



# Team Works

April 2004

A Resource for Congregations from Hamilton Conference Staff

## Planning An Event: Questions for the Journey

by E. Ann Fleming

Your congregation's programs are a vital and defining part of your ministry. How you plan for those events is critical to you reaching your goals.

How are you doing?

My many years of planning and leading events tell me that programs are made or broken at the planning stage.

It is my intention to offer here a process or model for planning and ways of putting the wheels under such a process so that both routine congregational events and extraordinary programs that you are called upon to plan are vibrant and enriching. These events can be learning opportunities, social gatherings, discussions on specific issues, opportunities for spiritual formation or all of the above. It is important that every program have identifiable outcomes. Every event is a new and exciting adventure to plan for in your own context. Only you as a leader can answer the important planning questions for each event.

Here are some of those questions.

### Where to begin?

Often a planning cycle begins with the feedback from participants of the last offering of a program from an ongoing group. To evaluate a program, the

planning group will want to use the feedback from participants. Here are some important questions to ask on a feedback sheet: What would you like to learn more about? What suggestions do you have for future programs? New program ideas might also be sparked by an expressed need or request from someone in a committee, network or group called to have a conversation about the yearnings of the faith community.

The next question a planning group will want to ask is: Why would we want to offer this program? Once you have an idea to test, gather planners together and hold a brainstorming session on what might be possible themes and methods of offering a program to fit the need. Brainstorming at the beginning helps to keep your options open. In this process there ought not be any barriers to any ideas expressed. Input and energy are usually high at this point in the planning process.

From the list of ideas you have generated a number of priorities may be chosen and they assist in forming a purpose statement. A question to ask at this point is: Does your purpose statement fit with both your group's mandate and your congregation's mission? Purpose statements do not need to be complicated but they do need to reflect your desired outcome.

It's important to put some action words in your purpose:

- to offer an opportunity to (experience, learn, discuss, enjoy, serve);
- to explore a (subject, project, issue, model);

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Team Works is a resource for congregational leaders, produced quarterly by Hamilton Conference Staff, The United Church of Canada.

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Please send feedback on this publication to John Asling, (905) 659-3343, P.O. Box 100, Carlisle, ON L0R 1H0 [jasling@hamconf.org](mailto:jasling@hamconf.org)



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- to share (ideas, resources, models for action);
- to network (connect with others doing the same ministry, be in community);
- to offer (an experience of and resources for participants that can be used elsewhere).

Once all the planning is completed, it is important to return to the purpose statement to see if you have caught all of the original vision and to assess whether you want to adjust it. The big picture, the vision and the purpose of the event come out of your thinking on why you are doing it. This will lead naturally to more planning questions: Who will your participants be? How will you accomplish your goals? When is the best time to hold the event? Where is the best place to have the program?

## Who are your participants?

Who will benefit from this event? As you begin to identify your audience, brainstorming may again offer a wide variety of suggestions around who should attend. Is it an event that would benefit from including folks from all ages or stages of life? Would your event benefit from the sharing of ideas and the experience of multiple generations? Now is also the time to explore what the best number of participants would be for your event? Is a small group of eight to 12 folks best for this discussion or study group? Would a group of between 30 and 60 persons be a good size for the event? Would you be happy to have 100 or more participants turn up? The planning group needs to determine a minimum and maximum number of participants. Available space or subject matter will often dictate the latter.

## How will you reach your goals?

Once you know why you are doing the program and who might attend, you are

ready to tackle how it should be done. What are the best methods, models or ways to offer the outcomes your purpose statement suggests for the audience you have identified? Is this a time for a small group to be together as one whole community? Do you need to plan for the small group to at least work from time to time in twos, threes or fours? Does your purpose lead you to offer theme time in plenary with workshop opportunities? Will participants have a choice of workshops?

What ways of offering the program will address the variety of needs and ways of learning? How will you address the need for some to do individual work and for others to have group involvement? How will you engage all of their senses and maintain interest and energy? Will you set your program in the context of worship, Scripture, storytelling or in a theme? Do you want to arrange for a resource or book display?

This is also the time to form a tentative agenda for the program. A principle of adult learning is to always inform participants of the agenda for the time they will be together. However, while planners need to have a detailed agenda with all the times blocked in, participants need only the outline of what will happen with beginning and ending times for each section. Consider the stewardship of paper and post the agenda on flip charts in one or two visible areas rather than making multiple copies.

Make sure someone is responsible for ensuring that leaders have a detailed agenda and that participants have an outline of the blocks of time. Someone needs to take responsibility for the resource display table.

### **Who will lead your program?**

Once you have determined how your program will work, you need to focus on who will lead you or facilitate the discussion. If this is a small group happening, do you need one facilitator to give input and engage the group in the process you have designed? Who do you know who might offer the workshop material you might want conveyed? Who would be able to offer the reflections you desire in connection to your theme? Who would be the best person to carry forward your agenda? Do you need an overall facilitator for the time the group is gathered? Who is best suited to prepare and lead worship, community building or theological reflection? Who will be responsible for the recruitment of the leadership?

Once the leadership team is in place, be courteous and send a written confirmation of their commitment to them. Include a copy of the publicity, the flier or brochure and any other particulars of the event, for example: the material they need to offer the workshop to others and an agenda. This is also the time to communicate any requests you have of the leader, for example: a description of the workshop, a biography to help for introduction, space, set up and equipment needs. Do you want to have copies of any workshop handouts for all participants, even those who cannot attend all the offerings? Will you cover costs of those handouts? Will you pay for other costs of the leader?

