

RETREAT TWO: GROWING THE RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR PARTNER

Objectives – To explore our relationships with our significant others and learn ways to strengthen these. Participants will have opportunities to reflect on their styles of leadership, connection, and communication at home, and to explore the qualities that can contribute to strong relationships.

Preparation – It may be that not every member of your group has a significant other – spouse or otherwise. If that is the case, you will want to expand your definition of “significant other” to include a range of primary relationships, as long as they touch the heart in a significant way. In this retreat outline, we treat “significant other” as a spouse, partner for life, the one we are bound to for better or for worse. However, you should modify the materials, exercises and discussion points for this retreat to suit the particular needs of your group. We have tried to make suggestions along the way. You will want to bring or check the availability of: at least one bible, perhaps have members each bring their own; an easel and flip-chart; background music for meditation; snacks, bottles of water, soft drinks etc.; men’s journals or notebooks for writing; handouts created from materials in the addendum.

Agenda

The following one and a half day agenda is provided for your inspiration. There are simple directions and scripted parts however – as with all our session outlines in the *Fuel* book – feel free to adapt and modify the material offered here to the particular needs of your group. And, as always, we welcome you to our website, www.faithbalance.com, to view sample prayers, scriptural references, and to share your own ideas and experiences on the site.

Day One: Communications Styles

Opening Prayer - Reading: Psalm 27: 1-6 (*Have someone prepared to read this.*)

Silent Reflection (20–30 seconds is usually long enough)

Leader prays aloud: *Lord, thank you for this wonderful opportunity to gather in your name, learn more about ourselves, and celebrate our relationships with you, with one another, and with our partners. Our relationship with you is important and we seek to be closer to you. We also seek to strengthen the relationship we have with our significant others. Guide us through these next two days and help us learn more about how we can be better spouses. In your name we pray. Amen*

Group Warm-up

Leader: Everyone in the group has a story about how they first met or courted their life partner. Tell your story and (because we always enjoy a little competition), the best story gets a free pass on preparing or paying for dinner. Don't be afraid to embellish – remember, this is for a dinner!

After everyone is finished, have the group vote on the best story.

Leader: Welcome the group and go through the goals for the group's time together.

The goal for the first part of our retreat is to reflect on our own spiritual leadership at home and to begin to discuss the roles of men and women in family life. We plan to: get to know our fellow group members better, improve our relationship with our significant others, learn more about our personal leadership and communication styles, and have fun.

Individual Exercise (30 minutes) – Remind group members of the value of using their journals for notes during both regular meetings and on this retreat.

Leader: Using your journal or another piece of paper, create three columns. In the left column, write a list of the traits that first attracted you to your wife. These may include things like energy, sense of humor and fun, centeredness, commitment to family, inner strength, faith, etc.

Now, in the middle column, write those traits that are still present in her. Of course, she may have picked up new traits (or maybe you just noticed) to which you are now attracted like love of art, a gift with children, etc.

Finally, ask God to help you see what may be missing in your spouse's life and, therefore, in your relationship with her. List these areas in the right column. A detailed reflection is not necessary here, but it is important to be sincere.

When finished, take several minutes for silent prayer and reflection. Ask God for the strength and wisdom to address these areas.

Paired Discussion/Walk (20 min) – When everyone is finished with prayer, organize the group into pairs to share your thoughts to the extent that you each are comfortable. Encourage each pair to find a quiet location to talk or go for a short walk outside, and answer the following questions.

1. What did the exercise bring back for you?
2. Has the way you see your wife changed since those initial attractions caught your attention?
3. What new positive traits have you found in your wife recently?
4. Is there anything missing or lacking in her life?

Return to the Group and then Break (10 minutes)

Group Discussion (15 minutes)

1. Ask the group to brainstorm the top qualities of long-lasting marriages. Use a flip-chart to capture ideas and have someone organize these qualities into categories such as "Communication," "Love, Respect," "Time," "Appreciation," or whatever else seems appropriate.

