

Event / Meeting Planning

Haskell Williams, Carolina Conference

Ministerial Directors are called on to organize a variety of meetings that could include any of the following and more (at the discretion of the conference president):

- Yearly ministerial retreats
- Evangelism rallies
- Elders / Deacons / Deaconess training-retreats
- Camp Meetings

The following list is not exclusive, and may seem obvious. But even experienced meeting planners can overlook items in their planning, so consider this a check-list.

Pray

- Whatever the meeting's purpose—inspirational, educational, training—the ultimate motive is spiritual. Begin with earnest prayer for God's guidance and blessing in your endeavors.

Don't Go Solo In the Planning

- Build a team

You may be an excellent planner, but you are not omniscient. If it does not already exist, develop a planning team or committee. If an appropriate entity is already in place, add "Meeting Planning" to their job description. In some conferences a Ministerial Advisory, Council, or committee of ministerial leaders is already in place. They can be your "Dream Team" for conceptualizing and working out details. They may even be able to take on delegated responsibilities.

Think Outside the Box

- Think of other ways to accomplish your task

Usually, the first assumption is that to instruct and inspire, you must bring people together in one place. Because of distance and tight time schedules, that is not necessarily the case. Determine what you are trying to accomplish—define your purpose.

Then, with your planning team/committee, brainstorm on the best way to carry out your purpose. Don't be bound by the maxim—"This is the way we've always done it."

- Be innovative

Explore alternative 'delivery systems.' Will a webinar work as well? Will it save travel for your attendees? Could the presentation be recorded and distributed or posted online? Will a teleconference accomplish the purpose? Sometimes the size of the audience will preclude certain modalities. Other times the cost of technologies will preclude others.

- Use the Surprise Factor

Besides considering an alternative delivery system, explore inventive presentations that will engage the attendees. This may involve audience interaction, PowerPoint or video that are visually arresting, or programming that is audibly stimulating. Not that you simply want to impress with "flash and awe," but you must gain and retain attention.

- Consider Learning Styles

Because we are each wired differently, the gateway to our attention and learning is different. Don't expect a simple lecture to reach everyone. Consider that some learn visually, some audibly, and some kinesthetically. Respect and plan for those differences.

Ask Questions

- Inquire from those who have already 'done it'

Do not be afraid of seeking assistance from others who are experienced. They can save you time, money, frustration and embarrassment. Every planner has a story of what he/she learned through the experience—from "Don't ask him..." to "be careful of the hidden expenses at..."

- Get advice

Fellow officers can offer helpful information about topics / issues to cover. You can ask colleagues in the Ministerial Department of other conferences what they are doing. And some of your best advice may come from pastors in the field who have their ear to the ground on what's really happening (and what pastors need) in the local church.

Plan Ahead

- Time ~~creeps~~ rushes up on you

Anticipate well in advance, when the meeting needs be scheduled. Allow sufficient time for scheduling arrangements for the speaker, for the meeting location and for the attendees. What now seems like a distant date will rest quietly... until it is suddenly imminent. Then, in the scramble to get things done, details get overlooked.

- The speakers require notice

If you want qualified and interesting presenters, you need to ask them early. A year is not too early to ask and some might be already booked for other commitments by that time. Definitely allow a minimum of 6 months. This will allow them time to make travel arrangements and time for you to file for any inter-conference permission requests.

- You need time to work out the logistics

Whether the meeting will be held in a church, the conference camp / retreat, or convention center, arrangements for the facility need to be made. Secure the agreement for the location well in advance. The larger (or more popular) the desired venue, the earlier your agreement should be made. If a specific date is required, aim for a 9-15 months advance reservation. Reservations may be arranged verbally, but they should be confirmed in writing (postal or email). Often a contract is required. This gives you an added layer of assurance.

- Consider your attendees

What is an appropriate advance notice time for those you want to attend? People have schedules and responsible people plan their calendars in advance. It is inconsiderate to plan meetings, expecting individuals to attend at the expense of disrupting their work schedules, family plans and vacations. Give them appropriate advance notice.

