



Take your church away

Organising a special weekend

A30 Articles series: Planning

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This article is designed to help all who have the task of planning church days, weekends or holidays. The advice is geared for a whole-church weekend away at a residential Centre but the principles also apply to a weekend held at home, a youth event or a senior members' holiday.

Organising a weekend away is a complex task: so many things have to be co-ordinated. But the impact on both individual members and on the church as a whole makes all the hard work so worthwhile. It is a task with many challenges, but one to enjoy. And of course the best organised weekends are those when no one is aware of the planning and administration going on behind the scenes!

So here are ten elements of a possible planning process divided into four parts. An additional item adds a detailed actions checklist.

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The foundations

The church's leadership should normally establish the foundations for the event. It is vital to prepare this stage well before rushing into the more routine planning stages.

1 Purpose and theme

Churches fail to see a weekend impacting their life as it might for two main reasons. One, which we shall deal with right at the end, concerns a lack of follow-up. The other is a half-hearted attitude to the purpose for the weekend and so to the selection of its theme.

Here are a number of ways in which themes get chosen, all of them somewhat questionable.

- Someone knows 'a good speaker' and that choice then determines the theme, being their specialist subject or the Christian ministry they are involved in.
- You find a speaker who decides the theme themselves, using material they have already prepared for elsewhere.
- Someone in the church suggests a topic they want to see tackled and in the absence of other ideas this is followed up.
- One particular pressure group within the church pushes an idea and, again, this is accepted for lack of alternatives.

All of these may provide a great event, but seeing the weekend not as a one-off but as a special event in the life of the church's overall programme should offer a better way forward.

So, start by asking these questions.

- 1 Why are we taking all this trouble to go away for a weekend? It's expensive, it disrupts people's lives and it takes a considerable amount of organisation. What exactly is it for?
- 2 What changes do we want to see in our corporate life and in the lives of our individual members that a weekend might enable?
- 3 What do we want different people (children, teens, parents, singles, senior members) to be saying with enthusiasm after the weekend?
- 4 Where might this event fit into our church's current vision and programme?

Only now are you in a position to start thinking of theme, and only then of speakers, opportunities for worship and overall format. But remember that the weekend may be two years ahead of where you are today so you also have to think of what may change in the intervening time.

The purpose for most church weekends away will focus on three elements but the balance between them, especially the style of the third, will vary considerably:

- building relationships;
- teaching;
- worship.

Some churches want to create more of a holiday theme and so give more time for outings and less for formal sessions. One special case is when a weekend away is timed to prepare a congregation for a major event in church life: a special outreach activity or a move to a new building.

This event is a magnificent opportunity to focus on one particular theme for longer than is possible in the normal church programme, and with the opportunity to tackle it in different and varied ways: speaker, discussion groups, specialist workshops, etc. So the weekend can profitably be set in a wider context so that the congregation can be prepared for it in advance and then carry on working at it for the year that follows.

Decisions such as these should be taken by the church's leadership, preferably after wide research and careful thought and prayer as to how best to capitalise on this very special opportunity in the church's calendar.

2 Options to consider

A weekend away scores highly as a special event but is expensive in terms of cost and time to organise. Here is a spread of ideas.

Church weekend away

For many churches this will be a highlight of the year's programme, but it is unlikely to be repeated on an annual basis. Because of costs and time this is more likely to be held every two or three years or just occasionally.

Church weekend at home

The idea here is to lay on the kind of programme that you would have at a church weekend, but to do it all at base or locally to save costs. This may not have the same atmosphere as a residential weekend but it can have many of its features: speaker, young people's programme, meals together (self-catering).

Church awayday

A variation on the home weekend is to hold a Saturday awayday at a suitable venue. Sunday services and a lunch can then be brought into the programme. A visiting speaker may have two sessions on the awayday and then preach on the Sunday.

Church holiday week

Rising costs have cut the number of churches taking a large group away for a week's teaching and holiday, or it may be that the range of major Christian events now fulfil this function more effectively.

Sector weekends away

A range of churches now take a men's or women's group away for a weekend. Several churches run teens' weekends away and others organise such events for missional community groups, home groups or leadership teams. These can alternate year by year with a whole church weekend.

Other such events

Variations on the above include Church Council awaydays, Alpha and equivalent weekends, and churches that lay on a week's 'holiday at home' for seniors. Many churches now take large groups away to major Christian events such as Spring Harvest, New Wine, Soul Survivor or Word Alive.

This article focuses on a whole-church weekend. Adapt what is described to the type of event you are planning. And if you feel you are too small a group for some of what is covered here, why not link up with another church to give sufficient numbers?

Choice of venue

If you have decided to go away you then need to consider

- how far away from home you want to travel;
- what type of accommodation suits your needs.

The same will apply for a weekend 'at home' where you use a nearby venue rather than your own church buildings.

