

Towards a new paradigm for conferences

Something has been niggling at me for at least the last 10 years when it comes to conferences of all kinds, be they professional, community or church based. The prevailing model is that you get a well-known speaker, or group of them, and then get lots of people to listen to them. Up until the advent of YouTube and Livestream the prevailing model made sense. Now it no longer makes sense. Why gather a group of people together if you are only going to provide something they could access on YouTube?

Far too often we gather people together to listen to a well-known speaker, and the vast majority of people arrive and leave without ever making a meaningful connection with any other attendee or leader or member of the organizing team. Follow up beyond a feedback form is non-existent. As long as they came, and either paid for entry or gave a donation or offering, purchased books and merchandise related to the conference and thereby enhanced the reputations of the speakers and the organization putting on the conference (and their social media followings), that is considered success. Positive testimonials, healings and conversions would be a bonus.

This is a consumer driven model, not a participative or collaborative model.

It is definitely not tapping into the wisdom and experience of the people present, nor permitting connections to be made that could move careers, ministries and relationship networks to a whole new level.

This has to change, even though there are many vested interests that will resist such change.

And the change has to be well beyond the addition of a few discussion groups into the conference mix.

I believe that the Divine Renovation team are thinking along these lines, because when the DR20 conference had to be foregone due to the coronavirus pandemic, they didn't rush out to replace it with pre-recorded video since they had been planning more 'hands on' experiences than guest speakers.

So here is my vision for how a conference could be very different:

At the time of registering for the conference, participants would need to fill out a reasonably detailed survey. The survey would require answers to where participants

- feel that God is most active in their lives (to get an idea where charisms might be, and there would be long lists to choose from),
- experience burdens or callings (eg Pro-life, mental health, evangelization, prison ministry, helping people with addictions, helping people in domestic violence situations, youth ministry, ministry to the homeless, political activism, etc)
- have creative, artistic and musical talents
- write about a project or ministry that is on their heart, but currently unattainable due to lack of funding, co-workers and prayer partners
- and provide their top 5 themes from the Gallup StrengthsFinder questionnaire

Each part of that survey will assist in the planning of the conference, and in developing groups with the greatest numbers of shared interests and experiences. If there is enough prayer in the preparation and planning parts of the conference, the groups will fall into place with the Holy Spirit's fingerprints all over it.

The conference facility would need therefore to have a large room where all participants can gather, as well as at least 6 smaller rooms for groups to meet in.

Each day of the conference participants will get the opportunity in groups to interact and collaborate with people with whom they have shared interests, callings or abilities.

As far as possible such a conference would be open to all age groups, and the more intergenerational the better.

The conference would start on a Monday, in time for lunch for those who have top 5 themes in the Influencing domain and in time for 5pm Mass for other participants. Day 2/Tuesday would be devoted to charisms, Day3/Wednesday to burdens and callings, Day 4/Thursday is a combined creative day and lectio divina day, Day 5/Friday is a vision day (or start up day), and Day 6/Saturday a half day to pause and reflect on the whole week, with time alone and with opportunities for free ranging conversation and swapping of contact details.

The idea is to have some basic structure to each day, and yet have plenty of opportunity for God to move as He wills.

A live-in location for the conference would be best, however a blend of live-in and 9am-10pm participants sleeping at home is possible if they live within an hour's travel of the venue and have sufficient stamina.

The timetable for the full days would be something like this:

7.00am Morning Prayer, followed by personal prayer

7.40am Rosary

8.00am Breakfast

9.00am Praise & Worship, with outline of the vision/plan for the day

9.30am Break into groups, give more specific vision/plan for the day, and get to know each other

10.40am Morning Tea

11.00am Seeking God, what does He want to do with us, say to us today; praying for each other

12.00pm Mass

1.15pm Lunch

2.30pm Major work of the day

5.30pm Evening Prayer

6.00pm Dinner

7.00pm Team meeting

7.30pm Night session

9.30pm or 10pm Night Prayer and end of the day

Day 1 Monday

After lunch, special sessions with those who have top 5 themes in the influencing domain, because these people will be called on to lead at least one group during the conference. These special sessions will provide a vision for how we want the leadership of the groups to function during the conference, and a bit of additional leadership training. Before the others arrive to register, we will pray over these leaders asking God to help them.

