



Creating space for a Planning Retreat

TN54 Training Notes series: Planning

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In these notes I make the case for a concept I call a 'Planning Retreat'. I believe that something like this should be a regular entry in every Christian's diary.

Who needs it?

The idea of a **retreat** comes well down the priority list for some busy Christian workers. It sounds like silent meditation in a monastery, or spiritual exercises in a retreat house, or reflective contemplation of the soul. For those packing each day's diary with impressive 'To Do' lists, there is perhaps a fear of enforced inactivity which feels out of touch with the reality of a hectic schedule.

The idea of a **planning** day feels somewhat uncomfortable for a different set of workers who take ministry as it comes and have little idea of a priority list at all. It sounds managerial. Presumably it involves statistics, lists of tasks and performance indicators, things they see as having little part to play in a life of Christian ministry. The Pastor should not be a manager. The Youth Worker's role is to hang out with the kids, not spend time at a desk.

What I describe here is neither of these, and yet both of them too. This idea is for any Minister or church staff member, but just as applicable for any Christian whether in normal employment, bringing up a family at home, student or retired.

It applies too for any Christian team: church staff, small action group, activity leaders.

It is for anyone who wants to do God's will, to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ, to be filled with the Spirit. It seeks to bring the big perspective of life into focus, instead of being continually entangled in the detail of daily business.

It is especially needed by all who think themselves too busy to have one.

What's it all about?

- 1 Blocking out enough time to slow down and forget about your 'To Worry About' list. So, at least one whole day but perhaps two days with a night away. You then have the gift of time.
- 2 Getting away from your normal environment: desk, home or office, telephones, post, emails, TV. Your smart-phone is switched off. You become unavailable. You then have the gift of space.
- 3 Connecting with God. For some this will mean a holy place, for others a comfortable flat. For some solitude, for others going away as a team. It could work well for a couple wanting to review their marriage.
- 4 Finding perspective in a broad sweep of your work, discipleship or life, or probably all three. You leave detail behind on your desk or at home. You remind yourself of the vision you used to have. You try to see it all as God might see it.
- 5 Reviewing the past month or year. So it probably involves a number of 'measurements' of what you have done over that period (with a diary, a time log, lists of activities, printed outputs, and so on).
- 6 Analysing the present. So it ideally needs some form of journal or job/role description (clergy might also like to review the Ordinal – see TN78 on this website), noting where time goes each week, considering a list of priorities, and so on.
- 7 Planning for the future. So what does the past year and the present time tell you about future direction in your service of Jesus Christ, team relationships, marriage (if applicable), personal discipleship?
- 8 Praying: about reconnecting with your Lord and Master and enjoying the relationship, especially if it has become strained by pressure of activity.
- 9 Receiving fresh input: perhaps with time to read or listen to recorded talks.

What goes on?

There is no right programme – do whatever makes sense for you. But here are some possibilities for a one-day planning retreat away from home.

- 1 A time of unhurried study of the Scriptures and prayer, preferably in an environment that inspires you.
- 2 A careful analysis of the past period, checking diary against your purpose to test what has been happening. If you do this monthly, try an annual one-year review too. Then perhaps a careful listing of what has given satisfaction and joy, and a second list of what has proved to be frustrating, worrying or where you feel you have gone wrong.
- 3 A time to pray over what this analysis has shown and to reconnect with God. This might involve a period of extended confession, or a time of praise for all he is and has done for you. It might instead be a time to pray for friends and family if they have been neglected.
- 4 A session to plan and pray for the coming period (year or month) – but only after all the above. This might be big picture stuff to sense a shift in overall direction, a decision

- about one or more key changes in your life and work, or a time to plan what should be the priorities and perhaps list some markers with dates (reviewed next time).
- 5 An activity to provide input and stimulus. This might mean some serious reading, but it might equally mean catching up with old friends down at the pub.
 - 6 A careful write-up to review regularly and to form the basis for the next time.