Do you want to be close enough to base to enable those not on the weekend to join you on the Sunday or to come as day visitors? This can be a big plus. Some people have family or work commitments that mean that a residential weekend is simply not possible, so a day visitor option can include them.

But the risks of being too close to home are that the sense of 'going away all together' is limited, some will opt to be day visitors who might otherwise have come for the whole programme, and residents may be tempted to pop back home or go shopping on the Saturday.

On the options for type of accommodation, consider the following.

Christian or other conference centre

They are set up for events such as yours. Some are large and you may be sharing the weekend with other groups (some allow exclusive use for a surcharge). Some are small and you may find that the mix of family, double and single bedrooms does not match your needs so that single people either have to share or to pay a premium.

Bible college / other academic institution

Many double as a conference centre out of term-time. Dates are clearly restricted but facilities can be good.

Christian community centre

These are similar to conference centres but there will be a resident community who may expect to run your programme for you.

Commercial hotel

There are hotels set up for mid-week conferences that are eager to fill beds at weekends and some offer special deals to churches. Or you may be able to find a resort hotel offering a good price too if out of season.

Self-catering centre

These will save you money but you need to organise both a hard-working Catering Team with experience of this kind of event, and someone with skill and experience to plan the menus and order all the food. This can work well for a small sector group going away together.

Youth centre

There are a number of Centres around the country designed for young people's groups. Sleeping may include dormitory accommodation with everything run at a less luxurious standard than at hotels and conference centres.

Camping options

If you want to be much more basic, some conference centres offer camping sites linked to them or you pitch tents and marquee on a registered site. This will involve a considerable amount of extra work to organise. This article does not have space to cover the specifics of this option.

Other church or local hall

These can be valuable for a non-residential self-catering event that is still 'away' from your own church buildings.

You can maximise bookings by choosing a venue that can offer a range of different levels of accommodation such as single, double and family rooms, youth wing and camping so that people can pay for what they get. Some people stay away if it is all the same but not their level of comfort or within their price range.

Time of year

Finding the right time of year is not easy. Depending on who the weekend is designed for here are some times you may want to avoid:

- when those you want to book are likely to be away – such as half terms;
- when life is particularly busy – such as the run-up to Christmas;

- when your church's programme is at a peak – such as September;
- when travel might be disrupted by snow – such as January.

But if you follow these ideas too tightly your whole year has been blocked out! If you plan far enough ahead it is possible to encourage a whole church of families to come away at a half-term. Or you might launch an autumn church programme by encouraging all groups to see the weekend away then as their first session. Some conference centres offer special terms at times of the year they find difficult to fill (although this is more likely to be mid-week than weekend).

For a weekend away for a large group, remember that your chosen Centre may be booked up two or three years ahead. So everything at your end needs to be planned in very good time. When you put in a booking you will be asked to pay a non-returnable deposit and to guarantee minimum numbers. These may look fine today but may cause problems two years later when you promote the event.

The people

Having decided purpose, theme and type of event, we consider now the choice and responsibilities of different groups of people who play key roles in the preparation stages and at the weekend itself.

3 Organising Team

With the type of event agreed and the theme fixed, it now depends on the appointment of a small Organising Team to pull everything together. This team needs a clear leader who will take ultimate responsibility for the success or otherwise of the venture. Whether you see the focus being on the leader (who gets a small team together to support him or her) or the team (who appoint a leader from among them) will determine the style in which the event is organised and run.

For example, a weekend may be in the hands of the church's paid Administrator or a particular member of the congregation with supporters to help. This can be an efficient way of operation but it places a heavy burden on one person and means that their own personal style and preferences may shape the weekend to a considerable degree.

On the other hand you might have a team where the leader keeps a low profile but helps three or four members of the team to hold specific

responsibilities and ensures that they work together well.

Other variables that will affect the shape of the Organising Team include:

- whether the Minister (or the staff team in larger churches) takes a leading role in the organisation or stays right out of it;
- how much the church's Council wants to be involved to ratify key decisions or whether once the theme and budget have been chosen it is all left to the organisers;
- whether the congregation includes people with both time and experience in organising a project of this kind;
- whether staff time can or should be legitimately diverted to this project so that it effectively becomes a staff event.

To avoid misunderstandings it is important that the group is given clear terms of reference and budgetary boundaries. A weekend away can involve considerable sums of money, sometimes committed two years in advance. The choice of

speaker might be controversial if their style or theological position was not that of the church itself. What degree of risk is the church prepared to invest in this venture?

It is a good idea to keep the Organising Team small and to keep official meetings to a minimum. A team of ten people meeting monthly in the year leading up to the event takes up a considerable amount of people-hours. Much can be done by email, phone and ten-minute meetings in a corner after a Sunday church service by a team of four or five. Provided terms of reference and accountability for the team are clear, the responsibilities of individual members agreed and known and the communication between everyone effective, much can be achieved in a simple way.

If the event is to become a key part of a church's programme, it is vital that the Organising Team is kept in close contact with leaders who have the responsibility for the wider context of the church's vision and priorities. This can be done with one person on the group representing the church's leadership, the presence of the Minister on the group, or a close working relationship between Minister and team leader.