Then the conference begins in earnest with 5pm Mass followed by 6pm Dinner and the first Night Session at 7.30pm. The Night Session will start with Praise & Worship, a short keynote talk of encouragement, followed by housekeeping information and guidelines for how prophetic words and words of knowledge are to be discerned, and only released when permission from the discernment team is given. That way there can be a small team of people assisting in the interpretation and praying about the best way to act upon and release the messages. As far as possible we need to avoid and discourage undiscerned messages of personal prophecy. In groups, the group leader will facilitate group discernment procedures. At the end of the Night Session participants break up into groups of around 4 people and pray for each other. Night Prayer ends the day.

Day 2 Tuesday

This Day is foundational, because the more the charisms of the Holy Spirit are activated in us, the easier it will be to co-operate with His leadings and promptings throughout the conference. Today we want to group those who have similar charisms, so that they can share their experiences and learn from each other. Ideally there would be a group for prophets, a group for intercessors, a group for evangelists, a group for those with the gift of discernment, a group for those with the gift of healing, a group for those whose charism doesn't fall into these categories, and a group for those who have no idea what their charism is.

In the introduction part of the day, participants would be invited to share how they experience that charism (eg an urgency to stop and pray for a particular person or situation, tingling and warmth in the hands, dreams, changes in senses of smell etc), a story about a good outcome from the operation of that charism, and a challenge they are experiencing with regard to that charism.

Obviously if several people are experiencing the same challenge, then this is a sign that dealing with it is on God's agenda. Before the next session starts do a bit of research, consultation and prayer for resources and wisdom on this challenge. This topic will then become the first thing the group does in the main afternoon session.

Then after Morning Tea each group spends time seeking God for what He wants them to do as a group. After a time of seeking such guidance, group members share any impressions they have received. There should be enough, 'I felt that too', to chart a course of action. Otherwise start with the first impression, give it ago, if it feels anointed continue with it; if not, try the next impression. Some groups may feel like God wants them to lead them in a time of repentance, or to seek God's mind about a particular topic, or to pray for a particular group of people, or to just rest in stillness before Him for a while.

The main thing is to get a bit of consensus about what God wants to do with the group in the main session, (at least to start with) and then to pray for each other for deeper releases of the charism they already share. What to do is one thing, how to do it is another, so until the main session starts everyone should be seeking God individually for specifics. For example, if the general impression is to pray for Japan, is it for the leaders of Japan, is it for protection against natural disasters in Japan etc and how to pray, eg in song, in tongues, with the Rosary, with a map of the country etc. Where you start in the main session may not be where you end up, allow God to lead you step by step. It is OK for the leader to ask for feedback from time to time, eg should we go deeper here, or do you feel that the Holy Spirit is changing our direction? Is the anointing as strong as when we started? Or has it lifted? Remember to follow good spiritual hygiene principles before and after the main session.

At the after dinner team meeting, group leaders give a brief account of the day. Are there any common threads between the various groups? If so, then go deeper with that in the ministry part of the night session. Otherwise the night session will be a full on 'whatever you want to do with us God' prayer meeting, expecting God to give people practice in the various charisms.

For the group of people with less common charisms, the group times of the day should be very similar, just needing extra levels of open heartedness to listen to the experiences of others that are so very different from your own.

For the group of people who have no idea what their charism is, they will have more of an input day than a collaborative day. For them, bring in guest speakers who describe their own experiences with charisms, and growing in them. Some of the day should be one-on-one conversations about how group members have experienced God's guidance in the past; from those conversations some nascent charisms might be recognized. If so, pray for them to become more manifest. By dinner time everyone in this group should be better equipped to recognize and respond to charisms, and have had a time before the end of the main afternoon session where everyone prayed for the release of God's charisms within each other for the welfare of the church.

(For a conference made up of people mature in the use of the charisms, you could add a similar day breaking into groups of those with similar offices, viz, apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, teacher. We say people have an office if there is general recognition that a person has been used by God consistently in this area for several years, and with much fruitfulness.)

