

LEADER GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

This Guide describes how to use *RENEWING OUR PROMISE: A Marriage Enrichment Retreat* with a group of couples.

This retreat design is intended to improve marriages that have come up against the realities that the years of living together can bring. It is not therapy for seriously troubled couples. It provides a step by step process that moves couples through activities that will help them assess and renew their relationship as they recommit themselves to each other.

This retreat will help couples create an event that can become the beginning of an intentional process of renewal for a marriage relationship, especially for those who struggle because they have come up against the realities of day to day living together.

How to Use This Resource

The Participant Guide that accompanies this Leader Guide is a complete retreat design that can be used by a group of couples in a retreat setting.

What Does It Mean to Lead This Retreat?

As leader you (and your spouse) will be responsible to:

- Ô **Recruit (select)** the couples who might benefit from this retreat.
- Ô **Schedule a place and time** for the retreat. **Arrange** transportation, meals, etc.
- Ô **Gather needed resources** (including people).
- Ô **Manage the schedule** of the retreat--**adapt** it as necessary to fit your group's needs.
- Ô **Encourage and facilitate interaction** between spouses and among the gathered couples.
- Ô **Provide materials and alternative activities.**
- Ô **Schedule a "follow up" meeting** within a month after the retreat.

A. Select Participants

Since those who will benefit from this retreat are couples that have a basically healthy relationship and commitment but are struggling with some of the difficulties that can enter a marriage, you probably will want to **select** those who might participate in this event.

Approach each couple individually. Without accusing or attempting an instant analysis of the relationship, simply offer the couple the opportunity to be involved in this retreat enrichment experience.

As you do, focus on the positives that the experience will offer:

- A chance to get away and pay attention to each other and their relationship;
- A chance to focus on each other as they receive guidance from the Spirit through the Word and offer encouragement to each other and receive it from other couples;
- Learning a way to begin a process of renewal in their marriage that will have a lasting effect on their relationship.

Emphasize that you will ask them to do nothing that will embarrass them; they will not be forced to share anything they don't feel comfortable sharing. All are free to "fit into" the retreat design in a way that seems right for them.

This event promises no miracles, but you can promise that if they invest the time in reviewing and renewing their marriage relationship, the results will be positive, effective and long lasting.

B. Schedule/Arrange

This design will work best if used on a weekend retreat. The activities suggested will fill a Friday evening through Sunday afternoon schedule. You might follow this plan:

Friday afternoon: Arrive, relax, recreate.

Friday evening: **Assessment—Where Are We Now?**

Saturday morning: **Remembering—A Look at The Past**

Saturday early afternoon: **Affirming—Building Each Other up**

Saturday late afternoon: Recreation/Relaxation

Saturday evening: **Celebrating Our Oneness**

Sunday morning: **Renewing Our Commitment** (Might be done back among the congregation)

Sunday afternoon: **Looking to The Future**

Modify this basic schedule to fit your needs.

C. Gather Resources

You might provide materials needed for the retreat:

A copy of the Participants Guide for each person

Writing and drawing paper

Sheets of newsprint

Pencils, pens, markers

Modeling clay ("Pla-doh" works well and is less messy than clay) or newspaper for sculptures
(Shape a piece of newspaper into a "nest" for a demonstration, if possible.)

A copy of the wedding service used in your parish

Bibles (or ask participants to bring Bibles)

Materials needed for a communion service (See "Remembering" session), if you choose to make that a part of your retreat.

Hymnals, song books, materials for devotional times together. You might choose one person to be the worship leader for the group. Or ask the pastor to serve in that capacity. Ask a pastor to attend for the communion service and on Sunday morning for the rededication, if possible.

Encourage participants to bring their wedding pictures to share.

D. Doing the Retreat

Basically what you will do on your retreat is to help couples work through the activities set out in the Participants Guide. You and your spouse will want to make all feel welcome and involved, model interaction by your exchanges with each other, and encourage honesty and openness in sharing. You may, however, find it necessary to adapt the activities to fit the couples you are working with or your setting.

Prepare

First read through the Participants Guide. Try some of the activities with your spouse. Do the sculptures or write "love letters." Work through the Bible studies. Select those activities that seem to you to fit well with the people you'll be working with. Get a feel for the flow of the design.