For churches that organise such events on a regular basis, to have team member continuity can be really helpful. But to use the same team each time may lead to a lack of fresh thinking. Much of the work is highly detailed and each team should seek to develop some kind of operational manual they can pass on, listing tasks to be carried out by date, sample publicity and letters to those coming, checklists, etc.

It should go without saying that the team should see their work as close to the spiritual heart of the church's life, with prayer as a central activity both by its members and for them too.

If the team shares out the main responsibilities between them, here are some possible ideas for a working division.

Leadership/co-ordination

The one person with overall responsibility, team leader, link person with the Centre and with the main speakers, co-ordination with the Minister and church staff, overall budget.

Publicity

Main means of information and promotion to the congregation, selling the event during the booking period, design of booking brochure, media releases if appropriate.

Bookings/finance

An administrative task to handle all bookings and payments, room allocations, all enquiries before the event, accounts, payments to Centre and to speakers, transport to the event, registration

there, information sent out to those booked and a conference pack for everyone.

Programme and locations

Seeing that the event programme is planned with meticulous care and arranging the use of rooms, technical equipment and operation, seating, tidying up each day. Any recreational activities, entertainments, etc.

Young people's programme

Leaders for crèche, children's and teens groups, programme, all-age activities, safeguarding issues, encouraging young people to come, specific projects for them.

See the [supplement to this article](#) for a detailed checklist of all Organising Team actions before, during and after the weekend.

4 Self-catering

The self-catering option for a weekend away cuts costs but adds a considerable level of logistics to the weekend. Most weekends at home will also be self-catering, although here the kitchen facilities will be familiar which may prove helpful (unless insufficient for the numbers involved).

The planning of menus, ordering of food, cooking and preparation will normally be the responsibility of a separate Catering Team. This article does not attempt to cover the specifics for all the organisation involved, but provides here the issues that the Organising Team and its leader will have to take into account.

Early planning stage

- Appoint one member of the Organising Team to have responsibility for liaison with the Catering Team.
- Appoint a Senior Caterer (or a couple) – you need to find someone with the necessary experience and qualifications who is available for your dates and prepared to undertake a major task.
- Decide whether the Catering Team should be able to participate in the whole programme or not. If so, there will be implications for timings of sessions.
- Consider types and complexities of menus, involvement of those on the weekend to help, budgeting for food and equipment, use of alcohol, etc.
- Allow for free places for the caterers in your budget.

- Decide whether to include any special meals within the programme: barbecues, camp fire meal, formal meal, meals bought out (eg. fish and chips), cream tea, a bring-and-share meal, pizzas delivered by a local take-away, etc. Meals at an 'at home' event do not all have to be prepared by the team. You will also need to plan for children's meals and special diets.

It is wise to appoint a separate team to handle refreshment breaks and possibly teams to serve the food at meals and then wash up.

Detailed planning stage

- Ensure close liaison between Organising and Catering Teams, especially as numbers increase or adjustments get made to the programme.
- Design meal plans.
- Allow adequate time in the programme for food preparation and clearing away if you want the Catering Team to be involved in the main event.
- Arrange to purchase the food (cash and carry options) and the transport to bring it to the Centre (or home church).
- Check hygiene etc. qualifications for all the Catering Team.
- Set up teams for refreshments, serving, clearing away, washing up, etc.
- Prepare all necessary risk assessments.
- Ask those coming to the weekend to provide items for food: cakes, etc. either for all refreshment breaks or as part of main meals (check hygiene requirements).
- Book or arrange crockery and cutlery (decision on paper or not), table coverings, flowers/candles, cleaning materials.

Other issues to keep in mind

If you are running a self-catering weekend at another church or non-conference facility, there may be a range of other tasks to be organised not associated with the catering.

Examples include: checking out spaces to be used for main sessions and smaller groups, opening up and locking up, laying out the rooms with chairs and tables in the arrangement you require, bringing in equipment that a dedicated Centre might have available (sound, visuals, etc.), insurance, car parking, cleaning the site and the loos.

At a self-catering conference facility you may also have to ask everyone coming to bring bed linen and towels or other additional items. You may

have to arrange a fire drill and check carefully on other safety requirements. There may also be specific requirements for cleanliness.

5 Speakers and leaders

One of the main attractions of a weekend away is to hear from and engage with a specialist speaker (or several speakers) over two or more sessions. There are all kinds of options to consider and much will depend on the purpose. An external speaker can bring both a fresh approach and a spiritual challenge in a way that the home team cannot so easily do. Here are some ideas.

A known name

You may want to opt for a name that many people will recognise, someone who may be a regular speaker at national Christian events. They may be a Bible teacher or a specialist in the kind of subject you want to tackle. You may hope that a 'big name' will help promote your event. But you may have to pay a professional fee for such a person, and you may need to book plenty of time in advance.

