

## **Gospel Centered Events** **Retreats, Conferences and Workshops**

There are some women who simply love going to retreats, conferences and workshops. They can be worship experiences that are focused on igniting my heart for Jesus, they can be workshops that inspire me to action, and they can be conferences that engage my brain. Honestly, if I could justify the time and expense, I'd go to almost everyone of them out there. I think what I enjoy most about them, is not that this is information or activities I couldn't do on my own, at home. I can grab my bible and read the scriptures, pull down a book on apologetics or theology from my bookshelf, and I can put on my favorite worship CD and crank the volume. Almost every popular speaker and worship artist has something I can download and listen to when ever I desire.

However, there is something about being pulled away from the every day things that I am responsible for and fully immersing myself in these events. There are no distractions. I don't have to think about anything else, not even what I am going to eat. Chances are, I'm eating at the first restaurant I come to when I walk out of the doors. Because I like going to these events, I also love planning them for women. I see them as valuable as any other method of reaching the women in the church and community, and they are often opportunity to corporately worship with my sisters in Christ from around the state... country... and sometimes even the world. PRAISE GOD that we can do this!

As much fun as they are, we have to be realistic... they are a LOT of work. They can also get very expensive, if you are not carefully watching your budget. The benefit of these types of events is that they are usually paid for by the attendees. There is little money (if any) coming from the ministry budget itself. Before we dig into the details, lets define what these events are.

**Workshops** - A workshop is generally a short term event. It may be a single day, or even a couple of hours. Workshops are generally very focused on a particular subject. Your church may have offered something like a workshop in the past, like a parenting workshop with a guest speaker. Our church hosted a workshop for marriages, with a local Christian counselor. They may be even more focused than that, like a workshop for parents of the youth group about internet safety. Great workshop ideas for a women's ministry might include: How To Study Your Bible, How to Be a Mentor, How to Write a Devotion, How to Lead a Small Group, etc. Workshops are sometimes offered for free, other times there may be a small fee involved.

**Conferences** – Conferences are generally large events, where the attendees are there for multiple days. If a local church is hosting a conference, you may not need hotel accommodations. However, if you are attending a conference hosted by an organization, you may need to plan for a hotel. Conferences are usually a big deal to put together, and often women's ministries will attend conference put on by larger ministries or organizations. Then the women's ministry only has to focus on working out the travel and lodging arrangements. Occasionally, however, a church will attempt to tackle a conference on their own. These require long term planning strategies and many volunteers. Either way, conferences are generally more expensive than a workshop. On average, it can range from \$100- \$150 or more for the conference ticket alone, and there may be added expenses for food, transportation and hotel.

Conferences will often include some sort of musical praise/worship portion, multiple speakers either speaking on independent topics or part of an overall theme, and what are known as “breakaway” sessions. These are generally mini workshops during the course of the conference. They are not always related to the overall theme of the conference, but various subjects of interest to those attending.

Conferences will have some sort of merchandising area, if put on by organizations, where you can purchase books from the authors who might be speaking, conference memorabilia, etc.

Simulcasts - In the last several years, a new concept has been introduced called the “Live Simulcast” and I would categorize this as a mini conference. Because, essentially, that is exactly what it is. These events are usually put on by well known organizations. They will select a city to hold a live event, and then for those who don't want to travel you can attend a simulcast at a church closer to your home. For example, the live event could take place in New York, but you live in Florida. Or, the live event could take place in London, England and you are in South America. A simulcast means that you are watching the live event, at the same time as those sitting in the actual audience. A local church will sign up & pay a fee to be a host location. A recent simulcast I attended was just \$20 per woman, however if I were at the live event the cost would have been \$100.

Simulcasts have given women who normally couldn't afford to attend an event, a better option. They are usually single day events, so there is no hotel costs. Many of these events will include lunch, so there is minimal (if any) food expense. And, most women can find one within reasonable driving distances, limiting the expense of travel. For the hosting church, a simulcast only requires signing up with the organization, taking the payments, arranging the lunch, and being present for the event. Since the simulcast is usually promoted highly by the organization and speaker, you will also find simulcasts to be a great way for people in your community to learn about your church. They may get an announcement or hear on the radio a simulcast is coming up, log into the organization's website to find their nearest location and your church pops up.