### **Where is a suitable location?**

If it is a congregational event, what space is best used to accommodate the number you are hoping to have accept your invitation to come? If your event is for a wider group, determine the geographical center for your constituency. Is there a place in that area that is easily accessible from a number of directions? Is there enough parking available? Are there plenary and break out spaces to suit your needs? What about the use of kitchen facilities and equipment for food preparation and serving? Would the location offer the presentation needs required: audiovisual equipment, sound system? Is the space accessible on all levels to anyone who might come? Some of these questions might need to be returned to as you plan the event and identify the needs for the presentation. Who is to be responsible for arranging the location

and seeing to the needs for space for the event? Who will do the setup at the time of the event? Who is to be responsible for refreshments?

### **When is the best time for your program?**

What else is happening in the church or area at this time? What season of the church year is best for this event? The seasons of Advent and Lent lend themselves for study and worship and reflection programs. The fall is often an excellent time for leaders' training events while the spring is a good time to begin planning for the next program year. If the need is high, anytime is a good time. Looking at the big calendar picture for congregational, Presbytery and Conference needs is a good way to determine timing. Timing decisions require knowing your audience. Are they available daytimes during the week or are evenings best? Is Saturday a good time to reach the majority? Timing also requires decisions about the number of hours you will need to meet your stated outcome and the method that you have chosen. The month, day, beginning and ending are time considerations. If you are planning ahead, the year may also need to be considered.

### **What will be the cost of the event?**

The hard facts of budgeting are now at hand. What expenses will you have? Space rental or donation, leaders' honoraria and expenses, handouts for participants, food, publicity, equipment rental and decorations all need to be considered. Where will you receive funding: participants' registration, group budget lines, grants? It is as important to frame a budget as it is important at the end to do a statement of income and expenses for future reference. Who will be responsible for the budget and seeing that expenses are taken care of and recorded?

### **How will you publicize your event?**

What will be the sizzle that will be inviting and draw the participants to your program? The basic need of publicity, beyond invitation, is to inform folks about who the event is for, why they would want to attend and then tell where and when it will take place, the cost, how to register and what the deadline is. Plan to make your flier or brochure as attractive as possible, with a logo or distinctive colour so it will stand out in the midst of all the other material received these days. Be sure to include the name of the sponsoring

group and how to get further information. Consider what information you need from participants. If you are offering a meal or meals, do you need dietary information? Name, address, phone, email and congregation may be information you need to make contact in case of cancellation. Remember that there are privacy policies to be considered and any information received is to be treated with care. Only use it for stated purposes.

Make a list of all the ways to distribute your information: in the church bulletin or newsletter, personal invitation, your congregation's web-site, at announcement time during worship. If your program is for a wider audience, decide how you want to inform the audience it is for. Hamilton Conference has a monthly mailing called HamPack that can sometimes be used. (Call John Asling or Barbara Hampson for more information.) *Contact*, the Hamilton Conference insert in the *Observer*, is another way to publicize your event. It is published six times a year. Be in touch with the editors at [drusso@vaxxine.com](mailto:drusso@vaxxine.com). Again, the Hamilton Conference web site ([www.hamconf.org](http://www.hamconf.org)) might also be an option. Be in touch with [bhampson@hamconf.org](mailto:bhampson@hamconf.org).

Presbytery announcements and personal invitations are also important. Check and recheck your information. A good idea is to have someone who is not on the planning group read it to see if it is inviting and that all the information is clear. Do you need to include a map to the location? It is always helpful for participants to have the phone number for where they will be. Who will be responsible for the various ways you will advertise your event? Who will be responsible for receiving registrations?

When all the above pieces of the planning puzzle are in place, it is time to return to the beginning of your process and check each activity you have on the agenda against your purpose or desired outcome statement. Do you need to revise the agenda or the statement? Is there time for people to learn, be together, enjoy, share their ideas and stories?

### **The time is now...**

Those responsible for setting up have done their jobs. Refreshments are ready. Signs are in place to direct

folks to coat racks, washrooms and the registration area. Leaders and participants will arrive soon. There is a registration table with nametags and registration information at hand and a people person ready to welcome arrivals. Each leader has an assigned greeter who will welcome and help with last minute setup of their material. The agenda facilitator is keeping an eye on the time and, at the right time, gathers the group for the beginning on time. All that has been planned happens. At the end of the time there is a participants' feedback form to complete and hand in for the learning of the planners and to use as the beginning of the next program. When all is said and done, the planning group or those assigned see that the all the spaces used are put back in the order they were found.

And there is more. Who is to be responsible for paying all the expenses and seeing that there is a record of receipts and expenses? Who will be responsible for collating the feedback information? Who will write thank you notes to leaders, to the facility, to anyone who did specific work to make it all happen? (It is helpful for all leaders to receive the collation of the feedback comments to assist in their planning of their next presentation.) When will the planning group meet to do its evaluation of the event and note what they would or would not do the next time?

When this meeting happens, the planning cycle is complete and it may be time to begin again, brainstorming about the needs and priorities and about how, and if a new event is needed, what it might look like, how it is going to get planned and who will lead it.

Planning is part of the adventure of offering a program or event for the benefit of others. There is much satisfaction in facilitating a well planned event, whether your tasks are done far in advance of the event or happen up front at the time. I hope these suggestions and questions will be helpful the next time you are the planner or part of a planning group!

*Ann Fleming is the Hamilton Conference Minister for Christian Nurture: Leadership Development, Worship & Stewardship Education.*