A denominational leader

The weekend gives the opportunity to invite a Moderator, Bishop or other leader in your denomination or stream. There may not be such a cost implication here but you may still have to book far ahead.

A specialist

The emphasis here is on someone with detailed understanding of your theme. There may be a good speaker or trainer who only undertakes a few engagements of this kind and who may be available at shorter notice than those above.

Another Minister

It may be that you are looking for Bible teaching and simply a change of voice and style from your normal Sunday speakers may be refreshing in itself. This may mean a Minister known to your own leaders.

A speaker from the Centre

Some Centres offer to run your programme for you with their own speakers. This takes the pressure off finding and vetting people, though there needs to be a good level of trust that what will be delivered will meet your needs.

Your home team

But there is nothing to stop you using your own team of speakers, especially if the format of conference sessions gives them scope for

something rather different from a Sunday sermon. One possibility is to have an external speaker for two or three main sessions, and the home team for other input or workshops.

Similar issues will apply for your times of worship. You will probably make use of your own musicians, but why not give them the weekend off and invite a small choir or band from another church, or a professional group?

Dealing with an external speaker

If you are inviting an external speaker it is worth taking the trouble to do the job properly. Not only is this respectful but most speakers want to have the confidence that it would be worth their while giving up what may be a considerable amount of time not only to be with you but to prepare too.

Initial letter

It is worth writing a proper letter on church letterhead rather than simply sending an email. The letter should include exact details of theme, venue, dates, the number of length of sessions you are looking for, the accommodation you will provide and any offer for their spouse (if applicable) to attend too. You should make it clear whether this is an exploratory letter with details still to be discussed or a definite request for a booking. You will need to ask what financial arrangements they look for and offer to cover all expenses at normal rates.

It will be wise to offer to meet the speaker(s) before finalising the booking, if this is practicable.

Details for booking a speaker

Some speakers will have contracts they ask you to sign, fee deposits they need on booking, and cancellation arrangements that may involve paying penalties. Make sure you read all the small print! But arrangements will be more informal than this for a local Minister. It is

however wise to have everything sorted out in writing. A casual arrangement by phone may be misunderstood and lead to disappointment.

You will want to provide some brief bio and a photograph on your publicity for the event, so you will need to ask for these. Send a draft copy of your promotional literature in case they want to suggest any changes.

Nearer the date

It is polite to check up on accommodation needs, travel arrangements, claiming for expenses, payment of fee if necessary, their own dietary requirements, equipment needs and whether they will bring their own laptop or not, any books they might want available on a bookstall, whether they want you to produce hand-outs.

Ensure they have seen your promotional literature for the weekend and have full details of the Centre you are using and travel directions to reach it. If you are sending delegates details for what to bring (are towels provided, for example) make sure your speaker is given all the same information.

At the event

Will someone from your Organising Group be given the responsibility for meeting the speaker when they arrive, checking on all their accommodation and equipment needs and ensuring that they have all their questions answered? You then need to agree who will introduce the speaker at their first session – this may require some homework.

After the event

You need to write to the speaker to thank them for their contribution and to check up on expenses. If there is no fee charged you might want to enclose a generous token, in addition to any more tangible gift you may have presented them with at the event itself. If in doubt, be generous.

The preparation

The success of the weekend depends on your church members coming. Two issues to plan here concern the way you promote the event, and how people are asked to pay for it.

6 Publicity

If the aim is for everyone to come and the Centre booked will take those numbers, then the work of promoting the event and encouraging bookings will be a vital task. People react in very different

ways to differing means of communication. It is unlikely that one means will work for most people.

Before thought is given to the use of different media, it is vital to plan the timing carefully and well in advance. Some people will have work

diaries and/or holiday plans that are fixed at least a year ahead. To announce a weekend for the first time six months before the event may well create annoyance and prevent some from coming. Here is a possible plan.

- 1 Announcement of date, place, theme and speaker at least a year ahead.
- 2 Some form of early publicity to create excitement. The weekend becomes the focus of an annual meeting or other congregational events, sermons start to prepare the way for the theme, the speakers are promoted on display boards in church, small groups are asked to arrange programmes around the weekend theme, children's and teens groups start to talk about it regularly and plan activities there. The website includes details and discussions take place on social media sites. This becomes a continuous process rather than just one push.
- 3 Five or six months in advance comes the main selling point with brochure and booking form out to the whole congregation, backed up with service announcements, publicity in each small group, stories from previous events, perhaps a visit from the weekend's speaker. The church's Minister and leadership body need to take a lead in this so it is clear they are making it a priority. Hold a Gift Day if this is part of the financial strategy.
- 4 Ongoing encouragement to get bookings in, to sort out finances, with the church's programme clearly homing in on the weekend. Lists of bookings in to date.

Throughout all this use every means at your disposal: notice-sheets, newsletter/magazine, church website, social networking, email contact, text messages, spoken announcements, interviews, drama, small group notices, videos clips at church services, photographic displays.

