ensure your forecasted budget remains accurate. With your youth leaders and core group on board, communicate and get approvals from necessary leadership groups. As you share your plans with these teams, you may discover natural connections to support the theme or new potential volunteers to be part of your trip.

Marketing & Communication

Make sure that your core leaders are equipped to talk about the trip as much as you are. Have a one-minute version of your “why” about the trip and share that through other people, in video format, and in written invitations. Most people will need to hear about the trip or retreat three to seven times before



they get enough information and consider registering. Use every communication medium at your disposal (announcements, newsletters, emails, social media, face-to-face invitations, etc.) and remember to include your “why.” If the trip or retreat has a special focus or outcome (ropes-course team building or short-term mission or service, for example, consider listing other expectations for the trip. They could include things like how much physical activity will be required, activities that are optional, and even things like sleeping and meal arrangements.) People are more likely to join in if they feel valued in the purpose of the trip and welcomed to participate in a meaningful way. Helping them understand what they are signing up for before the trip begins avoids headaches later!

Registration

Set clear deadlines and deposit schedules for trips that have a significant financial cost. Make your final deadlines at least twenty-one days before the trip actually begins so that you can track down any missing payments or paperwork. Short, local trips probably don’t usually require special registration outside of a sign up and the standard medical information and release forms that you already have on file. (If forms like that aren’t in use at your church, check out our [Crash Course on Administration](#) and get some in place as soon as possible!)

For trips that involve overnight stays (especially mission trips), consider creating a registration form

that provides the most-up-to-date medical and insurance information for your participants, as well as any information or registration forms required by the host organization or host site. In addition to needed information like allergies, you can include fun information like favorite snacks, current favorite music and movies, current favorite Bible verses, and so on. You can then include some of those fun items on the trip, building playlists, snack times, and so on around the information you get back. Keep copies of these registration forms (print or digital) accessible and with you for the duration of the trip. Clearly communicate “What-to-Bring” lists along with registration so that participants have plenty of time to get what they need.

Communication

The increase in access to technology has created an expectation of regular communication between youth and trip leaders with parents and the church before, during, and after trips. Before trips, communicate clearly with parents about behavior expectations and preparation needs for their youth. Communicate with church leadership about all locations of the trip and how you can be reached during the trip. Also communicate days that you will be away from the church itself, before and afterward, for preparation and recovery from the trip. The choice of whether to allow youth participants to keep their mobile devices active during trips is up to you as the leader.

Adult participants should have communication devices for emergency usage. As the youth leader, you also should retain communication capabilities for emergencies. You should also have a communication plan to leave voicemails at the church and do social media posts to tell the story of the trip as it unfolds and give confidence to parents that all is well— especially on extended length trips. With the ease of picture and video sharing through mobile devices, task an adult leader or two to document the trip and share pictures and videos through apps or closed-groups on social media. After the trip is complete, follow up with participants to encourage them to continue their discipleship and growth, tying their experience on the trip to ongoing faith formation opportunities. Follow up with leadership teams. Particularly if you want to repeat a trip, include participants and other leaders in evaluation of the trip and decide what should be kept and what could be improved.

06 EVALUATION

YOU CAN EVALUATE A TRIP IN MANY WAYS.

Did it stay on budget? Did it begin and end on time? Did everyone make it home without serious injury? But there are bigger questions to ask during evaluation. Did the participants of the trip experience God in new and meaningful ways? What relationships were built internally with the group and externally with others through the experience? Is the group welcome back at the site who hosted them?

One way to help ensure the paradigm-shifting potential of retreats and trips is to use the “Theology Together” process from the Center for Youth Ministry Training, which is briefly outlined below.

- Invite youth to share their “wow” moments from the trip or retreat. These are the moments that surprised, impressed, or deeply affected them.
- Ask “why” questions, guiding them to explain why those moments wowed them.
- Discover and discuss what the current culture and context would say about that experience.



- Consider God’s perspective on the situation. Help youth explore scripture and tradition to discover how God’s perspective on that wow moment compares with that of the current culture and context.
- Over time, the discipleship system at your church can help align those wow experiences with God’s perspective, helping youth grow as disciples.

Consider keeping a log of these paradigm-shifting “wow” moments and compare them to your original “why” from the planning stages of your trip or retreat. You may be surprised at how the Spirit moved during the trip! Make sure to share these stories with appropriate church leaders, or even in worship, to multiply the impact of those moments.

