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INDIANA CONVENTION CENTER & LUCAS OIL STADIUM®
Religious conferences may sometimes generate less attention from local news media compared to giant trade shows like CONEXPO-CON/AGG, International CES, or International Manufacturing Technology Show. Nevertheless, they are a steady and reliable sector for many cities across the U.S., bringing roughly 5 million attendees to religious conferences each year, according to the 2012 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches (the most recent study).

Consider Pope Francis’ visit to Philadelphia earlier this year in conjunction with the World Meeting of Families. That visit alone brought more than 20,000 people to the Philadelphia Convention Center. The convention had about 250 exhibitors, brought in more than 1,000 members of the press and 1,200 first responders who staged at the convention center as a result of the Papal visit that occurred during the convention. About another 1 million people flocked to the city just to see the Pope and attend one of the Roman Catholic Masses conducted by him during the visit.

Of course, most religious conferences draw considerably fewer people than the Pope brought to town, even though Catholics represent about 20% of the U.S. population (51 million people), according to a 2014 Pew Research report. That’s the largest religious group in the U.S. (Southern Baptists are the largest Protestant group with 16 million members.) But these groups are just two among many that host events for a variety of educational, youth development and social issue discussions each year.

The impact of their events is significant to many communities. There are more than 500 meeting planners who are members of the Christian Meeting & Convention Association and stage events for regional and national religious organizations, school groups and youth rallies. And there are roughly 30,000 private religious schools with a combined 5 million students in the U.S., making religious education conferences important as teachers and administrators seek new ways to keep religious education at the forefront in modern society.

Some events are narrowly focused but still provide a boost to local economies, convention centers and hotels across the U.S. There are conferences devoted to promoting ministries within the religion and those promoting youth development and missions. And those that draw professionals who want to offer their services to church-related businesses.

The Baltimore Business Journal reported a $9 million economic impact in that city for hosting the 2013 American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literatures annual meetings. The former brought 10,500 people to town. Rochester, NY generated about $6 million from regional Jehovah’s Witnesses conventions in 2011. Two years later, Reading, PA estimated Jehovah’s Witnesses members had generated about $100 million during the first eight years of the convention center’s existence.

The economic impact is significant enough that cities and states sometimes have to scramble to keep religious conferences in town. That was the case earlier this year when the Disciples of Christ threatened to cancel its 2017 event in Indianapolis as a result of an unpopular ‘religious freedom’ law that the church perceived as threatening discrimination against some of the 8,000 members expected to attend. The issue was resolved in April with state legislators. Visit Indy estimated that a cancellation would cost the city about $5.9 million.

From the organizer’s standpoint, there always are challenges and rewards to conducting religious conferences. Here we take a look at some of those challenges and ways that convention and visitor bureaus can help, as well as how these groups are keeping up with the times through social media and innovative audio-visual elements.
Every sector of the trade show industry faces its own set of challenges driven by economic, social, business, or industry events. Trade Show Executive asked some of the leading religious convention and trade show professionals what they see as their biggest challenges today and how they are trying to address them. Below are their replies.

DEDRA HEROD
Director, Event Experiences, Christian Leadership Alliance

“We have a solid core that is committed to our annual event, but there are so many others who still need to discover and experience it. Our greatest challenge is finding ways to engage new people and to tell the significance of our ministry story. We are running an ad in a national publication promoting the event and we have targeted universities and colleges to attract a new and younger demographic.

“We never assign the same tracks in the same way---we try to mix it up so (attendees) have a different perspective every year. This year, we’re offering an emphasis on emerging leaders and church leadership and bringing in more volunteers to create a ‘returning home’ feeling.

“Our second biggest challenge is keeping leaders who live in the city committed to attending. They often comment how hard it is to be fully present at the event when it is the same city as their offices. We plan to give them recommendations about how to unplug from the office even when you don’t have far to go to get to the event.

“And finally, we need to find new ways to make a venue appealing, especially after we have used it for several years. Conferences usually give people a reason to go away and visit someplace new. If your venue is not resort-like, then it requires more effort to make the location appealing. We have placed extraordinary effort on working with the local tourist bureau to highlight all there is to do in the city and some discounts to motivate them to do it.”

DIANE MILLER
Meeting Arrangements Coordinator, Church of Nazarene

“There are always economic challenges and finding a location is always a challenge because of the total space requirement. We can’t go to most first-tier cities because the finances don’t work for us. We have to consider housing rates, rental fees, whether the facility is union or non-union---everything is considered in terms of cost. Some cities would be great locations but the convention centers are too small for what we need.