But one of the most effective ways of encouraging people to come will be personal invitation. So can your printed details be shaped into named invitations asking for a response? Can each small group leader be asked personally to invite each group member? If the whole group can be encouraged to come together this creates special value. Can the Organising Team make a point of personally inviting all those not in a small group, especially newcomers?

Once booking opens it can be helpful to man an information desk in church after each main service to provide information, to help people complete the booking form and to give the event a high profile.

What the 'brochure' might include

- 1 The basic details of date, place, theme, speaker, cost and financial arrangements. Giving the weekend a bright title and identity is an important selling point.
- 2 Specific information for particular types of people in your church. Families need to know about activities for children and teens and see whether they can trust the standard of care on offer, including safeguarding issues. Many people need to be reassured about the type of sleeping accommodation, availability of single rooms, en suite facilities, cots, safety, etc. Those who do not like noisy games need to be reassured that the programme has options for everyone. People without transport need to be told what will be arranged. Those unable to afford such an event need to be reassured if they will not be expected to pay. Those with special needs may need one-to-one information and encouragement.
- 3 Direct encouragement from the Minister and other leaders to make this a priority, to demonstrate its importance and to show how it fits into the church's vision and programme. A message from the speaker will help. So will a 100% response from the church's Council and leadership team.
- 4 The selling of the venue, its facilities and scope for leisure activities, anything from countryside for walks to games facilities for the energetic. Sample menus. Map.
- 5 Some idea of the programme: the more information you can give people the less they will worry about what might be included that would not be to their liking.
- 6 Sharp quotes from those who went last time, a sense of everyone involved.
- 7 Plenty of colour photographs: speaker, Centre, accommodation, etc.

Note: you may need a separate and much more zany brochure for teens.

What the booking form might include

- 1 Names as desired on name badges, children's names and ages / school years.
- 2 Contact details: email, phone, address or whatever means will be used to put out information.
- 3 Special mobility or disability needs for the choice of bedrooms and daily movements. Any special needs for babies and children in particular.

- 4 Special dietary requirements, needs for or offers of transport.
- 5 Perhaps: offers to help with crèche, bedroom patrols (but watch the need for DBS checking), music.
- 6 Payment system and amounts as deposit or full payment. BACS/card details or to whom cheques should be payable. Arrangements for all who would find the fees difficult. Dates due for future payments. Cancellation arrangements.
- 7 Choice of workshop or activity options if applicable.
- 8 Signature (important for parents to sign children in).

Note: some churches are now utilising online booking on the church website. The key is to offer a range of alternative means of booking so everyone can find one that suits them.

People who may need special persuasion

The following may need more gentle encouragement and one-to-one work than others.

Church members whose spouses are not yet Christians

Some churches encourage the non-believing spouse to come, emphasising that sessions are optional and that they would be very welcome to join in just as much as they want to. There are examples of such people becoming Christians: a weekend away can be an excellent evangelistic opportunity.

The elderly

Issues include the comfort of en suite accommodation, the length of sessions, the distance and time of travel, and the amount of walking to be done between rooms.

Teenagers

If there is a thriving teens' group and an excellent programme in store, they will be begging to come. But if there are only one or two in this age group, a weekend away with your parents and their friends can look pretty uncool. Encouragement needs to be for the group, however small, to come together, to stick together and to have a special programme. But watch out for exam and revision seasons.

Fringe members

These will be people who may not see the value of a weekend focusing on discipleship and who may well fall into the first category above too.

But the event could be just the door into church life that they need, so it is well worth talking to them one-to-one and helping them to see there will be others present just like them.

Singles

A weekend promoted strongly as a noisy, family occasion or where single rooms attract a surcharge can deter singles from booking. Be careful not to overdo the all-age emphasis and do all you can to make the event singles-friendly.

New members

Churches often find that the old-stagers book without too much pressure, but new members stay away. So one-to-one work may need to focus on those who have joined the church since the last weekend away.

7 Financial arrangements

If you opt for a residential weekend you will be paying per person what will prove to be a considerable sum of money for many people. This will hit, in particular, your students, unemployed members, older people on fixed incomes and many families. You want to avoid giving the impression that only those who can afford the weekend are welcome to come. Here are some ideas to overcome some of these difficulties. Don't ignore the point already made about offering different levels of accommodation if you can.

Your own pricing structure

Your Centre may charge per person but you can restructure this to favour families by giving children free places, reduced rates for students and the unemployed, etc. One snag is that you may then charge single people more than might be regarded as fair.

Reduced rates on request

The idea here is to have a fund to enable you to offer discounts for any who cannot afford the full fee. The fund may be financed by charging a higher standard price or making a charge on the church. The obvious snag is delegates having to ask for a subsidy which some may be unhappy to do.

Free places

On a similar tack you can offer free or reduced price places for those people you need to be there: musicians, youth leaders, church staff, etc. But where do you draw the line and does this mean that some people feel that some people have unacceptably favourable treatment?