Look through the suggested schedule in the introduction. Adapt the schedule to fit the time you have allotted.

Pray for yourself, your spouse and your relationship, and the other couples. Seek the guidance of the Spirit as you work together.

Getting Started

Encourage all to arrive several hours before your first session. See if you can make registration and room assignment as hassle free as possible.

Greet each couple as they arrive. Allow free time. Encourage all to relax and make use of the facilities.

Work with the camp or retreat director to make local recreational opportunities available to couples. Organized activities are OK but keep them relaxed and non-competitive.

When You First Gather as a Group

Use this time to put people at ease. Help participants get to know each other. Build group rapport and build anticipation for the time you will spend together.

Get Acquainted

Use your favorite "get acquainted" activities. You might make name tags available.

If you have time allow each couple in turn to share one of the following:
A time when they felt they had fallen off the pedestal.

Memories of their first meeting.
A funny incident from their wedding.
An important event for their relationship.

You might do a get-acquainted game or two, if you have time.

Clarify Expectations

On a large sheet of newsprint write: At this retreat, I hope to. . . Let participants volunteer words or phrases to complete the sentence stem. Or take a break and allow couples to write endings for the sentence on the newsprint as they get refreshments.

Talk a bit about the expectations. Assure all that their expectations can be met since they will be able to shape the retreat to fit their own needs.

If you have time, read over the Introduction from the Participants Guide. Allow for comment and discussion. Simply accept what is offered and do your best to answer questions that arise. Keep it light. Don't make people uptight by laying on great expectations or creating an impossible agenda for the retreat.

Review Schedule

Go over the schedule with the couples. Because you and your spouse will already have worked with much of the material, you might make a few comments about what the participants can expect to do during the retreat. Keep the presentation positive--couples will likely gain about what they expect to from the time together.

Again assure all that what happens at this retreat primarily concerns their relationship as a couple. They need not do anything in the group they don't feel comfortable doing nor will they be asked to share what they would rather keep private.

Opening Devotion

Make your initial worship brief. You might read Colossians 3:12-17 aloud. Offer a prayer for the God's blessing and the Spirit's guidance.

STEP BY STEP THROUGH THE DESIGN

Move through the six sections of the Participants Guide according to your schedule. The

following information is offered to help you lead each section. Use this material as it fits your style and situation. You will need to adapt the material and may have to adjust your schedule as you go along. Encourage couples to do those activities and exercises that you can't get at during the retreat at home on their own.

Assessment—Where Are We Now?

Purpose: To help couples gain insight into the present state of their relationship as they honestly assess how it has changed over the years so that they can determine its strengths and weaknesses.

Time Frame: Two hours

1. A Tour of Marriage

This first activity can be done as a group. Ask volunteers to take turns reading the statements in the Participants Guide. Talk about each. Share reactions and comments.

2. To What Can I Compare Our Marriage? / 3. A Love Letter

These activities should be done privately by couples. They need not share their sculptures or letters in the group unless they wish to do so. Allow enough time for couples to work individually to discuss what they have made or written.

4. Bible Study--A Family Prayer

The Bible study should be done privately by each couple, though you might ask them to share their insights and their prayers with the rest of the group.

Devotion

Plan to do the worship as a group. You might add a hymn or song and a blessing. Or encourage couples to do the devotion privately in their rooms.

Cautions/Special Instructions

It may be difficult for some to "get into" the sculpturing or letter writing activities. The activities are important. They encourage the involvement of the whole person in the learning process. We have a tendency to do learning only with our "cognitive" (left brain) mental processes. Working with art forms and letting our hands express our feelings involves the affect and gets the right brain involved. The insights that can come through this kind of total involvement can be startling.

Encourage even those who claim they are "not artistic" or "don't know how to do sculpture" to at least try. Remind them that the quality of the image is not important; no comparisons or "grading" will be done. The doing itself has value.

You might give examples of writing and sculpture to encourage participation. For example, you might do a sculpture in newspaper of something from your past as a couple or something that describes where you are now in your relationship. The sculptures can be as simple as a shape or as elaborate as a symbol or representation of a person or thing. Use what you have created to help others begin a sculpture of their own.

Similarly, if you and your spouse are able to share a "love letter" you have written to each other as you worked through one of the activities in this design, you will encourage others to do the same.