“Another challenge is that our demographics are changing, as is true with many organizations. A lot of our constituency was through colleges, so
the conference was considered more of a ‘family reunion’ time and people didn’t skip certain events. Today, not as many people are attending the colleges and so aren’t forming those relationships we previously counted on. It makes a difference in what they want from the event, so we have to teach them why they should come as well as what the conference is about.”

““Our biggest challenge is finding a venue that’s the right size for us at the right price. We’re not big enough (with 2,500 attendees) to get attention from the large convention centers but we’re too large for some of the hotel convention centers, and there’s always a price point issue. We’re pretty straightforward with venues—either they are interested in bidding or not. We tell them ‘here’s what we need and here’s what we have to work with’ ---then we ask the cost.

“The second issue we consider is the ambiance among those venues that are affordable and a good fit for us and that meet our location parameters. For instance, we’re looking at Cincinnati, Columbus, Indianapolis, Detroit, Cleveland and Toledo for our next event. There aren’t any tricks about it—we’re just honest about what we can do and then it’s a question of which one has the better ambiance once we’ve narrowed down the financial end. A bit of a bidding war is sometimes a good thing.”

BASHARAT SALEEM
Director of Conventions, Marketing & Special Projects, Islamic Society of North America

“The biggest challenge is to find an appropriate venue in terms of space layout as well as choices in terms of food. Most venues have an exclusive policy on food and other outside vendors like A/V, which creates a problem and lack of options for our attendees. Because our events vary in size from a few hundred to several thousand (at the annual convention), we have to find suitable venues for (all of them). Depending on the need, we also try to negotiate with the venue to accommodate some of our needs within their policy guidelines.”

AMY DURKIN
Director of events, National Catholic Educational Association

“Our biggest challenge is keeping it fresh—keeping attendees engaged and giving them reasons to come back. Our convention has been around since 1904 (except for 1943 and 1945), and in the past 20 to 30 years, it has focused on professional and exhibits. In professional development, it was always theater style with a panel or presenter, and death by Power Point. That’s not what adult education is about (today). We’re making a conscious effort to be more interactive, getting away from the theater-style setting. Instead, we’re going to round-table setups for attendees so they can discuss issues with one another.

“We’re also partnering with other speakers. This year we had an ‘I Catholic’ session with an Apple educator who put together I-technologies that provided examples of education using these tools. We’re calling it STREAM: science, technology, religion, engineering, arts and math. It’s an initiative that strives to combine research and online resources. We plan to have a STREAM Playground in one of the ballrooms. Our vision is to have kiosks where attendees can engage one-on-one with presenters in shorter sessions. They can have I-pads and other devices to use at the kiosks. Last year, we called it ‘I Catholic: the Classroom of the future.”

“We also went through a reorganization as of July 1, 2015. We’ll be using the next convention as a public launch of the new logo and the new face of NCEA. The branding is being finalized over the next few months to find new ways to promote our sessions, bookstore and other elements and what tools we want to use.”

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“We produce conferences for both youth and adults. For the youth events, the No. 1 challenge is attendance and how to increase our numbers because there’s a lot of competition from other events. We need to do a better job at selling ours as the best choice and increase the profile of our event. When we get buy-in from the local churches, we get better attendance. If we don’t, then the kids don’t come. The question we (as organizers) need to answer is how do we better communicate the value of the event to our members?”

“Some of our ideas to increase attendance cross into social media. We’ve ramped up live streaming this year to convince others to attend and we had good participation because the gatekeepers who make the decisions got a better idea of what the conference is like. We’re also trying to increase donations for scholarships to the conference and looking at more direct marketing to members so that they have a better idea of what the event encompasses.”

“Any time you make multiple changes, you don’t know which piece of those changes affected the outcome. This year we made a couple of major changes. One was to hold the event in San Diego. It’s an ideal location that’s probably on every planner’s wish list. But in order to do that, we had to alter the typical date pattern by a couple of weeks, moving it to the first weekend in January after the holidays. That makes it a bigger challenge to educate the audience about the different date pattern (from the usual later weekend in January). In this case, it’s possible that the proximity to the holidays, kids getting back to school after the holidays and other such things could impact the event. So far, we’ve broken several registration records. That part is great—but it is because of the city or the dates? It’s hard to tell. So that’s the biggest challenge for us so far.”

