

# PASTORS RETREAT NETWORK

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## A Time to Retreat

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In the busyness of ministry, intentional time alone with God benefits you, your family, and your congregation.

*"Christ stands at the door knocking" . . .or maybe that's my administrative assistant, or my spouse, or the youth pastor, or . . .?*

Nobody has to tell you what a demanding and diversified job description today's pastor has to fill. As fundraiser, administrator, and spiritual leader of a congregation (too often in that order), the lion's share of professional development dollars are often devoted to the latest church management software or fund-raising program. Rarely is the pastor's spiritual enrichment considered professional development and given the appropriate resources of time and money - it's either overlooked by the board, it's a result of the pastor's own priorities, or an emergency need in the area of facilities or resources supersedes all spending.

*Jesus said, "Come with me by yourself to a quiet place . . ." and I replied, "Let me check my Palm Pilot."*

In October of 2001, Pastor James Johnson and his wife made the bold decision to take a week out of their busy schedules to attend a Bethany Retreat - part of the Pastors Retreat Network.

Yes, five days of uninterrupted time with God and spouse. Nothing to do, the brochure promised, but to "reconnect to God, your spouse, and your ministry."

"That won't take long," Johnson decided, and not wanting to be bored or unproductive, he did what any self-respecting pastor would do: he brought along some work - planning to rewrite his entire Sunday school curriculum in five days.

When he arrived, he looked over the program guide - biblical meditations using the ancient art of *lectio divina*, readings from spiritual classics - really old spiritual classics, not the familiar *Hinds' Feet* and *My Utmost For His Highest*, but centuries old books by Thomas a Kempis, St. John of the Cross, and Brother Lawrence. This "new" material was so intriguing that he decided he'd set aside one day to complete the whole Bethany Retreat program, getting it out of the way on the first day and allowing him the rest of the week to do his curriculum.

But this was too demanding. Everyday Johnson was giving more time to the spiritual formation readings and less time to the curriculum. By the end of the week, he knew that something was happening, but he wasn't sure what to make of it. He asked to take his retreat evaluation form home with him and mail it in later.

*Jesus said, "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. . ." and I said, "What do you mean, Lord? I've completed my D. Min!"*

A week, then two weeks passed, and the evaluation didn't come back. The host couple of the retreat center sent an email to see how things were going after the retreat. Johnson's wife sent the following response:

"Just a note to let you know that God is still at work. James has really been struggling since the retreat. One of the readings we came across on the retreat was on the 'dark night of the soul.' James drew it to my attention and said he felt he was experiencing that. Since we've been home, he's been almost in tears most

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of the time, and Sunday he fought getting up and resigning when he went to preach. What I'm writing about is for you to PRAY for him. I will try to keep you posted. But just PRAY. Thanks and blessings to you. In his love and care . . ."

Two more weeks passed before the evaluation arrived. It read:

"The Bethany Retreat was probably the greatest week of my life. There were areas in my life that I was struggling with. I didn't know what they were or how to deal with them when I found them. Bethany helped me to focus in on these areas, but also helped me know how to deal with them. One thing it did was take me to what was referred to as the 'dark night of the soul.' In this period of time, I was able to open my heart up to the Lord for him to do a work. My direction, priorities, and goals were changed. I'd highly recommend every pastor and spouse to go to the Bethany Retreat."

*"Test me in this," said the Lord. "Give me a portion of your time and see if I don't pour out upon you . . ."*  
*And I replied, "But Lord, I'm not a gambler, and I can't risk leaving my flock alone for a week, and you know what people think about someone else speaking on the weekend. . ."*

Johnson's story is a testimony to the importance - and the risk - of pastors taking time to focus on their own personal spirituality and relationship with Christ. Every pastor's retreat experience is different, but the net result is always an increased devotion to Christ and to the ministry.

The formula is simple; you can't outgive God. Devote uninterrupted time to God on a regular basis (at least one week a year), and experience the tremendous impact it will have on you - and ultimately, on your ministry.

There are many things that keep a pastor from retreating. Some equate the term "pastor retreats" with classic "pastor rescue" ministries for pastors who are in crisis, but the type of pastors retreat gaining prominence today is the place for healthy pastors who recognize the need for constant commitment and recommitment to "practicing the presence of God."

Tony Roma and his wife attested to this in their comments on a recent evaluation, commenting on what he took away from his retreat: "I've always had a good prayer and devotional life, but now I'm more responsible about keeping my appointment with him as I would for anyone else, and I'm more inclined to meet him with my heart."

The focus of many pastors retreats has turned from counseling and therapy to spiritual enrichment. The widely popular spiritual formation movement in the church focuses on what the ancients called the interior life.

"I was familiar with the spiritual disciplines from my youth as a Catholic," Roma says. "It means more to me now, especially as my wife and I experience it together. We function more now as a team."

*Jesus said. . . "A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. . ."*

Spiritual health is essential to good pastoring - and you can't fake it. On the positive side, you can't hide it either - it's contagious. Roma is the worship leader at his church, and when asked if the retreat had any long-term affect, his senior pastor replied that he no longer sees Tony simply as a worship leader but sees him as a person worshipping God.

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The enrichment to be had from uninterrupted time with God is rightly called professional development, but that in no way diminishes the positive personal effects a retreat can have on a pastor's marriage, personal health, and spiritual growth.

At the Sinai Experience - a pastors retreat for individuals - pastors often talk about fighting the urge to turn everything into sermon material. Instead of looking for something "that'll preach," the pastors are free to make their time an intimate, personal time with Christ.

Taking the time to intentionally plan a retreat within your busy schedule is the beginning of focusing time on your relationship with God. Our call to pastoring is more than just an occupation, it's an expression of our relationship with God that is replicated in the lives of those we serve. So for you, your family, and your congregation, plan now for your own personal retreat. Everyone you minister to and with will experience the benefits of your time alone with God.

### ***"be still and know that I am God"***

Every pastor needs to spend time alone with God, especially in today's world of noise and busyness. Three lessons you can learn from spending time alone with God on a spiritual retreat:

Lesson 1: Silence or time alone is difficult. We live in an age of noise, and we spend our days with noises all around us. Remember that you must overcome both external and internal noise as you spend time with God.

Lesson 2: It's possible for even the busiest pastor to spend time in silence with God. It's a matter of priorities. Be intentional in your planning. Your ultimate purpose is to meet with the God who longs to meet with you.

Lesson 3: It will bear fruit. Yes, spending time alone with God will strengthen your ministry and give you direction in life. But the greatest fruit of retreating to a quiet place with God is your own growing intimacy with God.

### ***Benefits of a retreat***

A spiritual retreat is like taking vitamins and minerals to keep the body healthy - preventing disease. Here are some benefits of planning a retreat in your annual schedule.

- It prevents burnout.
- You can spend quality time alone with God ? without an agenda
- You have the opportunity to deepen the spiritual practices in your life.
- Your vision and purpose will be renewed, altered, or redirected.
- You'll be strengthened spiritually, mentally and physically.

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