2. Have individuals tell stories about a time when they saw a really great quality in their own relationships. Examples include: being best friends, communicating openly, simply having a good time, sharing mutual respect, putting each other's needs ahead of your own, spending quiet time together, appreciation, romance, giving to or serving others, affirming the other.

Communication Styles (15 minutes) - *Introduce the Inventory of Communication Style (found at the end of this retreat outline) and ask group members to complete it individually.*

Leader: The questions in the inventory match up to some of the basic needs that we all have in marriage. Next to each question on your inventory, write the corresponding need from the following list: (Display the list on the flip chart or elsewhere.)

In marriage we all need:

1. Quality time and attention
2. Gifts and rewards
3. Significance
4. Little acts of kindness
5. Positive reinforcement & praise
6. Physical touch & intimacy

Small Group Conversations (15 min)

Leader: Now, we're going to break into small groups and discuss our inventories.

Try to answer these three questions:

1. Which needs did you find were your highest priorities and why?
2. Which needs are most dominant for you?
3. Does your spouse recognize this priority order for you? Give examples.

Large Group Conversation (30-40 minutes)

Ask these questions to get the group talking about needs and communication styles.

1. Were you surprised by the priority order for your own needs and communication style?
2. Does your spouse have the same priority of needs as you do?
3. What did this exercise tell you about ways that the two of you communicate?
4. How could your communication be enhanced by this knowledge?
5. What are you personally going to do with these findings?
6. If one need is met, does it allow others to be met as well?

7. What could you learn by sharing this inventory with your significant other and having her answer the same questions?

Wrap-up (20 minutes)

1. Leader explains the purpose of the exercise in these or similar words:

In a relationship there are two sides to everything. In our relationships we take turns with receiving and giving. When our styles of communication or expressing love matches the kinds of communication that are most important to our significant others, we connect with them on a more intimate level. When our communication does not really meet needs, over a prolonged period of time, difficulties can arise. The goal of the exercise we just did was to examine if our spouses' priorities for communication are the same as our own.

At the risk of stereotyping, the top three or four needs for men and those for women are as follows:

- Women: companionship, security, significance, emotional responsiveness
- Men: companionship, support, admiration, physical responsiveness

You might suggest that each group member take the inventory home, ask his significant other to take it, and then compare notes. Encourage them to discuss what each partner most appreciates and what style of communication is most likely to be positively received by the other.

2. Next, have group members write ideas in their journal for the following:

- What is the priority order for the six needs/communication styles for me?
- What do I believe is the priority order for my partner?
- What have I learned that I can use at home?

3. Review the details of the evening rendezvous with significant others.

Closing Prayer - Have the group gather in a circle.

Lord, thank you for guiding us in discussion this afternoon. We are grateful to gain better understanding of our true selves. We seek to learn more so that we can be better friends, husbands, fathers, and community leaders. Please help us to know ourselves so that we can do your will. Conclude by praying the Our Father together.

Date Night with Significant Others

1. *Mass or Other Communal Prayer Celebration* We recommend inviting a local priest to celebrate Mass with you or another minister to lead prayer (a deacon or lay minister can preside at an Evening Prayer or another communal prayer service). Let this person know ahead of time what the retreat goals and activities are. Invite him or her to join you for the afternoon discussion to get a better sense

of the group. Be sure significant others also know something about what you have focused on through the afternoon.

2. *Dinner* – The group can share fellowship with significant others at a local restaurant or in someone’s home. We recommend that dinner not become a couples’ workshop but rather that you keep the conversation light. Use opportunities during the liturgy or prayer service for prayers of gratitude, thanking God for the companionship of your significant others. Talk over dinner about your discoveries of the day and/or about what you are receiving from the group in general. Give dinner a romantic twist – if at a restaurant, perhaps order a single red rose for each significant other. If meeting at someone’s home, perhaps set the mood with candles, flowers, music. This is a chance to do something extra for your significant others. It’s well worth the effort!

3. *After Dinner* – The group might watch a movie together that follows the day’s theme of self-discovery through relationship.