Instalments

The costs of the weekend for everyone can be collected in three or four instalments both before and after the event – perhaps over the course of a complete year. In any case many churches would ask for a non-returnable deposit on booking and the balance payable a few weeks ahead of the event.

Subsidy for all

Here the church decides to cover part of the cost out of general funds and then everyone pays perhaps half the realistic rate. This can of course be combined with any of the above.

No charge at all

A bold option, but one often recommended by this writer, is to tell everyone that the weekend is free so no one needs to feel they have to pay anything. You ask all church members, *whether they are coming or not*, if they would give a one-off gift to the church towards the total cost of the weekend (quoted) at a special Gift Day. You then pray the cost will be covered by the gifts received. The point is that a weekend benefits the whole church not just the individuals who go.

Offering at the weekend

You may announce in advance that there will be an offering at the end of the event.

Budgeting for the event

Well before you fix the price you need to produce a detailed budget of costs to be met. Here is a list of items you will need to consider.

- 1 The Centre's charge for accommodation – this will be your major cost but much will depend on how this is structured for children and single occupancy of double rooms. There may be a minimum charge which you had to guarantee.

- 2 In the above you need to remember that the accommodation charge has to cover a number of people who may not be paying: your speaker (and, perhaps, spouse if invited), young people's leaders if from another church and others. If church staff are given a discount this needs to be taken into account too. All this needs to be loaded on to the average cost per person or funded separately from church funds. Note too any extras owed to the Centre: equipment hire, extra meals, etc.
- 3 Fees, tokens and expenses for your speakers, young people's leaders, and others invited to take part from outside your church including worship leaders. A going-rate for a professional speaker for a weekend may be several hundred pounds – and, bearing in mind time taken in preparation and planning, no one is normally taking a large salary on this! If your speaker is a Minister from another church you might want to reimburse their church and give the Minister a generous gift token and present.
- 4 Administrative costs if not covered from church general funds. These may include travel costs to view the Centre in advance, Organising Group meeting costs, print and promotional costs, minibus and van hire, prizes for children's events, any special insurance or copyright fees, stationery.
- 5 Catering costs. For self-catering events another major expense will be food and, perhaps, hire of equipment and transport.

As well as a careful budget you will also need to discuss cash flow with your church's Treasurer. There may be a deposit to pay the Centre two years in advance and the balance one month before arrival, irrespective of whether your members have paid you or not by that time.

The weekend

But at the heart of all this work lies the actual weekend itself: its emphasis, its content, its shape. The Organising Team needs to give attention to these points from the very start.

8 Programme

Here are some ideas to help build a programme that suits a wide age-range. Don't start with a timetable. Instead consider again the purpose of the weekend and think about what elements it

will need to include to achieve this purpose. If you don't do this you simply fill the time with activity.

So the purpose should help determine the balance between elements of activity such as:

- teaching input;
- interactive work associated with this;
- small groups for study, prayer, activity;
- children's and teens programme;
- praise and worship all together;
- prayer ministry;
- time just to relax all together;
- sports and recreational activity;
- practical Christian service assignments;
- quiz, dance, drama, entertainment.

You might also consider whether Sunday should feel like normal (probably with a worship service in the morning) or be something quite different.

The key issue will be (for both adults and children) the balance of speaker input, interactive group work, time to network and time to relax and simply be together. Some weekends may be designed to be heavy on input from a gifted speaker, whereas others may want the weight to shift to giving time for the congregation to get to know each other better.

For many, a fun all-age entertainment (or ceilidh or all-age quiz) on the Saturday evening is a must – a chance for everyone to let their hair down and for unknown talents to emerge. But some churches feel that the weekend gives a one-off opportunity to engage with an external speaker or to allow extended times of worship and that these should take priority throughout the programme.

Speaker sessions can vary from 60 minutes of input followed by plenary questions through to much more of an interactive workshop approach with input broken up with any of buzz groups, questions to be answered, training exercises and games. Make sure your speaker knows what kind of approach you would welcome. Beware letting everyone be overwhelmed by input without proper opportunity to earth it all by being helped to apply it in practice.

Activity back at base

If you are a long way away from home, a separate programme needs to be put on for those who have not come on the weekend. But if you are not far away, might it be worth bringing everyone across to a joint activity on the Sunday? The important point is not to let people who genuinely cannot come on the weekend feel sidelined. It may be possible to arrange a digital link-up or encourage everyone to come to a Communion service on Sunday evening, those at home and those who have been at the weekend. If the speaker can stay for this, this can encourage everyone to feel they have been part of the event.

Pressure and busyness

The danger is putting on too concentrated a programme so everyone feels rushed. On the other hand younger members may quickly get bored if there is not something organised for them at every opportunity. The balance may be to ensure that some of the programme is optional and to make it clear that this is so. What is vital is not to let sessions run right up to meal times nor to have coffee breaks that are too short. The programme needs to include space to breathe and simply be.

