

STILL WATERS & TALL TIMBERS

Retreat centers are ideal for group getaways

Tall Timbers Baptist Conference Center features a 10-acre lake in the middle of the Louisiana woods.

Courtesy Tall Timbers

By Brian Jewell

“IT’S IN A WOODED AREA THAT IS KIND OF HILLY BUT NOT IN THE MOUNTAINS. THERE ARE BEAUTIFUL BIG PINE AND OAK TREES AROUND THE CAMPUS.”

Though the weather may be wet and chilly now, warmer temperatures and sunnier days are on the way. When they arrive, it will be the perfect time to get your church group into the great outdoors.

For generations, churches have celebrated spring, summer and fall with trips to camps and retreat centers. Whether it’s an outing for the youth group, the choir, seniors, or couples, a retreat offers a chance for rest, fellowship and devotion, and gives church members a place to reconnect with old friends and build relationships with new ones.

Although camps and retreat centers have many things in common, such as lodging, dining halls and outdoor activities, each tends to have its own highlights. Here’s a look at six retreat destinations across the country, as well as the accommodations, activities and services that make them special.

Mountain Valley Retreat and Conference Center Harrisonburg, Va.

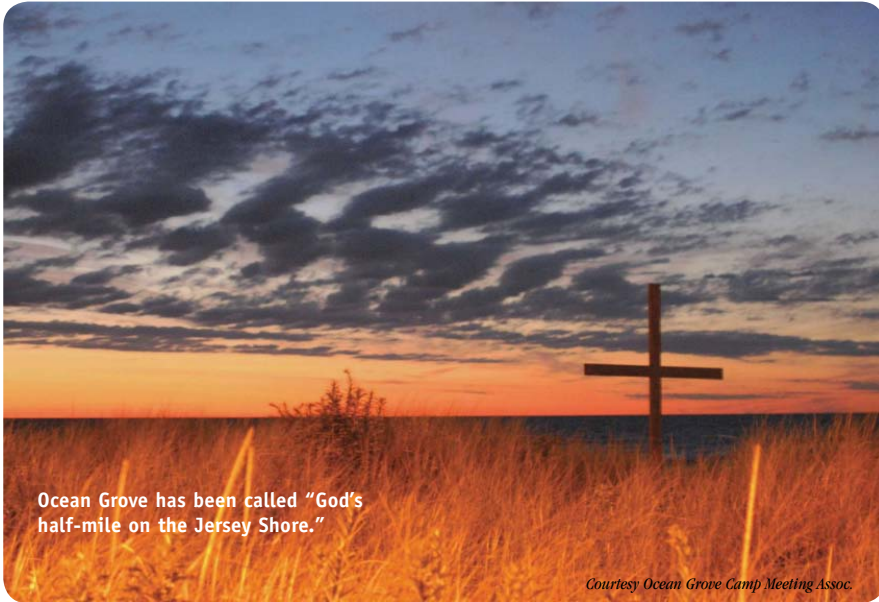
Groups of up to 30 people can enjoy a getaway in a historic estate setting at Virginia’s Mountain Valley Retreat and Conference Center.

“Mountain Valley was a pre-Civil War home built in 1803,” said Mary Chris Moore, marketing manager at the center. “It was just two rooms until about 1930. About 10 years ago, our owner purchased the property and remodeled the whole house.”



Warm Beach Camp offers an array of indoor and outdoor activities, including basketball, canoeing and mini-golf.

Courtesy Warm Beach Camp



Ocean Grove has been called "God's half-mile on the Jersey Shore."

Courtesy Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Assoc.

Along with the remodeling, the staff also connected the main home to a carriage house with a breezeway and constructed four Conestoga cabins on the surrounding property. Groups can enjoy antique furnishings in the main house, along with wireless Internet throughout the property.

Meals are provided by the retreat center, along with a host who serves the food and does all the cleanup. The staff also provides a variety of activities for groups on the property.

"If a group wants to canoe on our lake or go horseback riding, mountain biking or rock climbing, we can provide those activities," Moore said. "We have an extensive amount of low ropes here, and two high ropes courses set up, both with ziplines."

www.mountainvalleyva.com

**St. Meinrad Archabbey
St. Meinrad, Ind.**

If there's a perfect place to find peace and quiet on a retreat, it may be at a Benedictine monastery. At St. Meinrad Archabbey, visitors can walk among the monks and enjoy their hospitality.

"We were founded 156 years ago by a Swiss monastery that sent over two monks to start a monastery in the United States," said Mary Jeanne Schumacher, director of communications at the Archabbey. "We have a community of about 100 Benedictine monks who live here and run a guest house. It's intended for people to come rest, relax, reflect and get away from things and to focus on their interior lives."

Groups can join the monks in any of their five daily Masses in the monastery church or have special private meetings led by monks. Alternatively, a group can provide its own programming using the on-site meeting facilities.

When they're not in meetings, visitors can enjoy the serenity of the grounds or enjoy some of the other facilities on campus.

"We have a printing operation called Abbey Press that actually has a gift shop on campus," Schumacher said. "There's a bookstore and a nice library with over 170,000 volumes. And throughout the year, we host cultural events, like an organ concert or a vocal group in the church."

www.saintmeinrad.edu

**Warm Beach Camp
Stanwood, Wash.**

Churches looking for large retreat venues in the Pacific Northwest often settle on Warm Beach Camp, a 250-acre property that can accommodate groups of up to 1,200. A variety of lodging styles are set up to meet the needs and preferences of a diverse range of groups.

"We have accommodations for any type of groups: a youth group, a men's group or a women's group," said marketing manager Daniel Carver. "Each group has its own special need. A women's group doesn't want bunks, so we have hotel-style lodging for them."