CONCLUSION

SPECIAL TRIPS AND RETREATS OFFER TREMENDOUS OPPORTUNITIES TO FAST-FORWARD RELATIONSHIPS, FAITH DEVELOPMENT, AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS FOR YOUR MINISTRY.

Successfully offering these as a part of youth ministry involves advance planning, intentional communication, and follow up to maintain the energy that comes from these times away.



BONUS: TOP 10 LISTS

Top Ten Details Every Site Director Wants Youth Ministers to Know

1. Every host site has different forms and procedures. Please be sure to use those of the place you are partnering with.
2. Don't complain about gathering tools or supplies to bring with you to your host site! If it's a work mission trip, bringing the requested tools with you will allow your group to get more done. If a retreat center asks you to bring linens or dishware, just do it so that you have them on arrival.
3. Plan to be present for all events and meals planned by your partner organization or host site. Disappearing from a dinner because you just wanted to give your group a treat may leave uneaten food and will be rude to volunteers who may have come to help provide your group nourishment.
4. Share about your trip on social media and tag your locations, partner organizations, and host sites often! Most mission, trip, and retreat sites



appreciate the extra attention, which could result in future opportunities for them. After the trip, blog and social posts about how great your experience has been spread the story of your ministry and the place where some “wow” moments happened.

5. Strike a balance between offering an affordable trip and being realistic about the true cost of retreats and trips. This will involve picking a partner and host sites whose costs are accessible, having good fundraising tactics, and not adding a lot of extra costs for recreational adventures.
6. Register for your summer trips by December 1 of the previous year. Many retreat facilities and camps book up six months ahead of time, so plan ahead. Most sites have some process for perfecting team numbers up to about thirty days before the trip, so check with them about when you need to finalize and pay for your participants.
7. Sometimes it’s hard to be both the trip organizer and the relational pastor at the same time. If a host site offers organizational help, take it, so that you can focus on relationships and care for your group.
8. Remember, some service areas have finite resources for housing or project coordination, so sometimes DIY-seeking groups complicate the ongoing work there. Likewise, host sites including camps and retreat settings often have neighbors of some kind. Help your host site maintain those relationships by

respecting their ongoing relationships and facilities.

9. Always build time into your trip to reflect upon the experience daily through Bible study, prayerful discussions, and more. Sometimes visiting speakers or field trips around your destination can help expand your team's faith-filled understanding of why this retreat, trip, or service experience is important as a follower of Jesus.
10. Help your team remember that minor discomforts like bad coffee, watered-down lemonade, or thin bunk bed mattresses pale in comparison to the good work and relationships you will build during the trip. Help keep your group focused on the "why" of your trip, no matter what comes your way.

Ten Ways to Enhance Trips and Retreats

1. Recruit prayer partners from your congregation for individual participants on the trip. Have them write prayers down, collect them before departure, and pass them out during a devotion.
2. Have parents or regular volunteers write anonymous notes of encouragement. Make those available in a basket during mealtimes for participants to pick up and read.
3. Pair up trip participants into "Prayer Partnerships"

(or some way more creative term; you are way better at naming these things than I am!). As part of devotions, include time for each pair to process their day's experiences.

4. Bring large envelopes, or lunch bags, and scraps of paper and writing supplies. Have participants decorate their own envelope/bag and set up a display of them during the trip. Other participants can then write "care cards" about how they saw God through that person's actions during the trip, things they appreciate about that person, or other words of affirmation. Give the envelopes/bags back to participants for the ride home as something to read.
5. Need to split your travel group into smaller groups for a day or longer on your trip? Do people need to learn names? Get different colored duct tape and sharpies. Boom, every small group has a different color tape.
6. Plan your travel route in advance, looking for stops that have multiple bathroom stalls. Few things are worse than winding along a small road, trying to find a bathroom stop, and only having one toilet to share and taking turns.
7. Include a shirt or other trip commemorative item with registration. This could be a cost factor, but if you account for it, this is a great way to invite young people to design and distribute shirts and merchandise that they'll be proud of.

8. Invite volunteers from your home church to meet your group upon returning from the trip with dinner kits for the adult volunteers. You'll have a welcoming committee, and your adult volunteers on the trip won't have to think about how to feed themselves or their family when they return home!
9. During time when youth participants are out of sleeping areas, have adults come in and leave favorite snacks and treats. When youth discover them at the end of the day, its a recharge.
10. Coordinate a sign up for shared travel snacks instead of having individuals bring their own. This will save luggage space and give you some control over the amount of sugar and liquid that participants take in while traveling!