The Venue

- Choosing a Venue

In planning for a meeting, you need to consider several factors in choosing a venue:

- Capacity—what attendance are you expecting?
- Breakout rooms—will you need additional rooms for smaller seminars?
- Does your event require overnight stays?
- Does the venue (or the community) have a large enough guest rooms for the anticipated attendance?
- Sound isolation—is there enough isolation between rooms to avoid noise bleed-over?
- Accessibility—how near is it to your target audience?
- Cost—will the venue expenses fit in your budget?
- Food options—is catering available or are restaurants nearby? [*more on this below*]
- Media features—is the venue equipped to serve your A/V needs?

- Maximizing a Venue

Often, you have no choice in selecting the venue. You will need to ascertain how well the assigned venue is able to meet the needs detailed above. Think creatively about how to use the space available. In either case, it is best (if at all possible) to make an on-site visit to survey the facility. Do this especially before you sign a contract to secure the venue.

Be Clear on Expectations as you invite speakers / presenters

- Let the speaker know what you are expecting/requesting--
 - the Content
 - the Location & Time
 - the Accommodations
 - the Dress Code
 - the Remuneration

If you have a specific subject that you want the invited speaker to present, make it clear. If it is not one that you have heard him/her address previously, ask if he/she is comfortable with the subject. For clarity's sake, ask the presenter to restate what they understand you are requesting. You can't be too careful on this. As a team, we asked a recognized speaker to present a subject from the perspective of a publication he had produced. Several conversations centered on this request. He was excited to do so. He expressed that he would be writing new sermons to parallel the message of the publication. As time drew nearer, we again discussed the expectations and were reassured. When the meetings were held, there was a very disappointing repeat of earlier presentations. You can't be too clear.

State clearly and confirm the date and location you are inviting him/her to. A speaker arrived at the church one Sabbath morning and was greeted by a surprised pastor. When asked what brought him that Sabbath, he replied, "You asked me to speak today." Both were puzzled until the pastor realized that the speaker had been invited by his brother, also a pastor, but 200 miles away (who, incidentally, was puzzled why his guest speaker did not arrive).

Let the speaker know what his accommodations will be. And be considerate, knowing what you would like if the tables were reversed. Don't try to save funds at the expense of the speaker's comfort. Also, let him/her know what the attendees will be wearing—casual, dress casual, dress—and how he/she will be expected to dress.

The speaker should know in advance what costs for remuneration will be provided, and if that includes an invitation to the spouse—travel, housing, rental car. It is not out of place to ask if there is an expected honorarium. Full disclosure is better than big disappointment for either party [more on this later in the article].

- Let the attendees know what to expect (in advance)

Don't over sell your meeting. Be realistic about the size of the audience and the type of hall/meeting venue. If it is a rustic camp, say so. If you are hoping for 200 people, but can only reasonably expect 35, the speaker should know that.

- Let the speaker make his/her travel arrangements (unless they ask you to). Even if they request you to make the arrangements, ask them what they normally choose and if they are members of any loyalty programs (hotel, air, rental car). Travel takes a toll on guest speakers. Squeezing schedule and arrangements to obtain the cheapest fare is punishing and inconsiderate. Also, it doesn't encourage the speaker to consider your next invitation favorably. A little consideration and care goes a long way. Roger Hernandez (Ministerial Director, Southern Union) has written plainly on this subject in his L.E.A.D. blog on several occasions.
 - <http://leadsu.org/2014/04/>
 - <http://leadsu.org/2016/05/>
 - <http://leadsu.org/2018/11/30/guest-speaking-for-the-win/>

Process the necessary requests

- Protocol in the Adventist church is to send an official request when the speaker is from another conference. This is a matter of simple courtesy. The Secretariat of your conference sends the request to the Secretariat of the conference of the speaker. This should be initiated six months in advance of the date of the meeting.

Enlist the Help of Others

- Invite pastors to help with logistics

Be a good mentor and delegate portions of the responsibilities of the meeting to pastors in your field. This involves them in the process and gives them ownership/buy-in. It also gives the pastor an exposure to processes and training for future service. It also keeps the smooth conduct of the meeting from falling entirely on the shoulders of the Ministerial Director.

- Place pastors on your team in charge of segments of the program

One alternative for involving team members is to delegate the hosting of individual segments (music; a prayer service; etc.) or an entire meeting to a pastor (as platform chairperson). Thus much or most of the event could be distributed among several pastors.

Don't Be Afraid to Think Local

- Look around your conference for pastors with expertise

More than likely, there are pastors or departmental leaders who have expertise in the area you want presented at your meeting. Keep your ears open for specialties and

talents among your staff. You can even send out a questionnaire to learn the hidden talents within your conference.