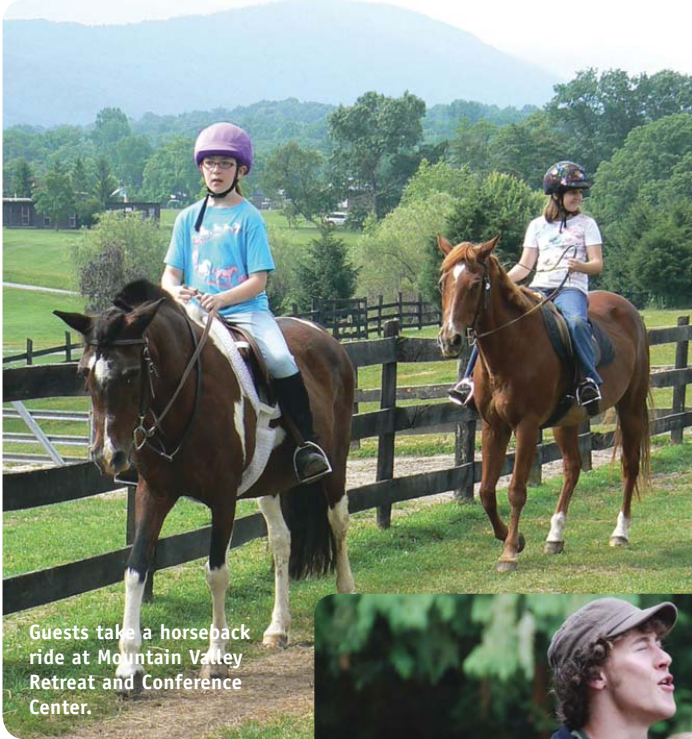
The hotel-style rooms feature queen-size beds, private bathrooms and views over Port Susan Bay. Other accommodations include traditional bunks, modular cabins, minilodges and retreat houses for smaller groups.

The camp's location on the bay makes it a great place to see wildlife around the water.

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Guests take a horseback ride at Mountain Valley Retreat and Conference Center.

Courtesy Mountain Valley Retreat and Conf. Center

That's not all!

For information about more retreat destinations, visit us online: www.goingonfaith.com



Students connect with a youth leader at Warm Beach Camp.

Courtesy Warm Beach Camp

"We do canoeing down there, and there's a wetlands preserve that you can canoe through," Carver said. "Lots of waterfowl make their home in that area, and you'll see a lot of blue heron when you're out there."

The camp's annual holiday event, the Lights of Christmas, has been chosen as an American Bus Association Top 100 event for 2010. www.warmbeach.com

**Tall Timbers Baptist Conference Center
Forest Hill, La.**

The Louisiana Baptist Convention owns Tall Timbers Baptist Conference Center but opens the facility to groups of any denomination that want to enjoy its woodland setting.

"The facility has been here since about 1962," said manager Sam White. "It's in a wooded area that is kind of hilly but not in the mountains. There are beautiful big pine and oak trees around the campus."

The center offers dormitory-style cabins with bunk beds for up to 216 guests, as well as a motel with 48 private rooms and a lodge with 10 semiprivate rooms. A large auditorium can seat up to 450 people for meetings, and there are eight classrooms and three other conference rooms in various places throughout the campus.

Most groups that spend time at Tall Timbers take advantage of the variety of activities available. Groups can spend time together on the high and low ropes courses, or break out in twos and threes to enjoy other one-on-one activities.

"We have a game room with air hockey, foosball and Ping-Pong," White said. "We also have a 10-acre lake, and we have pedal boats that our guests can take out around the lake."

www.talltimbersbcc.org

**Franciscan Renewal Center
Paradise Valley, Ariz.**

In the upscale resort area of Paradise Valley, not far from Scottsdale, groups can find a dedicated religious getaway spot at the Franciscan Renewal Center.

"We've been in business since 1951," said conference coordinator Sue Force. "There was a 10-room hotel at that time, purchased by Franciscan friars to do marriage encounter retreats. Now, we have 14 meeting rooms and 54 lodging rooms that sleep up to 100 guests."

The Catholic center offers groups a program called the Franciscan Way, which follows the teachings of St. Francis of Assisi. Visitors can also take advantage of an on-site counseling ministry, a meditation chapel and a full-size church with daily Mass.

Groups from other Christian denominations are welcome to visit as well and to take advantage of the center's distinctive setting.

"When you walk onto our grounds, you have a feeling like you're totally out of the city," Force said. "We have a desert walk toward the back of the property and lots of ramada areas for groups to sit in."

www.thecasa.org

**Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association
Ocean Grove, N.J.**

The movement of outdoor tent meetings that swept the nation in the mid-19th century led to the creation of the Ocean Grove Camp Meeting Association in New Jersey.

"We were founded in 1869 as a Christian retreat center," said chief administrative officer Nancy Hoffman. "It was Methodist ministers from New York looking for a way to get people away from the noisy city. We still have 114 tent houses as a tribute to that early beginning."

What began as an outdoor meeting has turned into a full-fledged village, complete with a stretch of private beach. Now known as "God's half-mile on the Jersey Shore," the property features an 1894 auditorium, an open-air tabernacle, a youth temple and a variety of lodges and private inns for accommodations.

The primary retreat center is a repurposed Victorian-style hotel that matches the architecture of many other buildings on the property. The center holds 65 people and features a full kitchen and several meeting spaces.

Besides the large menu of scheduled and customizable activities at Ocean Grove, groups will find special events such as choir festivals and contemporary Christian music concerts.

"In the summertime, we have a morning worship service and a Bible hour," Hoffman said. "On our beach, we have a sand sculpture contest, boogie-board races and scavenger hunts. Because we're a Christian ministry that owns the beaches, we're able to do things that other beaches can't do."

www.oceangrove.org

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