Day Two: Leading and Serving in Relationships

Opening Prayer – Leader prays aloud: *Lord, thank you for giving this group of men a wonderful opportunity to gather in your name, learn more about ourselves, and celebrate our relationship with you. We acknowledge that you are the source of all our lives. and look over us as a shepherd does his flock. Help us through our struggles and our victories in life, and guide us on your path. We seek knowledge about our own lives so that we may better serve you as your faithful servants. Jesus, we pray in your name. Amen*

Reading

Ephesians 1:15–19 (*Have someone prepare this ahead of time.*)

Silent Reflection (20–30 seconds)

Re-cap of Day 1

Leader welcomes the group and introduces the themes for the upcoming day:

The primary goal for us today is to learn how we can help lead the relationship with our significant other, and our family as a whole, to one of spiritual and emotional significance.

Leader then leads a brief discussion on the previous day’s exercises and the evening with wives or significant others. Use open-ended questions:

1. What are your thoughts about yesterday’s exercises and the evening with our significant others?
2. How did dinner go for you and your partner?
3. What insights have you gained so far?

Building Our Houses on Rock

Reading: Matthew 7:24–27 (*Have someone prepare this ahead of time.*)

Leader: What we all want is to “build our house on rock.” How do we do this? Our next set of discussions and introspections will focus on what we can do to strengthen our primary relationships. Yesterday, we talked about the qualities of great relationships. This morning, we’re going to again discuss the qualities of a great relationship and begin to think about how we can take a leadership role in bringing these qualities to our own relationships.

Personal/Journal Time (10 minutes)

Ask group members to write in their journals or another piece of paper, “Building My House on Rock” at the top of a page. They should then list as many qualities of a great partnership that they can think of (even if their relationships don’t have all these qualities today). Encourage them to think about qualities they long for in their own marriages.

Leader-led Review (15 minutes) We’ve spent some time thinking about the qualities of great relationships and which qualities we’d like to have in our own marriages. We’re now going to spend time tying together the work on communications from yesterday with reflection on how we can better serve as leaders in our own homes in order to build our houses on rock.

Review the six needs and corresponding communication styles discussed yesterday. Review notes from the group on qualities they would most like to emulate in a relationship.

Large Group Exercise (10 minutes)

Leader guides the following conversation while writing responses down on the flip chart. There are many definitions of leadership. The most inspiring definitions involve helping others to be the best that they can be. Take a few minutes to jot down your own definition of leadership. Then share these with each other.

Note: The group may notice in these definitions that leadership is commonly associated with the business world, or sports, or the remote control. Yet leadership can and should also be identified within family structures.

Now we’ll go around the group and each of us answer these questions:
(*Display questions on flip chart and write answers beneath each.*)

1. What skills does good leadership at work typically entail?
2. What is your leadership style at work?
3. How would you say peers (and subordinates) view you as a leader?

Note: answers are likely to be related to motivation/reward, charisma, decision-making, team-building, etc. When everyone has finished, have someone read aloud, these two scripture passages (slowly, with pauses between): 1 Corinthians 13:4–7; Ephesians 5:25

Then discuss:

1. What do these readings tell us about the servant leadership of Jesus?
2. What does a servant leader look like in marriage and at home?
3. How many of the traits that are important at work are typically applied in the home?
4. What leadership traits are generally applied at home to the spiritual arena?

Individual Writing (10 min)

Leader: In order to discover more about our individual leadership styles, especially at home, we're going to use the Inventory of Home Leadership Style. Have the group members take the inventory and tally their scores. (see Addendum B)

Break (10 min)

Group Discussion (30-45 minutes)

Leader:

1. What was the range of scores in the group?
2. For those who scored high: what are the things you do at home that provide the most leadership?
3. How did you move into a leadership role?
4. For those who scored lower: what are the things you could do more of at home to provide leadership?
5. In what ways does your significant other play a leadership role?
6. What aspects of spiritual leadership do you and your significant other have in your relationship?
7. Who has generally carried the spiritual leadership in your family and why?

Quiet Prayer & Journal Time (15 minutes)

Leader: We have about fifteen minutes now for some individual prayer and journal time. We have two brief scripture passages to pray with and then three questions to answer.

If individual bibles are not available, you may want to have these readings available on a handout along with the journal questions that follow.