- Do a devotional series presented by pastors

Choose some of your best pastors as speakers to do a devotional series. You could also feature the young pastors or interns for a series. This will give them experience, exposure and open the door for encouragement and perhaps constructive coaching.

- Look for other skills within the conference membership

Don't forget that many of the members within the conference are skilled teachers, technicians, therapists, etc. Many of them could offer instruction and counsel to pastors on physical and mental health issues, tax and accounting issues, instructional or leadership issues. Utilize those skills.

Maintain and Secure Records

- Location arrangements and contracts

It is critical that you maintain a file (electronic, paper or both) of the documents and communications regarding your venue. This is your guarantee of a location.

- Speaker correspondence

Any emails or postal mail should be preserved that relates to the invited speaker(s). Add to this written or typed notes of any verbal communication. Include communications about:

1. The subject
2. The meeting schedule
3. The travel itinerary
4. The accommodations
5. The financial arrangements

- Check list

Formulate a check-list of to-do's for your meeting. You could this outline as checklist. Leave room to add more items as needed. Review it periodically as time progresses.

- Any pertinent details

Jot down even the small details of planning during the meetings. They will prove invaluable as you progress. Items that come up in conversation should be included. You will be surprised at how helpful they are when you can refer to your notes.

- A notebook / packet

Keep a “packet,” notebook or file with all of the planning, correspondence, confirmations and expenses of the meeting in one location. The trend is to keep records electronically. They are of course, very transportable and available. What can be helpful is a “pressboard classification folder” with multi-sections and prong fasteners that hold papers in place. This can be not only a ready reference in preparation for the meeting, but also a handy assistance on site as you conduct it.

- Next time

The best thing of keeping good records is that when the meeting is completed, your file is a ready reference for future meetings.

Re-Confirm

- As the time gets nearer for your event (1-3 months), check with your presenter(s) asking if there are any changes to their needs. Restate the date, time and place in your communication. You can also share detailed directions and a map.

Have a Back-up Plan

- The best laid plans can meet with disruption

Any number of challenges can occur to your plans—

- Illness (of the speaker, of the musician, of yourself)
- Accident (transportation or otherwise)
- Equipment failure (you know it happens)
- Weather

Remember Murphy’s Law—“Anything that can go wrong will go wrong” “at the most inopportune time” (MacGillicuddy’s corollary). I have encountered cancelled flights for speakers, snow storms that blocked all transit (while 100 ministers were waiting attentively), speakers who didn’t understand the schedule and didn’t show up until the next day. My associate can top that—as the clock ticked nearer to the satellite uplink of camp meeting, he phoned the speaker to confirm that he had arrived and would be present by 7:00 pm. The response was, “Sure enough. I’ll be there for tomorrow night’s meeting...”

- In the event that the speaker can’t come

Have a back-up plan. It may be a special sermon that you keep in the back of your Bible. It may be a friend that you have ‘on call.’ Perhaps it is a video that is on the subject. Whatever it is, have it cued, prompted, and ready to roll.

- In the event that you cannot come.

You are subject to the same interruptions as the speaker. Have someone prepared to step in. This is another good reason to draw others into the planning and execution of the meeting. It can proceed because someone knows what is supposed to happen and doesn't have to 'wing it.'

- In the event that equipment fails

Equipment loves to keep us humble. Just when you've come to depend on it, it lets you down. An acquaintance had often used his iPad for sermons and weddings. As he was in the middle of the wedding ceremony, the iPad decided to reboot. He recovered, after stumbling a bit. But the iPad was not finished with him. Three more times it rebooted. When it finally came back up, he skipped everything else and proceeded directly to the vows. Where possible, have back-up devices, and, if you are the presenter have a printed copy of the message.

List Your Needs

- A/V Equipment

Speaking of equipment—assess what equipment is necessary for your meeting. You can begin with the speaker. Ask him/her several questions directly:

- Will you be projecting any images or notes on the screen?
 - What type of computer and connection will you need?
 - Will you be supplying that via flash drive or need to connect directly?
- Do those images have any associated sound tracks or audio files?
- Do you have any keyboard music needs?
- Do you need a pianist/keyboardist?
- Do you need to connect to the internet for your presentations?

- Connectivity

Speaking of connections to the internet, make certain of what connections are available at your venue. Will Wi-Fi be needed by participants? Ask the venue manager what connectivity is available and if there is a charge.

