

PANDEMIC-ERA PLANNING

4 tips from a longtime meeting professional in the religious sector

By Jamie B. Kervin

The Bible has so much to say about meeting together. The book of Hebrews implies that it serves to encourage one another toward love and good works. In the New Testament, the disciples break bread together often, and they encourage all of the churches to do the same. Even the Old Testament speaks consistently about the people assembling together. As both a nonprofit ministry of Cru and a third-party meeting planning company that serves the Christian ministry market, Arrowhead Conferences & Events is committed to helping our clients follow Jesus's teachings about gathering for the purpose of taking the Gospel to the end of the world. And although we have certainly had to pivot toward virtual events when necessary, no matter what industry you're in, nothing will ever replace the experience of meeting together. There is an element to an in-person meeting that cannot be replicated virtually. I would argue that, with few exceptions, they are more efficient and produce better results.

So how do you make that happen in a time where social distancing seems to be the antithesis of gathering together?

1. Plan. Think through every element of your event and how it could be impacted by new safety protocols before you distribute your RFP. If your venue is already contracted for a future meeting, go back to that venue and ask the appropriate questions. Consider an addendum to your original agreement. What additional requests do you need to make of a venue? Can the hotel provide a large enough space to socially distance? Are the hotel's restaurants open, and at what capacity? What are the current safety protocols? What does meal service currently look like?

After your venue is selected and contracted (making sure your force majeure language is updated and that you're reasonably comfortable with your ability to cancel should it become necessary), thoroughly consider your registration process and what changes need to be implemented. Do your attendees need to sign a waiver releasing you from liability should they get sick? Do you need to limit attendance?

Consider the program schedule and allow enough time to wipe down mics and podiums between speakers. Build in additional time between sessions to safely move attendees in and out of meeting rooms. You may need to consider not holding breakouts.

2. Communicate. Determine your protocols (temperature checks upon entry, face masks and/or social distancing requirements, denied entry should a participant not meet the communicated guidelines, etc.) and clearly communicate those expectations to your attendees, in writing. Provide as much information to attendees *before*


they register so they are able to make an informed decision on whether the event is appropriate for them. Provide a thorough FAQ page on your website or in your registration materials. If your attendees are coming from all over the country, remember that their experience with COVID-19 might be different than yours, so never assume they know

your expectations. People from rural areas likely have a very different perspective than attendees from urban cities.

Although you want to take every precaution to keep your attendees as safe as possible, you don't want to guarantee their safety. Avoid statements like "We are taking every precaution to guarantee your safety." Instead, consider statements like "We are following all guidelines provided by the CDC and encourage you to do the same."

3. Collaborate. This is new for all of us. I have close to 20 years in this industry and have never experienced anything like this. We're all learning from one another. Work very closely with your venue. Hopefully they will have held an in-person meeting by the time your meeting comes around. Lean on their insight and allow them to help you in ways you possibly never have before.

Work with the CVB to determine current city and



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state guidelines for in-person gatherings. Ask for their assistance and input on how best to stay within those guidelines for your event.

4. **Be flexible.** I am hopeful that one day, in the not-so-distant future, our industry will return to normal. Until that time, know that if there is one thing that's constant right now, it's change. Be prepared to change meeting rooms, meeting setups, for a speaker to have to quarantine and not be able to attend your event, for 10 percent of your attendees to cancel at the last minute, etc. But also be prepared for exceptional things to happen. Be prepared for overwhelming gratitude from your attendees that they're getting to meet in person. And be prepared to look back on all of this one day and realize how much you learned, and how much you and your attendees were changed for the better.

***Jamie Kervin** is Senior Account Manager for **Arrowhead Conferences & Events**, a ministry that provides Christian meeting planning services. Kervin previously served as Senior Sales Manager with **Hilton Hotels**, Event Coordinator for the **Committee on Discipleship Ministries** of the **Presbyterian Church in America**, and public relations professional for a high-tech public relations firm.*