Who else recommends this?

I am in good company. Here are three examples.

Archbishop Stephen Cottrell talks about his monthly 'reconnecting with the vision' days. He includes reading the newspaper and snoozing as important elements! But he also describes these days in terms of 'reclaiming first love' based on Revelation 2:2-5. He then feels that planning days might be different and best done in a team context but putting these two ideas together he is suggesting something similar to the above. (1)

In one of his many books, John Stott tells of a talk he heard in 1950 with the recommendation for "every pastor to take a quiet day once a month, to go right away from church and parish, to allow God to draw him up into his heart and mind, to look at things from the divine perspective, to focus on the important and to adjust his priorities accordingly." He comments, "This little prudential arrangement saved my life and my ministry... Although I was still challenged by the job I was not overwhelmed by it." (2)

The Gospels tell us that Jesus did something pretty similar. (3)

(1) See *Hit the ground kneeling – seeing leadership differently*, Church House Publishing, 2008, pp24-27.

(2) See *The Living church – convictions of a lifelong pastor*. IVP, 2007, pp183-185.

(3) See, for example, Mark 1:35; 6:46; even 14:35 and for the team idea 3:13; 6:32.

What did/does this writer do?

What follows will not be possible or right for most people, but it became an essential part of my annual calendar for 25 years. It is a different approach from the day a month idea. Note that in recent years I have had to adapt this to something more home based, first for Covid and now for family reasons. But the plan is still the same.

I took a full week away most Augusts and spend it in a small rented cottage (for several years a friend's bolt-hole in North Wales, and then a small 'prophet's chamber', a cottage in the owner's garden in rural Shropshire). The setting (peace, beauty, hills, amazing views) was a key inspiration for me. I have, as you will appreciate, a very generous wife. She said I was a nicer person when I returned.

Much of the time is, then and still now, spent working, but in terms of reviewing life and ministry and then putting together my plan for the coming year. I end up with a series of aims for the next 12 months which I believe God is calling me to, and some very specific targets to get to if I am to achieve the aims. Each day includes (weather permitting) a two or three hour walk, sometimes brisk covering several miles, sometimes very slow with plenty of time to stop, sit on a hilltop and drink in the views. These are times to talk to and listen to God and to test my ideas in his presence.

I also try to read a couple of books, listen to some Christian talks on CD, read up on magazines, and so on. I often have a work project that needs space for thinking.

In some years the outcome is quite straightforward, but I am always envisioned, re-energised and refocused. In some years I have found my ministry taking a subtle change in direction. Without the retreat times I might well have been deaf to God speaking to me.

What is important for me is being alone. But that won't suit others who may wish to do what I do but in a communal environment, or as a work team.

Then half way through the year around February I try to take what I call an 'Oasis Day'. This is home-based and gives me a chance to review the past six months in the light of the previous August's aims and targets and adjust plans for the next six months if necessary. I'll do one long walk out in the countryside to pray and reflect. I find it really hard to block out this time in the diary, but my work and life suffer without it.

And so?

Planning for both ministry and discipleship can so easily become the essential that is crowded out by the urgent. The only way I can make it work is:

- to block the time out in the diary well in advance and protect it jealously;
- to make it long enough and isolated enough to get me away from my current concerns;
- to keep doing it so that I have a growing experience of how stimulating it can be.

So, how about you? Whether as a Minister, Christian worker, disciple, married couple or work team, can you afford not to do this? Please share your own experiences with me.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN54. See also Article A4, *Twelve questions to help you plan* and Training Notes TN17. *Suggested questions for an annual review*, and TN43, *Did Jesus use an iPhone?* Also, for Ministers, TN78, *The role of a church leader*, and, for everyone, TN91, *An MDT for disciples of Jesus*, TN106, *Talk about taking time 'off'*, and TN151, *Loss of leadership passion*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN54 under Planning (with a link to Leadership).

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