Retreats – Retreats are very common for women's ministries because they are a mixture of speakers/ workshops, and fun activities. Almost always retreats are out of town, on purpose, and the price of the retreat will include lodging and food. The goal of a retreat is to give women an opportunity to break away from their every day lives, retreating into God's presence, resting in Him, and refueling their spirit. Amongst the speakers, and fun activities, down time is usually planned into the agenda; to give women an opportunity to reflect on what they are experiencing in the retreat and what God is laying on their hearts.

One of the beautiful things about these larger events is that they are, by their very nature, gospel centered. A parenting workshop is going to include biblical principles of parenting. A retreat is going to have at least equal parts of gospel and fun. Conferences and Simulcasts are going to be filled with opportunities to hear the gospel, dig into the Word, and pull us into corporate worship. Smaller, fellowship events, we often will find ourselves having to be more intentional in the planning & not leave the gospel out. I believe this is in part because we come at fellowship from a different direction than we do conferences.

For this presentation we are going to focus more on the workshops, conferences, and simulcasts. In the next presentation we will expound on planning a retreat.

The good news about Conferences, Workshops and Simulcasts is that you have the option to attend them instead of planning them. For a women's ministry team that is just starting out, or who doesn't have a team member with the Spiritual Gift of administration, attending one versus planning one is **THE BEST OPTION**.

With technology at our fingertips we can find these events with a simple internet search. Look up “Christian Women's Conference” and you'll get many options to choose from. There are some larger

ones, that will visit nearly every city, and even multiple countries. Then you may find ones that are more regionally based, that have a few select conferences in a tri-state area. They can be found in large churches and enormous arenas. The price will vary based on these details. Most conferences will offer group discounts to your women's ministry, as long as you meet their required minimum.

In the past, a church would have buy up a chunk of tickets (either taking a deposit or full amount from the women in advance, or outright buying a conservative number of tickets & recouping expense later). Now, technology has allowed these conferences to offer discount codes to churches. Instead of buying group tickets, and assuming the responsibility for unsold tickets, each person buys their own using the discount code. This is fairly common with the larger conferences, the smaller ones you may still have to resort to collecting the money as a church ... or forgoing the discount. Additionally, some churches will reserve a block of hotel rooms (to ensure their ladies all have roommates and are nearby each other in the hotel). Other churches have chosen to leave hotel arrangements to the individuals. Since the conferences usually arrange a special conference pricing with local hotels, there really is no fiscal benefit to the church taking care of lodging. It is usually for the purpose of keeping their group together at the hotel, making it easier on carpooling to the conference site, and for socializing after.

I have known of several churches where the women's ministry uses the conference as an opportunity for team bonding. The leadership team will head up a day earlier than the rest of the women. If the timing is right, they might even use this time to plan out their calendar. There are also several conference that will hold a special event the evening before the conference begins that is exclusive to women's ministry leaders. They are usually called "pre-conference" events, and will have additional pricing.

The benefit of the conference setting, is that you are not having to do any of the work yourself. You get to sit back and enjoy the conference with the rest of the women from your church. At the same time, that means your are also subject to whatever the organization has decided the conference is going to address.

I have been to conferences where the speakers were speaking from their new book. This is NOT a discredit to what these speakers had to say, and they have been amazing conferences, so please do not misunderstand me. They were totally gospel centered, many women were moved by the speakers, and those books were exactly what someone might have needed at the moment in their own life, to deal with a certain issue. These conference are very much geared toward motivation and inspiration, their worship sessions are usually amazing shows, and certainly the sense of fellowship is strong amongst the group. They are also, good events to bring guests too. A new Christian, that woman you have been trying to reach at your work, or even a family member you are trying to introduce to the greater family of believers. All of this said, make no mistake the conference was an avenue in which the organization was introducing you to their body of authors and teachers, hoping you will invest in their products for your personal use or church studies. These conferences may, or may not, have break away sessions. I've seen it go both ways, some will include lunch, some won't. When promoting these events to your members, make sure you are clear about what the expenses cover and what they don't.

I have also been to conferences that are very cerebral, they have some corporate worship opportunities, but the greater part of the conference is education based. This conference may be a bit intimidating to a new believer, but don't naturally exclude them from the invitation. They can learn a lot at these types of conferences. The speakers at these conferences are VERY different than the previously discussed conference style. They may be a bit dry, and straight to the point, the speaker may spend an hour addressing in depth a single chapter of the bible. These conferences almost always have workshops

and they can be just as intense. You might be choosing between systematic theology, inner city evangelism, ministering to the handicap... all the way to controversial subjects like homosexuality, abortion, and understanding court mandated reporting. A conference like this is aimed at people who are serving in ministry, but they are incredibly valuable to anyone who attends. I've also noticed that these conferences are the most common to offer student discounts, which is often better than the group discounted price. If you are taking CLI courses, you are a student, take advantage of those discounts when available.