Remind all that literary quality and technical perfection do not count. The goal is to **express feelings in words** that can be shared with one's spouse. Emphasize that these creations (whatever they look like or say) are **gifts** offered in love to one's spouse. As such, they should be received with love and care.

Additional or Alternative Activities

A possibility for an opening discussion that might help participants feel more at ease about the sculpturing activity: show a piece of "wedding cake" you have shaped out of a sheet of newspaper. Make the shape simple. Just suggest a piece of cake. Share your creation and allow all to talk about how that shape describes (or does not describe) their marriage or their relationship.

An alternative lead-in activity: If your couples seem to be quite open to sharing, you might ask each couple to **do** (act out) a "sculpture" of their relationship. Ask them to take a position as a couple that says something about their relationship. For example, one spouse standing over the other may indicate how control or power is lived out in the relationship. Others may express a certain coldness by standing back to back, etc. Don't dwell on the negatives brought out by these sculptures, but talk about what each couple is revealing by their sculpture. Allow time for couples to talk privately about the shape they created and its meaning before working through the material in the Participants Guide.

Remembering—A Look at The Past

Purpose: To help couples look at where they have come from in their relationship by returning to their beginnings so that they can evaluate the changes and surface some of the hurts of the past that need to be forgiven and intentionally set aside in preparation for renewal and re-commitment.

Time Frame: Two hours (Activity 2 will require additional time.)

1. "Memories of the Way We Were"

Encourage participation by sharing a sculpture or love letter of your own.

Give couples time to do the sculpture individually and share them. You might suggest that those who cannot make the sculpturing activity work for them, might write "letters" describing something from the past--something of special importance. Those who wish to might share what they have done or insights they have gained with the group.

2. "The Way We Were" (Optional Activity)

This activity will require several hours. Encourage couples to try to return to a different time in their relationship. You might make this the "assignment" during your morning recreation time. Or ask them to carry through on the activity for the rest of the morning. The discussion of the activity might be done as a group. Let couples compare their experiences and their assessment of how their relationship has changed over the years.

3. Memory and Forgiveness

This chance for confession and forgiveness can be done after the Bible study if it seems to fit better in that place. As you move into this activity, encourage couples to use this time, not for blaming and recrimination--certainly we can all recount the failures of our marriage partner--but as an opportunity to bring to conclusion some of the hurts of the past that are still haunting the relationship. Ask them to focus on the hurt they themselves have caused.

A fireplace would be a good place to put the sins written and confessed. Otherwise they can be torn up and discarded. Allow couples time to work through this activity in private. You might extend the time if they seem to be into an important healing process.

After you reassemble, those who wish to may share some of their experience--but no one should be asked to share specifics of what was confessed.

Take time to talk about the activity itself. It is not meant to substitute for the kind of ongoing forgiveness that is necessary in our relationships. This exercise is only a way of highlighting that forgiveness. Neither does it mean to suggest that forgiveness is the simple exchange of words. Forgiveness is an act of sacrifice (as Christ has sacrificed himself for us). It is often an act that requires overcoming a great deal of pain and setting aside much hurt. It can only be done out of a deep love and a sincere commitment. Don't trivialize the action, but do encourage couples to use this activity as a way to begin a process where they express their need for forgiveness and their willingness to forgive aloud. Sometimes, when it is simply assumed, it is also taken for granted

If a pastor is part of your process and you have the time, this is an excellent time for a worship service that includes confession/absolution and communion. Offering couples a chance to worship, confess and commune together can be especially meaningful and healing.

4. Bible Study--Our Forgiving God

The Bible study can be done as couples. As you come together for a discussion, ask participants to highlight insights from the study. Focus on the meaning of forgiveness for every relationship.

Cautions/Special Instructions

Remembering can be a difficult for many couples. It is always easiest to remember the hurts of the past done to us. Bringing those out can quickly turn into "garbage dumping." Though some venting may be necessary, encourage participants to focus on their own sins--rather than complain about their partner. Of course, blaming, accusing, complaining, tearing down--all are less than helpful.

If you become aware that a couple at the retreat is bearing a destructive load of past hurts--serious hurts that are unresolved--encourage them to seek further help with a counselor. As you do, help them move past dwelling on those hurts so that they can participate in the rest of the retreat. Don't forget to follow through on helping them get to a counselor after the retreat.

