

# Where to Begin

When planning an event there are many factors to consider including your event site, your participants, and your budget. Some people may start with a full vision of the event in their head. Others may simply know the location where they want to gather, who they want to attend, or what their budget looks like. There is no right order or place to start – starting anywhere is a great first step! Once you make one decision, the others will follow.

For example, you may start with an event location. The size capacity of the site will help you to determine the number of participants allowed at your gathering. It can also work the other way around where you start with a goal for attendance numbers and find a location that can host that many people. If your event requires shared transportation, this may also affect your event size or budget. For example, the number of seats in a van or bus you are renting may limit the number of participants who can register.

Another decision to keep in mind as you begin planning is the type(s) of participants who will be invited to register for your event. Your event might welcome youth participants based on specific ages or grade levels, young adults, adult advisors/chaperones, families, or intergenerational participants. These participants could be invited from your church, your local community beyond your congregation, your presbytery, synod, or geographic region, or a specific national group or caucus.

Budget is often a main driving factor in choosing the number of participants or event location. Determining your budget directly affects your event registration fee, or what you are asking participants to pay to attend. Make sure this fee is as affordable as possible and will not exclude anyone. Get creative and ask for help where possible to keep expenses down. Find out if you have access to funds to underwrite some of these costs or to provide scholarships. Funding may be available at the church or mid council level and is worth looking into when creating a budget. Keep in mind that meeting the conditions of any grant you receive may also influence your decisions while planning.

Building a budget can feel daunting. Simply put, building a budget is estimating all expenses, then subtracting any funding you might have available. Seeing what the difference is can help you decide on your registration cost. Divide that difference by the estimated number of attendees to come up with the per person cost. Update your expenses and revenue/funding as you go to stay on track. Also keep an eye on your estimated number of attendees.

Some categories of expenses to consider when building a budget include venue, lodging, food, transportation, leadership honorariums, supplies, printed materials, scholarships, and any necessary equipment rentals (including any audiovisual).

## **BUILDING A TEAM**

If you are able, we strongly recommend not doing this alone. Invite a small team to join you in the planning process. No one brain should hold all the information. While one person can be the director or point person, plans are always richer when more minds and hearts are involved.

To plan a diverse and inclusive event, it is important to start with your planning team. Build a team that truly represents who your audience is and should be. If this event is for youth, invite some youth to be on your team. If this is a presbytery or regional gathering, invite folks who represent the different churches and groups that will be attending. Include people who might not already be on your radar and reach out to churches that are different from your own. This is critical. The investment in your gathering will be stronger, diversity and inclusion will be more faithful, promotion will begin in a shared manner and financial contributions can be greater.

Reach out to presbytery staff about who you might contact from other churches in your area. It is important to consider things like their membership demographics, New Worshiping Communities and well-established congregations, rural, suburban, and urban churches, and churches with youth ministry programs of every size – including those without a current program.

As you reach out to churches, try to recruit adults (of all ages) and youth who might not be directly involved in youth ministry. Find and invite volunteers who have gifts in planning, mission, choreography, decoration, party planning, counseling, non-profit endeavors that involve teenagers, etc. This can help to cultivate leadership and participation in the greater church and give youth workers a break, as well as the opportunity for them to focus on bringing youth to your event. Bottom line – build a team that truly represents who your audience is and should be.

If you have a large planning team, it can be helpful to establish a basic team structure and planning timeline. Your basic team structure can be comprised of volunteers or smaller teams focused on specific elements such as registration & promotion, community & safety, hospitality, budget, study/small groups, worship & prayer, music, or recreation.

No matter how you decide to structure your team, provide consistent communication. Hold an initial meeting to get to know everyone. Follow up with an email or note to say thank you. Send regular emails or group texts to communicate key decisions and celebrate accomplishments. Checking in along the way helps to increase engagement in the process. It also allows team members to stay informed and speak knowledgeably and excitedly when promoting the event.

## SITE SELECTION

Most events will likely take place at your church or another church in your community. A camp or conference center is another great option for an overnight, regional, or presbytery event. You may also need to take distance and cost of travel into account when thinking about your event location. Often the size of your event and your budget will determine your site.

If your budget allows, it can be fun to host a hotel-based retreat. We recommend looking for a hotel that includes free breakfast, a pool (indoor if your event is during colder months) and meeting space. Free breakfast will save money and is one less thing for you to coordinate. A pool provides a great way to relax during free time and is built-in recreation. Meeting space will allow you to conduct programming and gather together onsite. You may also find it slightly easier to recruit adult leadership since hotels can provide more privacy, a better bed, and easy coffee options.

### Additional Hotel Tips

- Reach out to a hotel's group sales department to inquire about a block of rooms.
  - Ask about a reduced or comped meeting space rental for your event.
  - Find out their policies on outside food and onsite catering costs (if any).
- If hotel pricing is high, a little bit of flexibility can go a long way.
  - Ask about better rates on a different weekend.
  - Find out when the off-season is and plan an event then.
  - If transportation allows, look at properties in less-busy areas.
- Read all contracts carefully! Pay particular attention to deadlines & attrition.
  - Important deadlines may include a contract cancellation deadline and rooming list deadline.
  - Attrition is the percentage of your room block that you are required to fill by the cutoff date.

A few other things to consider in terms of site selection include accessibility, safety, and seasonal needs. The site should be accessible and hospitable to all participants. For example, there should be ADA accessible rooms and entrances. You might not know all of your participants' needs prior to registration, so it is important to take these things into account on the front end. Make note of any safety and security measures that are in place at the venue. Consider different seasonal needs and how these might be dealt with onsite. For example, providing air conditioning during hot months, heating during cold months, and rain plans for outdoor activities. Finally, keep in mind that some larger venues might host different groups onsite at the same time. Find out how that might look and if it will work for your specific audience and schedule.