Since these conference can be pricey, this is a great opportunity for the ministry to work with your benefactor or the church in regards to scholarships. What I find is that many who need scholarship really only need partial. They can usually afford some of the expense, but not all of it. Perhaps they can cover their ticket to the conference and their food, but the hotel is the expense that is keeping them from attending. Or, if it is local and they don't need lodging, perhaps they need help with just part of the ticket expense. Having good communication with women in your church will usually help bring these women to light. There have been times in the past, where our ministry had someone donate the full expense of a conference, but I didn't know who to offer it to. I called our Pastor's wife, and she was able to help me come up with a list of women.

If your ministry is actually collecting the funds for the event, you can ask the women who register if they would like to make a donation toward a scholarship fund. Most women will donate \$5-\$10 on top of their registration costs, and that can add up quickly. Your church might also have a policy in place for scholarships to events, so don't be afraid to speak to your Pastor, or the finance team. They will probably want to know who you are desiring to give the money to, and they may need a few days to get back to you. I don't ever recommend telling a person they are being considered for scholarships. Not even saying something along the lines of *"let me see what we can do"*. Instead, acknowledge their expressed interest in the event, and you can say something along the lines of: *"We'll do this again in the future, so don't get down about it."* Or, if they come right out and ask about scholarships, you can reply honestly that you haven't begun to review scholarship request yet, or that there are many requests that are coming in. My goal is never to give someone false hope. Work in the background, and if the funds are available, then bring them the good news!

If you find yourself in a position with more scholarship needs than funds available, request a meeting with your Pastor (or you may just send a quick email). Inform him of the situation, and those who are being discussed for scholarship. Ask for his opinion. He may know information about these women that could influence the gifting. A particular woman may be struggling with her faith, and he knows this would be good for her. It might be a woman who has lamented that she is struggling to connect with other women in the church, he may see this as a great opportunity for her. Or, he may know that this is a woman who has a history of making poor financial choices and is constantly asking for scholarships. This might be a woman who has a history of signing up for things and not showing the day of, and that scholarship money could have gone to someone else. Value his opinions because I will almost guarantee you, he has more information than you do. He may not share the WHY behind his selections, and I would simply advise you to heed those suggestions, but do not read too much into them. He may have just prayed to God to select the names for him.

There is also another option, where you simply divide the funds. It might mean partial scholarships instead of full, but it is at least something. Offer it to the women, give them a set amount of time to make a decision, and I usually ask for some sort of financial commitment. If it is a \$150 conference, and you can scholarship \$100 of it, then give them a deadline for the additional \$50. Or, ask for a \$20 deposit with their decision and then the balance paid by a set date. In doing so, you are ensuring they

are serious about their decision. If a partial scholarship isn't enough, and they can't afford the difference, you now know that you can apply those funds to the women who can. This will increase their scholarship amounts. You may also choose to put those unclaimed funds into the women's ministry account, and earmark them for future scholarship needs.

Conferences are a big ticket item, they have a hefty expense and a time commitment that not everyone is going to be able to give. They are also finite in pricing, it is what it is, there are no unexpected costs that sneak up. From a financial point, they are easy to plan for. You usually know the dates well enough in advance, that you can begin promoting and collecting money (if need be) and making arrangements. Conferences, unlike retreats, can be a little less personal feeling. So, some women's ministries may go an extra mile. They might give every woman attending a pretty notebook and pen for taking notes, or a goodie bag filled with things like pack of mints, a small pack of cookies or crackers, etc. These little gestures can mean a lot to the women who are attending the conference, and the idea is worth considering if it is within your budget.

If you decide that your women's ministry wants to try and tackle putting on a conference on your own, you will want to pay attention to the retreat segment coming up in the next presentation. The process is fairly similar.

Workshops and simulcasts are easier events to plan for, and they are generally budget friendly for the ministry and the attendees. Sometimes, they are so budget friendly, the ministry can offer them for free. They are great first projects to attempt if you are a new ministry or have never attempted to host your own event before. Although you may find that you don't need to, because they are already being offered. I am a huge fan of not "re-inventing the wheel". If another local church is offering a workshop, and it's open to the public, GO and go as a group if you can. Trust me, they will appreciate seeing your faces! However, there will be times it is best to do it on your own because of timing or you can't find the topic you'd like to address available.