Additional/Alternative Activities

During the Bible study, instead of just talking about the action between Jesus and Peter, you might ask all to "act out" (mime) Peter as you read the texts. Let participants take the bodily positions Peter likely took in each case. Ask them to express the feelings of Peter they are able to identify with as they do the mime. Use those feelings to inform your later discussion.

As a conclusion for section 3, you might do a brief order of confession and absolution. Adapt one of the forms from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* on pages 98, 193 or 196.

Devotion

An appropriate closing for this section would be a celebration of our renewal in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Read Psalm 103 or Romans 8:31-19 together. A hymn like "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing" (*LBW* 559) would fit well.

Affirming–Building Each Other up

Purpose: To help partners in a marriage prepare for their re-commitment to each other by intentionally practicing offering words of affirmation so that they can focus on the positive gifts of their partner and their relationship.

Time Frame: 60-90 minutes

Read the introduction to the section aloud in the group and briefly discuss the material. Why is it easier to "find fault" than to affirm? Why do we sometimes find ourselves tearing each other down instead of building up?

1. Pass the Good Words Please

This activity should be done privately in couples. Allow time for partners to share with each other how it feels to be described positively by their spouse. Ask those who are willing to share insights and experiences with the group.

2. The Shape of Our Love (Optional Activity)

This activity might be omitted if you are running short of time or if you feel that you've worn out the sculpturing activity. Encourage couples to do the activity later at home.

3. Bible Study--A Model of Love

The Bible study should be done by the couples. Allow a time for group sharing after couples have worked through the text on their own. In particular, ask them to share their "rewriting" of 1 Cor. 13.

Cautions/Special Instructions

It may be very difficult for some to keep their descriptions positive. We become so used to blaming and fault finding that the opposite seems strange on our tongue. Make an attempt to bring any lapse into negatives back to the positive without unduly embarrassing the speaker. You might even make a game out of it. See how long each can talk about his or her spouse without saying

anything negative. One negative and the speaker must stand. Keep it light but do allow time for partners to seriously discuss what it means to them to be described positively by their spouse.

RECREATION/RELAXATION

It's important to allow participants time to relax and enjoy one another's company in "play." You might organize some games that people can participate in as couples (e.g., volleyball, softball). Or just allow them time to get outside and enjoy the area as a couple. Encourage all to carry their intention to remain positive into the recreation time. Avoid those activities that would split your group by sexes.

Your recreation time might include a picnic supper and/or an evening out for dinner as a group.

Celebrating Our Oneness

Purpose: The previous activity asked participants to focus on the positives about their partner. Here we ask them to think about the positives of their relationship as a way to prepare to renew that relationship by re-commitment.

Time Frame: 60-90 minutes.

Read introductory material in this section from the Participants Guide as a group. Help participants see that we are carrying over the positive attitude of the previous activity into this exercise.

1. A Thanks Letter

Explain that this activity is to be a "love letter" expressing thanks for what the partner brings to the relationship. These letters should be shared as couples in private. They need not be shared with the group.

2. Bible Study--A Relationship Made New

Allow couples to work through these sections privately. Insights might be shared in the larger group.

Cautions/Special Instructions

Encourage couples again to express their oneness in physical ways. You can simply say "It's appropriate to touch each other as you talk together as a couple." Or better, model the kind of touching that expresses a cherishing love. For example, you and your spouse might hold both hands and sit facing each other as you talk about your love letters. Or simply sit close enough to touch as you share in the group. This kind of intimacy will probably come naturally to participants, but your example may "give permission" to demonstrate love by physical contact.

Additional/Alternative Activities

As an additional lead in to this section, you might ask participants to list on a sheet of newsprint the strengths of their relationship. Let them work together as a couple on the list. Encourage them to focus on strengths. These lists may be shared with the group and compared. Talk about the strengths all see in other's relationships.

Devotion

The Participants Guide contains a suggestion for a brief devotion you might use as a group. But particularly if this is the last activity before couples go off to their own rooms, encourage them to continue their evening worship in private.

Renewing Our Commitment

Purpose: To allow participants in a context of worship, to renew their marriage vow and to think through the implications of that re-commitment.