Friday night

Friday nights can be difficult for a weekend away. Some people can arrive in good time, but others will come home from work and then need to travel, arriving after supper time. Some Centres lay on cold buffets or snack meals for Friday night to allow for people arriving over a long time span.

Saturday afternoon

Getting this session right can be crucial to people's overall reaction to the weekend. The ideal is to offer a range of options to suit all tastes: sports, walks, family entertainments, board games, a film. But why not consider a range of practical opportunities for service, especially at a weekend at home: Healing on the Streets, local evangelism, practical service, washing cars, litter clearance?

Young children

Bedtimes may vary considerably for young children with some parents wanting to maintain normal routine and others happy to let small children stay up late. You may need to arrange corridor patrols so that young children can be put to bed safely while both parents are back in a main session. Patrols need to be undertaken by two independent people who have been DBS checked, and they should not enter any bedroom but only report sounds of crying or distress.

Worship and music

A weekend offers an opportunity to worship in different styles from normal, so times at the start of main sessions or on Sunday might include something more contemplative or liturgical than normal or, on the other hand, the learning of new songs or chants and an introduction to a freer form of worship. These times also allow different people to lead them, perhaps involving children or teens groups and even giving your normal musicians or choir a weekend off.

Weekends also offer the opportunity for optional informal prayer or worship times before breakfast and late at night and these might also be times for trying something different. If prayer ministry is a regular feature in your church the

programme can be fixed to allow more time for this, whether in main or optional sessions. For some churches the opportunity for extended worship times will be one of the main reasons for holding the weekend and this will shape the programme accordingly.

A special Communion service

The high-spot for many church weekends is the final Communion service: an opportunity to gather everything covered over the weekend and let people respond to what they have received. This can be held on Sunday morning as the final session before lunch, on the Sunday afternoon if people are not travelling back to church then, or back at base on Sunday evening. It is normal for this to be an all-age Communion. An alternative is to hold a Commissioning Service for everyone.

All-age

The weekend offers an opportunity for all ages to be together and do things together. Even if the main teaching sessions need to be age-specific, times of prayer, worship, fun and sport do not have to be.

Special events

You might make Saturday dinner a special meal and ask everyone to bring suitable clothing for a formal occasion.

A typical programme

The fixed points of the day will probably be the meal times that are stipulated by your Centre. It may be possible to vary these by 15 minutes or so if you are the sole occupier, but not by much more unless you are self-catering. So a typical programme for a weekend might look like this.

Friday evening

Arrive and unpack.

Dinner – may need to allow for latecomers

Time for one short plenary activity incorporating welcome, worship and introduction of speaker – but a realisation that people have travelled and many will be tired. Children may be wanting to let off steam and be high in excitement.

Saturday

Time for one voluntary activity before breakfast such as Morning Prayer (perhaps in a different mode from what would be regarded as normal for your church).

Breakfast

Best time for major input sessions, one on each side of a refreshments break: speaker followed by groups in some form. Full young people's programme in parallel.

Lunch

People like to get outside for the afternoon if possible so recreational activities, excursion, all-age games, or wet weather programme.

Tea

Time for one session before dinner: might be speaker input, workshops, worship, or something for all ages together.

Dinner

One session: often light-hearted for all ages: games, quiz, entertainment, concert, dance, etc.

Perhaps a closing devotional session then time to talk.

Sunday

Time for one voluntary activity before breakfast as Saturday.

Breakfast

Time for two sessions broken by refreshments. Many churches like to conclude with an all-age Communion service or a worship service can come first followed by groups or final input from speaker. Allow an opportunity for children's groups to show what they have been doing over the weekend.

Lunch

Some churches break at this point but some weekends continue with further workshop or speaker sessions. Or something on practical application. Or the Communion service here.

Tea

Some continue with an evening session back at home if travel does not take too long.

9 Young people

Take as much care over the programme for younger members as you would for the adults. You are not seeking to amuse the children or keep them occupied, but to draw them on in Christian discipleship just as for their parents.

But running a crèche, children's and teens programme alongside the adult one produces a number of challenges, especially in resourcing and safeguarding. Perhaps you want the normal children's and teens' leaders to take a full part in the weekend themselves and benefit from the adult programme. To give them a break from their normal Sunday responsibilities would make it a special time for them – and the young people might relish the idea of something different too! Here are some options to consider.

Leaders from another church

A popular option is to ask the leaders from another church to take charge of both children's and teens programme for the weekend. You can then return the compliment in due course. The weekend's format allows a more adventurous approach than is possible on a typical Sunday and a new team may give the young people a sense of something special.

But to organise and lead such a programme is quite a task which might involve many hours of preparation and delivery, so generous gifts as well as full expenses might be the order of the day. Remember too, as you budget, that you will be accommodating such people without income from them.