The benefit of a workshop over another speaker event, like a brunch, is that it is usually much more straight forward. There is no need to set up special tables and decorations. You will most likely be sitting in your church sanctuary or in your adult education/ Sunday School rooms, if you have them. Chairs are usually set up in rows, any hand outs for the attendees can be placed in their seats waiting their arrival. A podium and a microphone might be the only tech required, unless you have a video to share or powerpoint slides that accompany the presentation. There might be some light refreshments set up in the lobby: like water, tea or coffee. As well, you may put out some fruit and muffins in the morning. If the workshop or simulcast is lengthy, you may break for lunch. I have seen churches put out tables in the lobby for lunch, and I have watched women eating in their seats. You may even dismiss the ladies to lunch at local restaurants (perhaps even arrange special pricing if they show their waiter a special card or their name tag).

In most cases very little preparation involved, because the event is about showing up and learning something more than socializing and conveying general information. If you are doing a simulcast, they price the event based on your church size. You would divide that amount by your expected attendance, add in any lunch cost, and then you have your ticket price. I suggest calculating conservatively. For example, if you notice your brunches have an attendance of 40 women, then I would expect 50-60 at a simulcast. If you get a greater attendance than that, you will have a little bit of money in your women's ministry account you can put toward future events. You might even choose to spend it on the women who are coming to the simulcast. You could put together a little goody bag for each attendee, or purchase a mini devotion book as a gift.

Just like any other women's ministry event, you need to decide if you are going to offer child care. Some things to consider in this decision include: If the event is lengthy, can we find volunteers for that much time or do we need to hire someone (this increases expense), if we are providing lunch for the women, we have to provide lunch for the children (this increases expense), is it beneficial for children to be in the childcare rooms for that many hours (or are they better off at home). It is one thing to offer free childcare for a brunch that is only two hours long, and an entirely different situation when you are talking about a workshop or simulcast that may be 5 hours or longer. I have also known of situations where a mom didn't return after the lunch break, their child was cranky and just wanted to go home. On the other hand, if you are offering a parenting workshop and you have a lot of single moms in your church or community, offering childcare may be the only way these women can attend. It may be wise to not publicize child care is going to be offered, but go directly to those women and let them know it is available for those who are truly in need and "space is limited".

Simulcasts are going to be the easiest of these two options, because really someone else has already done all the work. You just have to promote it, address the lunch/childcare options, and show up. A workshop will require a little more work on your part.

- What do we want the workshop to be about? What is the purpose or goal we are hoping to achieve?
- Do we have someone in the church who can speak on this subject, or do we need to find a video presentation or hire someone to come in?
- How much is the speaker or video going to cost? Do we have permission to play the video for a large group, or do we need to pay a fee for it?
- Do we need to pay for advertising to the community, or is this just for our women?
- Are we providing childcare?
- Are we providing lunch/dinner?
- What materials do we need/want to provide? How much will they cost?
- Where in the church do we want to hold this workshop, and how will it need to be set up?
- What are the tech needs for the speaker, and who is going to be responsible for it?

It is a very similar list to that of a brunch, but simpler. There is no worship session, no fancy decorations, and no need for multiple people covering different speaking parts. Sure, you are going to open up the workshop with a simple welcome, opening prayer and introduce speaker, but that is about it. And often, the speaker may intend to pray, so you might not even need to do that part. At the end of the workshop, you'll have a closing address, make any announcements, and you may choose to close in prayer (if the speaker didn't do that too).

They are really much simpler events over all. As a final note, I'd like to strongly suggest bathing your events in prayer, whatever they may be.

Pray about what type of events you should be doing.

Pray that they stay gospel centered.

Pray for the women who will be attending, as well as those coordinating the event.

Pray at the open and close of the event.

Pray when the event is done that God continues working in their hearts.

Many women's ministries have a prayer team, and this is their only job. They pray over the ministry, the events, the speakers, and the women who attend the events (before, during, and long after). I have

been to events where they created a prayer wall, women could write their prayers down during the course of the event. Those prayer cards would be handed over to the prayer team once the event was over. There are events in which the prayer team was visible at the event, in case anyone was in need of prayer during the course or at the close of the event. Response cards are always a great tool, regardless of the event, to have on hand. Then your guests can request more information about the church, the women's ministry, ask for prayers, or request a pastoral call or visit.

Retreats can be a much more involved process. There are some options available that can make them slightly easier, but be prepared for a lot of preparation and work. In our next segment, we are going to get into the nitty gritty details for this type of event planning.