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BY SANDI CAIN News editor
The use of mobile apps and social media is skyrocketing as show managers look to enhance service, speed up communications, reduce their environmental footprint, and of course create buzz. Religious conference organizers have come up with some creative new approaches that hit the bull’s-eye ideal for the unique needs and practices of their sector.

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) used an app for the first time this year that generated a lot of traffic and helped with communication. However, the chat feature was controlled and the Instagram posts were limited so as not to interfere with session content and ensure online safety.

Amy Durkin, director of events for the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), said that group is heading into its third year using mobile apps and the group is getting better at implementing them each year. Last year, the NCEA hired a social media coordinator and, with the director of marketing, decided on what things to try first. “We wanted to be relevant without overwhelming people,” Durkin said. For 2016, the new coordinator came up with a social media contest structured in a manner similar to March Madness for Catholic schools.

Students and others could become a fan of the school’s Facebook page, nominate teachers, and then invite those teachers to solicit votes in an effort to win their bracket. Each bracket winner earned free convention registration and travel costs. Second-place winners received registration for the conference only. Durkin said the effort was the first of its kind for NCEA and garnered 1,000 new likes on Facebook. It also generated 11,800 entries, 412 likes, 3,200 shares and 51,000 visits.

Durkin said the effort was the first of its kind for NCEA and garnered 1,000 new likes on Facebook. It also generated 11,800 entries, 412 likes, 3,200 shares and 51,000 visits.

Dedra Herod, director of event experiences for the Christian Leadership Alliance, said that group uses a mobile app before, during and after their event. That includes what they call a social media “swat team” to help keep the chatter going about the event on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Pinterest, Google+ and Periscope. “We believe in the synergy and power that happens with (social media),” she said. As a result, the group has an extensive marketing campaign using both social and traditional methods to promote the conference and other learning experiences, she said.

The Religious Conference Management Association is using an app to manage a citywide scavenger hunt designed to better connect attendees of the conference with new people. The hunt involves a search for more than $1,000 in gift cards over the three days of the conference. Attendees are encouraged to download the app before they arrive in San Diego. Using the app, they create teams that must include one meeting planner, one supplier and one RCMA member at minimum. Once set up, the app will provide a task list for each team to accomplish.

The National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) tried a social media wall for the first time this year, sponsored by one of the universities. Director of marketing Jeannie Bross-Judge said it was successful enough that the group is looking at expanding sponsorship opportunities among colleges and universities to stage more of these throughout the venue in the future. “It’s good for them and it keeps (the sites) affordable,” she said. “The youth attendees love to see themselves on the screen.”

While all of these social media efforts are designed for better overall engagement, the biggest challenge to implementing them often is cost. “We need to keep pace with technology, but it results in huge budget increases,” Bross-Judge said. “As a not-for-profit, we need to find funding for that service.”

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Fish Bowl - A Creative Concept at the NCEA

The National Catholic Educational Association last year took a step toward the future, converting portions of its program to more innovative models through a program called “I Catholic: the Classroom of the Future” organized by association member and award-winning educator Fredy Padovan, who suggested doing some iPad sessions to spic up the program.

Padovan, the Dean of Innovation and Technology at a Miami high school who also won a 2012 NCEA Education Excellence award, spoke at one NCEA conference and ended up presenting a number of very different session ideas to the organizing committee. The rest was history.

“I always wondered why we learn about technology sitting in rows in front of a presenter,” Padovan said. So he brought in people to present interactive programs that would help people learn how to use the iPad in the classroom to work on group projects and share data from one device to another.

“This is what the 21st century classrooms look like,” Padovan said. He used a Twitter hashtag to entice participants and set up a “playground” in one of the conference rooms so educators could learn to incorporate digital tools in the classroom. Attendees drove the discussions and received valuable hands-on training.

Using two classrooms, Padovan created one space for 32 students at student desks on wheels that could be reconfigured for teamwork. Knowing that not all participants would want to be the proverbial guinea pigs in the 32 seats, he also created a fishbowl—a U-shaped area for up to 120 observers outside the 32 active participants—where everything the teacher was seeing (and what the students were doing) was projected to the outside audience.

The goal, he said was to ensure that participants learn a new skill they can implement in the classroom, such as using an iPad to create 3D models and export those to a 3D printer to create digital art through teamwork.

“It takes social media beyond to social digital interaction,” Padovan said.

This year, a playground will be one aspect of every session block offered, presented by teachers who already use these tools in the classroom.

“People respond to sessions that are for educators by educators,” he said.

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