Readings: Matthew 20:25-28; Philippians 2:5-7

Journal Questions

Either display these on the flip chart or prepare a handout.

1. In what ways do I show leadership in my home?
2. In what ways do I show spiritual leadership in my home?
3. What have I learned about my own leadership skills thus far?

Lunch Break (1 hour)

Leader calls the group back together and begins the afternoon by inviting the group to listen to the Word of God.

Reading: Colossians 3:12-14 (Have someone prepare this ahead of time.)

Leader-led Discussion (45 minutes)

The leader now transitions the group to an exploration of roles in their relationships with their spouses. Having thought about our leadership styles, let's take some time now to explore the traditional and optional roles of couples in a relationship. From the 1950s through today, television in the United States has popularized various types of "traditional" American families with stereotypes like Ozzie and Harriet, June and Ward Cleaver, Edith and Archie Bunker, Cliff and Claire Huxtable, and Marge and Homer Simpson. In "Everybody Loves Raymond" two couples of different generations are contrasted. Ray and Deborah are set in contrast to Ray's parents Frank and Marie. Frank thinks of marriage as a sort of king-and-loyal-subject relationship. His wife, Marie, outwardly goes along with it, but uses her expert skill at homemaking, wit, and guilt-tripping to keep the marriage in balance. Ray and Deborah, a 1980s couple with three children, espouse a shared relationship or 50/50 marriage – but it often turns out that Deborah does most of the homemaker work and Raymond acts like he's a 50/50 partner.

1. Which of the two "Everybody Loves Raymond" couples does your marriage (primary) relationship most resemble and in what ways?
2. Do either of these models work well in today's society?
3. What's missing from both of these models?
4. In what ways do God and religion play a role?

Leader-led Discussion (45 minutes) – The leader now transitions the group to a discussion on what the Bible says about marriage with these or similar words. As we all know, the Bible is comprised of many books and many different literary genres. As with all great books, the books of the Bible were written in particular times and places and so must be understood from within those historical contexts, with the nuances specific to the social, political, and philosophical constraints inherent in those contexts. When we look to the Bible for lessons about marital relationships, this is important to bear in mind. One passage from the New Testament that is sometimes heard at weddings and within the cycle of readings for Sunday Masses, poses particular problems when trying to understand the writer's intent from within our contemporary Western culture. We will spend some time this afternoon, probing more deeply this reading and another quite like it.

Reading: Ephesians 5: 21-32 *(Ask someone to prepare this ahead of time.)*

Questions for Conversation

1. What do you understand this passage to mean?
2. To what does it seem to call husbands and wives?

Commentary – *Consult a reference work like The New Jerome Biblical Commentary for a more complete treatment of the passage.* The passage is really about how the church should be in relationship to Christ. In this way the passage is prescriptive. In other words, it's telling us all how to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. The analogy to the marital relationship is a tool to help early Christians grasp the relationship between Christ and his church. The writer uses the social structures of his time to draw comparisons. In this way the passage is descriptive. At the time it was written, the infant Christian movement was seen by many in power to be subverting the social order with its claims of equality among all its members. The writer of Ephesians is characterizing Christians as remaining in sync with the social fabric of the day while at the same time calling them to a higher calling, that of mutual worthiness before God. In first century Asia Minor, wives were often treated as little more than slaves. Paul is calling Christians to rise above this understanding of marriage and toward one where spouses mutually love and respect each other. The first and last verses of the passage are the keys to understanding the fullness of the author's intent. *Read again the opening and closing verses of the passage. Then, break into smaller groups for discussion using the questions below as starters.*

Small Group Discussion (20 minutes)

1. If a prominent Church leader were to write a letter today about the relationship between Christ and his Church, do you think he or she would be wise to draw comparisons to marriage? Why or why not?
2. In what ways is the analogy still helpful? What truths of Christian living can marriage reveal for us today?
3. In what specific ways are you and your wife "subordinate to one another"? How could you be more so?
4. How do the two of you together subordinate your marriage relationship to the will of God?

