

Additional Vestry Retreat Design Resources

Art:

Center for Creative Leadership's Visual Explorer (very expensive, but worth having as a shared resource across parishes or within a diocese)

(Used with questions like, "which of these pictures speaks to you about our parish right now?" "Which of these pictures speaks to you about your desired future for our parish?")

You can also create your own collection of art using photographs, postcards of paintings and sculptures, and drawings. (Google Image searches work well for this purpose.) The most difficult part of this, and the reason why the Center's Visual Explorer works well and costs so much, is you need a significant array of types of images to acknowledge the array of perspectives within your parish's leadership.

Recognizing this, what I would suggest is that, if you wanted to incorporate art into your retreat, you ask every member of the vestry to bring a picture either that is meaningful to them or a picture of a time when the parish was living into God's dream (or faithful to God's calling, however you choose to narrate it). When people share, it offers a way of getting to know one another and what one another values in their lives or about the parish.

If you would rather not use art in such ways, you can also make one of the opportunities for prayer a visio divina, which works like lectio divina, except your object of reflection and contemplation is a visual representation of a biblical story.

Music:

Taste in music and preference for musical genre is profoundly personal, obviously. Thus, introducing music into your retreat is highly context-dependent. You will know how well jazz or folk or classical or hip-hop would work in your setting and with your vestry. In selecting music, then, what we want to look for are three things: (1) the lyrics – does the song invite you to see something, participate in something, dream something that you otherwise wouldn't?, (2) the story behind the song – is there something in its creation that is instructive, inspiring, or thought-provoking?, or (3) is the song or piece an experience in and of itself, something that points us to something beyond it?

As to the first, the singer-songwriter Carrie Newcomer, interviewed recently on "On Being," comes to mind. Her songs, particularly "A Gathering of Spirits," "Holy as a Day is Spent," and "I Heard an Owl," offer fruitful images in an accessible style. Likewise, the group Sweet Honey in the Rock, particularly their "Wanting Memories," offers an interesting framework to invite people to reflect on their lives. Know that if you are going to choose music for its lyrics, make sure your retreat participants have a copy of the lyrics in hand so that they can refer to them.

Second, if you are choosing music because of the story behind the song, it's helpful to think about how to introduce that. Do you have the artist or songwriter on video (or in an audio recording) describing what led to their writing of the song? Or, is it something as simple as Bobby McFerrin's "23rd Psalm" with the note that this is

dedicated to his mother? As with poetry, if you preface the piece with the story, it changes how we hear the piece. (Even if you hate what Bobby McFerrin does with the 23rd Psalm, knowing that it is for his mother makes it a more intimate and personal experience.)

Third, if you're choosing to use music because of the experience itself, you might think of something like a recording from a jazz concert (my preference is John Coltrane live), with a question like, "how is it that the improvisation we hear in this recording might suggest something about the way we might work together?" Here, answers could include things like the preparation and rehearsal required to improvise well, the listening to each other, the sense of being in it together ... you get the idea. The point is, it is less about the piece and more about the experience of the piece.

Some reliable performances, aside from those named above, that I have used include: "One Voice" (The Wailin' Jennys), "You Raise Me Up" (Josh Groban), "When It Don't Come Easy" (Patty Griffin), "Feelin' Good" (Nina Simone).

Poetry:

Leading from Within, S. Intrator

Risking Everything, R. Housden

Teaching with Fire, S. Intrator, M. Scribner

Using poetry can be a challenge because we don't want it to feel like we are trying to discover the poem's meaning; rather, we want the poem to give us either a language or a framework to talk about our own experiences and to harvest our own wisdom.

So, for example, in Mary Oliver's poem, "Mindful," she writes, "Every day I see or hear something that more or less kills me with delight..." It's not terribly interesting (or fruitful to your vestry) to ask, "what kills Mary Oliver with delight?" What is interesting is "what kills you with delight?" Here, people can talk about their passions, values, commitments, experiences in ways that they might not ordinarily.

In choosing a poem that you might use, you want to choose something that raises a provocative question, like Oliver's, or that has a rich metaphor in it, the kind of metaphor that a person can play within. It's a bit like my example in the webinar of the "Indy car" versus "Moses' sandals;" metaphors can help people name what they know but wouldn't ordinarily say for whatever reason.

**** In your selections of art, music, and poetry, you will want to make sure that there is a richness of diversity represented to ensure that the diversity of the human experience is honored and reflected.**

Evaluation Questions:

In most evaluations, you want to give the opportunity for people to reflect both appreciatively and constructively on what they have experienced. Here are some sample questions:

Appreciative (ask 1):

- What experience contributed the most to your learning?
- What part of the retreat was most beneficial to you?
- If you were in charge of planning next year's retreat, what from this year's retreat would you do again? Why?
- When were we at our best during this retreat?

Constructive (ask 1):

- What do you wish had been different about your retreat experience?
- What part of the retreat contributed the least to your experience?
- If you were planning next year's retreat, what would you hope we wouldn't do again? Why?
- How could this retreat have been a better experience for you?

Personal:

- Were your needs and desires for this retreat time met? Why or why not?
- In hindsight, was there anything that you could have done differently to make this a better retreat?
- Would you choose this venue for a vestry retreat again?

If you try something markedly different for your vestry in a retreat setting (you bring in a guest speaker, have a panel discussion, pray the labyrinth), it is worth asking one or two specific questions about that. "How did -x, y, or z - contribute to your experience during this retreat?" "What did you learn about our parish / yourself / the church / the world because of -x, y, or z-?"

Also, it's nice to ask for a commitment at the end of an evaluation, something like, "would you be willing to help plan next year's vestry retreat?" It invests people in the future of the very thing that they are offering feedback about, and in so doing, it moves people from being critics to collaborators, to paraphrase the writer Andy Crouch.