Professional leaders

Some churches have turned to leaders who work for Christian young people's organisations, or a local schools worker, to run a programme for them, perhaps involving some of the older teens too. This is similar to the previous option but here you will be (or should be) paying a professional fee for the time involved in addition to travel and accommodation costs.

Your 18-25 year olds

This means that these leaders will miss the adult programme, and there may be issues of DBS checking. Younger leaders are likely to offer a more exciting programme for your children, although to have a responsible older adult in charge may be essential!

Staff from the Centre

Some Centres will take the whole programme off your hands. They are probably well used to running children's and teens programmes and may have specialist equipment and a range of exciting activities.

Other adults

You might use adults in your congregation not normally involved in the youth programme. The problem here is that you probably want these people in the adult sessions, but it is worth considering as an option if all else fails.

Arrangements for a crèche

This may be run by parents themselves but it may be better to appoint one overall leader who sees this as their Christian service for the weekend. Add a rota of assistants, perhaps a mix of students and 20's with older people, for one session each. It is best if these are not your normal crèche team, although you will have to check up on DBS clearance.

Whatever you do it is vital that this is seen as a weekend for all ages, not an adult weekend with

a side-programme for children. So in all the sessions when all ages are present, children and teens should be involved as much as adults. This applies to any entertainment session, Holy Communion service and times for recreation.

Ways of incorporating the young people's programme into the overall theme include:

- sessions on the same teaching theme in an age-appropriate way, so the whole church is covering the same concepts and all have the same aim;
- giving the young people a specific project to complete over the weekend which is then shared with everyone at the final session;
- having all the young people in the main sessions for opening worship (which needs therefore to be all-age friendly) and notices and then leaving for activities (some would say it is better if at this point the adults leave for their activity!).

If you have a weekend at home, teens especially miss the residential element so plan a sleepover with leaders at a local venue.

10 Follow-up

One of the greatest mistakes which churches make is to consider the weekend over once it is over! But if the purpose and theme have been seen as essential requirements before any practical planning takes place, the assessment and follow-up afterwards should prove to be just as important. These should be planned from the very start, not seen as an afterthought once the event has closed.

Assessment by those who attended

It can be helpful to have an assessment form in the welcome pack at the event so that delegates can be helped to give their feedback on how they found it, and suggest ideas for improvements next time. You can either ask people to score different aspects of the event (if you do this, have an even number of options – say 6 or 8 – not an odd number where people can opt for one right in the middle), or you can simply ask for descriptive comments. The latter involves more work in summarising them but is less artificial.

If you do scores, do ask for something descriptive too and then have spaces for ideas for how things could have been done better or suggestions for a next time. Someone needs to work on these immediately after the event and publish the findings to the whole church as quickly as possible.

Ask for these to be handed in before people leave the event. If you let people fill them in back at home many will never get to you, and sometimes groups can get together to co-ordinate replies, especially if wanting to criticise something like worship style or speaker input.

Assessment by the leadership

Once the analysis has been completed the church's leadership needs to carry out their own assessment in the light of this. This gives an opportunity to consider how the teaching input now needs to be carried forward and applied, what lessons were learned over the weekend that should be brought into the mainstream life of the church, and whether there were any specific outcomes from the young people's activities and group discussions that need to be worked on.

Many Christians take a big step forward in their discipleship at residential events away from home. They take considerable effort to organise, but the over-riding feedback this writer hears is that they are well worthwhile.

Follow-up

From all this decisions can be taken about the church's life and programme, whether when all together or when in small groups. It might be wise to organise a special church day in three months' time to take ideas forward, or a programme for Sunday teaching that builds on the weekend. Invite the speaker back for a Sunday to take everyone on one more stage. Why not timetable in a further assessment six months after the weekend to check what the impact has been?

So the event started in the hands of the church's leadership who decided the purpose and theme and how the event might fit as a means to achieving the church's vision. It was then passed to an Organising Team to handle all the detail and run the event. The team now hand the event back to the leadership to assess and plan for the future. To omit this final stage could mean great potential is wasted. To undertake it prayerfully and carefully might result in great spiritual blessing for the church as a whole.

There is a supplement available [at this link](#) (listed as Article A30a) for a detailed checklist for the Organising Team including the pre-event mailing and the conference pack plus advice on working with the Centre. Enjoy organising a truly successful weekend event where everything runs so smoothly that the organisation remains invisible and everyone can focus on the real purpose!

This article is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A30. It owes much to earlier Administry research on this theme, to a range of churches whose Administrators kindly sent in examples of programmes and ideas, and in particular to Ruth Somerville and Jeanette Martin who gave detailed input. For the context into which a church weekend away can fit, see HC4&5, *The Church Health Review*, in the Health-checks area of the Resources section on the website.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of using his consultancy or training services on any issue of church planning.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication, Administration. File A30 under Planning.

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NOTE: Throughout this paper the word Centre has a capital C when referring to a residential or other Centre to distinguish it from the normal meaning of the word. But when the expression 'conference centre' or similar is used, this is clear as to meaning without the need for capitalisation.