Time Frame: 60-90 minutes

1. That Central Promise

You might begin the session by encouraging couples to speak their wedding vow as they remember it and then compare that to the one found in the Participants Guide. Talk about the vow as a group. What does it say? What does it assume? What does it fail to say?

If you have time, allow participants to share their wedding pictures. Give them time to tell as much about the event as they remember. Often couples have "favorite stories" about embarrassing moments or special happenings from their wedding. Allow all to share these if they wish to.

2. Bible Study--A Model Promise

This brief study of the text in Ruth can be omitted if you need to save time, especially if your worship service will include a meditation or homily.

Worship--A Promise Renewed

You'll want to make this worship service as special as possible. Follow the form of the wedding service in your hymnal or service book. Add hymns, songs or scripture readings. Invite couples to share something spiritually meaningful from their own weddings.

The rewritten "promise" from the study of this text might be used as the vow for the re-commitment service for each couple. Otherwise you might give couples time to write a vow they will use during the service.

Cautions/Special Instructions

If possible, ask a pastor to be present for this worship event. Allow him/her to make the rededication service appropriately elaborate and as meaningful as possible. You will probably want to avoid special clothing, witnesses and the other "trappings" of a wedding. Assign a couple to work with the pastor in planning the worship service: location, music, etc. **If this retreat is done on a Friday and Saturday, you might do this re-commitment back at your congregation. It can be a part of the morning worship service or done just after the service, inviting those who are interested to stay and be a part of the celebration.**

Looking to the Future

Purpose: To help participants project the significance of their renewed commitment into the future. To prepare them to meet the events of future years with dedication and purpose. **Please Note:** If there is not time at your retreat to do this section, encourage couples to do it on their own as soon as possible after the retreat. Results can be shared when you have your follow up meeting.

Time Frame: Two hours

If you have copies of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, you might read or sing the hymn "Blest Be the Tie that Binds" (370) together as you begin this section.

1. "Blest Be the Tie. . ."

Ask couples to work through this section privately, then share insights with the whole group.

2. A Love Letter/ 3. A Visit to the Future

Either or both of these activities should be done by individual couples. Encourage the imagining asked for in 3 by doing some of that projecting aloud with your spouse, if possible.

4. Bible Study--A Prayer and a Promise

The Bible study may be done by couples or in the larger group. Encourage open sharing about the changes that have happened for couples during the weekend.

5. A Letter for a Time to Come

The love letter for the future can be omitted here if you are short of time. Encourage couples to write and share that letter after they return home.

6. A Plan for Growth

Be sure to encourage couples to go through the planning process asked for in this section. The vow they spoke has little meaning if it has no effect on daily interaction. The suggestions here are some ways that living out can be done. Couples can devise other ways of their own if they wish. These promises can be written out and shared in the group if couples are willing.

Cautions/Special Instructions

It is possible that by this time in the retreat, couples will experience a kind of emotional high. They may feel very close to their spouses and form tight relationships with the other couples at the retreat. The "high" can be enjoyed, but encourage couples to do the planning and projecting asked for in this final section so that the benefit of the weekend does not fade with the emotional warmth of the moment. Everyone has to go back to daily living. Old patterns of hurt and taking for granted may return quickly. It will take an intention plan of improved communication and commitment to keep a healthy relationship alive.

Be sure to encourage couples to share their plan for continued renewal. That will allow them to gently "check" on and encourage each other when you meet again for a follow up in a few weeks.

Devotion

Your closing devotion can be brief--but should maintain a note of celebration. Ask each couple to write and offer a prayer of thanksgiving and petition for themselves, their relationship and for the other couples.

FOLLOW UP MEETING

Make a commitment at the retreat to meet together again in about four weeks. This meeting can happen at the church or in someone's home.

At the meeting you will want to:

Renew relationships with each other. Repeat games or other activities from the retreat.

Encourage one another. Ask each couple to share how they are doing with their commitment to renewal. Encourage and build each other up for the task.

Repeat a portion of the Participants Guide—a Bible study or another activity, if you have time.

Review and reread the vows each couple wrote and the written commitment. Again, encourage continuance in the effort.

Conclude with worship that includes prayer for all participants.

Contract for additional meetings (small group sharing) if couples are interested, or plan another retreat.