Break (10 minutes)

Leader-led Discussion (30 min) - In marriage, as in all relationships, what you put into or bring to the relationship drives what you receive from it. Let's end this retreat by thinking about five proactive ways that we can be leaders in our homes. *Write down "Servant Leader" on the flip chart and have the group brainstorm things you can do to integrate a service leadership disposition with the leadership style that you know your significant other reacts to best.* Examples:

- Partner with your wife in planning for the future and all key decisions
- Schedule regular check-points or date-nights to reconnect
- Pray together as a couple, encourage family prayer, and spend time at church

- Publicly praise your significant other
- Set examples for your children of mutual respect and self-giving love

Write down "Communication Style" on the flip chart and have the group brainstorm things you can do to integrate a service leadership disposition with the communication styles that you know your significant other reacts to best. Examples:

- Inquire frequently about your spouse's well-being – are all six needs being met?
- Work on noting the needs of your spouse and communicate in a way that encourages her to hear your needs in her own language.

Individual Action Planning (15 min)

Leader invites each member of the group to write down five action items that he will take away from the retreat and use at home to be more of a leader.

One-on-one Discussion (30-40 minutes) Leader assigns group members to two-person teams and suggests that each team go for a walk or find a quiet place inside to consider the following questions and provide feedback to each other.

1. After this discussion, how do I feel about my leadership style in my primary relationship? What will I do the same or differently to change or strengthen the role I play as leader in this relationship?
2. After the past day of our retreat, what have I learned about my needs in this primary relationship and my own communication style? What have I learned about my significant other's needs and communication style?
3. What action items have I come up with to strengthen my relationship with my significant other?

Wrap-up (10 minutes)

Leader invites each group member to share with the rest of the group his five action items for improving the relationship with his significant other or spouse.

Closing Prayer & Petitions (5-10 minutes) - Invite the group to gather in a circle.

Lord Most High, we praise you for giving us life and for our wives (significant others) with whom we share this magnificent time on earth. We thank you for these two days spent together in fellowship. Empower us to be better spiritual leaders in our homes and help each of us take the steps we've outlined for improving our most valued relationships. We ask that you embrace the prayers and petitions of each member of this group.

Invite the group to offer up hopes and prayers of petition.

We lift up all these prayers and thank you, Lord. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen

Conclude by greeting one another in peace.

Addendum A

Inventory of Leadership Style in the Home

Using a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being strongest), please rate yourself in the following leadership indicators.

In general:

I'm an aggressive and active person, generally seeking leadership. Rating _____

Others view me as a leader and role model. Rating _____

I generally like to plan, organize, and lead. Rating _____

At home:

I'm aggressive and active, typically taking the lead. Rating _____

I take responsibility for handling our financial situation. Rating _____

I provide for my wife and family materially. Rating _____

I provide for my wife and family emotionally. Rating _____

I give spiritual direction and vision at home. Rating _____

I model biblical values (self-control, faith, hope, etc) at home. Rating _____

I honor and give praise to my wife regularly. Rating _____

I responsibly plan for our future as a couple & for our children. Rating _____

Tally up your total score out of 60 possible points. Total _____

Addendum B

Inventory of Needs & Communication style in the Home

How would you respond to the situations below? Rank your answers from 1-6 with 1 being your first choice.

1. Your wife or significant other has had a difficult day and has just come home. What things might you do to make her feel most loved?

- Ask her about her day and sit and listen with complete attention
- Buy her a new piece of jewelry or some expensive perfume
- Let her know how important she is to you in your life
- Clean the house, make dinner, have her favorite glass of wine ready
- Comment on how well she balances your home, the children, work, etc., mentioning specific examples
- Give her lots of hugs and a back rub

2. You had a difficult day and have just come home on a Friday night. What things could your wife do to make you feel most loved?

- Ask you about your day, listen with complete attention, and empathize with you
- Buy you a bottle of your favorite wine, a new sports shirt, or a book you wanted
- Let you know how important you are in her life
- Do all your weekend chores, so you have no pressures for the weekend
- Remind you what a great dad and husband you are and give you specific examples
- Surprise you with a back rub and offer to make time for just the two of you