- Support Staff

What types of support staff will you need?

- Transportation personnel for meeting equipment, stage set-up, or handouts
- Registration / check-in personnel
- Programming personnel to assist you in the flow of the meeting
- A/V & IT personnel

- Food

Will your program need food to be provided? To determine that answer, ask these questions:

- Is your program on Sabbath?
- Will a Fellowship Lunch be provided?
- Will the meeting last beyond a meal time?
- Are restaurants available and convenient (if it is a non-Sabbath date)?
- Do the accommodations have cooking facilities available for attendees?

If, by the above questions, you determine to provide meals, here are issues to weigh:

- Does the venue offer a restaurant or cafeteria/kitchen?
- Will the venue allow food to be catered in?
- What are the costs for meals?
- Can the food service provider accommodate vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free diets?

- Think of the Presenters Needs

Speakers often have special needs, especially those who are frequently invited. Following meetings and at meals, they are often mobbed with questions and sharing of personal stories. At times they might feel that they cannot have any 'down time' or privacy when they are presenting at an event. Ask them if they need a private space at meals or if they need you to buffer for them. Ask them if there is any way you could help them. Check to make certain that their accommodations are sufficient.

Arrive Early

- Get set and ready

Despite the best efforts in planning and preparation, there is always "the surprise factor". It is always best to arrive in sufficient time to be able to make adjustments for the unexpected. The lack of hurry to get set-up and ready will leave you as a program host less frazzled and worried as the meeting approaches. Adjustments to equipment or programming can be made, as well as having conversations with those attending.

- Review Program and Check for changes

It is recommended that you go over the program with each participant to review what is expected of them. A printed order with time allotments is helpful for participants. Ascertain if any adjustments to the schedule or if any substitution of participants are needed.

Be Flexible

- No situation is perfect. The venue was not designed for you. In all cases, be gracious with your host. When there is a space issue, a lighting issue or a noise issue, work with the host of the venue to explore solutions. If none are available, be flexible and make the best of it. You will learn from the experience and perhaps choose a different venue the next time.

Be Considerate and Generous

- Appreciation

Toward the end of your program (seminar, weekend), share your appreciation verbally for your presenters and staff. There is never enough thankfulness shown.

- Expenses

Make certain that you make arrangements to reimburse the expenses of your presenter. If you know the exact expenses ahead of time, you can present him or her with a check at the time of the seminar. If those are not available because return travel is incomplete, make arrangements with the presenter for those to be mailed/mailed to you. Make sure he/she is reimbursed promptly. It is most inconsiderate to leave the presenter having to pay their credit card bill before they have been compensated. Any of your staff or volunteers should receive the same considerate treatment on expenses. Be certain to obtain copies of the receipts so that you can obtain reimbursement.

- Honoraria

It is a courtesy and, possibly, a cultural expectation that a gift (honorarium) be provided to the presenter for their service to you/your organization. The amount is subjective and expectations will vary, normally ranging from \$50-\$250 for an hour's presentation [subject to inflation]. Multiple presentations would multiply the honorarium. If in doubt, ask someone who has invited them before. You can even ask the presenter, "What do you normally receive as an honorarium?" It is better to know the expectation than to fall significantly short.

Follow-up

- Clean-up

Don't forget to leave things as you found them. If furniture or other items were relocated to accommodate your meeting, move them back. If partitions were altered, restore them to their original position. If you brought items to assist in the presentation, pack them out. If you brought materials to be handed out, reload the extras or place them in the dumpster. This includes all the "now empty" boxes that

came with you. You are more likely to be welcomed back if you are considerate at your departure.

- Thank You(s)

A simple “Thank You” is never wasted. Your time will be rewarded in good will when you take the time to send a card, a letter or (at least) an email thanking your presenter. But don’t limit your list; include:

- the presenter(s)
- musicians
- seminar speakers
- other participants
- technicians
- interpreter(s)
- the venue host
- other individuals who helped in set-up, conducting, or take-down for the meeting
- your own staff

- Evaluations

If you want a good picture of how things were received, ask your audience to fill out a survey before they leave. Keep it simple; too complicated and it won’t be completed. You can even email the attendees a link to complete an on-line survey on Survey Monkey or similar service.

Your experience will afford additional nuggets. Write them down for your own future reference. Then add them below.