Day 3 Wednesday

This day is designed to bring people with similar burdens, callings and ministries together. The purpose is for mutual support and encouragement, the improvement of relationships between people with similar God-given passions, and the sharing of ideas. If at the end of the day people have been helped to avoid common pitfalls, if solutions to common issues have been shared, if a bigger vision for what God is doing in this ministry area is received, if mutual collaboration begins between ministries, then the day has been a success.

The break up of these groups will be determined by the answers to the registration questionnaire. Likely groups would be pro-life, youth ministry, ministry to the poor/disadvantaged; less likely but still possible groups could be catechists, prison ministry, drug & alcohol rehabilitation, social media apostles/evangelists, protection of religious freedom activists etc. The emphasis is on the burden of the heart more than where someone is currently in mission. For example, if someone goes to state schools as a catechist every week, but God wakes them up on a regular basis to pray for those tempted to suicide, then that person should be in a group with people sharing a passion for mental health rather than with the catechists.

The first group session of the day begins with prayer, and then time for group members to get to know each other through introducing themselves, how this calling or prayer burden first manifested itself in their lives, a story about a good outcome from this ministry, and the sharing of a challenge arising from the calling, prayer burden or ministry. Only if time permits, group members can share how they have dealt with some of the challenges the others are currently facing.

If there appears to be commonality among the challenges, then we see God's hand in bringing people together with a common challenge, and the group leader in the break goes to seek out wisdom and resources through research and consultation with team members. This will be the first topic for the main session in the afternoon, and a videoclip for discussion starting, or role play, or bringing in an expert speaker, may be the way to start it off, but then collectively pray for God's wisdom for the challenging situation, and share any impressions, ideas and scripture quotations that come. It could be as basic as producing a budget, or as nuanced as exploring ways of setting boundaries and saying no to those who are demanding more than can be given.

The second group session is about seeking what God wants to do with the group. So this will involve prayer. It could very well be that God would like to give the group a time of restful, soaking prayer to refresh and bring healing in this session, as a prelude to what He wants to do with them in the main session. It may become a time of collective repentance for the occasions that we failed to respond to His promptings, and/or failed to serve the people sent to us. If group members agree, it could also be about sharing solutions to challenges, and respectfully learning from each other. At the end of this session there should be general agreement as to how the main session will start. Before the session ends, pray for each other and for each other's ministries.

The main afternoon session will start by dealing with all the things that arose from the previous group sessions. But this should take up no more than one third of the main session. Then the rest of the session is turned over to God, letting Him direct what happens next, with the group leader facilitating group discernment. It is likely that the various groups will be led into times of intercession for those for whom God has already given them a burden (eg youth, those who don't know God, those bound in addictions etc). It is also likely that the various groups will be led to seek God for fresh vision and fresh strategies for their ministries, and for the deeper release of charisms with which to serve in those ministries. If a time of repenting for obstacles placed in the way of unity between ministries begins, flow

with it. Allow God to share his heart with you, and to broaden your vision for what He wants to accomplish through you. Begin and end this time with proper spiritual hygiene practices, since the possibility of intense spiritual warfare is high. If God wants to use your group in prayer to help bring down spiritual strongholds that are holding back His floodgates of grace, do not resist and do not be afraid.

The group leader's debrief after dinner is again crucial. If in the debrief and sharing you find that many of the main sessions prayed for the nation, or were led to pray for financial help to be released, then the night session should devote time to praying for these things as a whole conference body. On the other hand, if groups were led to pray for boldness, or for those in political leadership, then do more of that. So the night session starts off as a prayer meeting and covers those areas that came up as themes in the groups, and if time permits at the end, there will be a time of sharing of good outcomes from various ministries. To make that happen each group leader will go and invite the person who shared the best story in the group to share it with everyone, so that the evening ends with collective praise and thanksgiving to God.

There will be a group for those who have less common callings, for whom there aren't enough to have a specific group for those callings. With extra patience and openness of heart to each other, there is every possibility that their group may be led by God in deep and amazing ways. Be on the lookout for any indication of being drawn together into new multidimensional or multidisciplinary forms of ministry. For example, it might be discovered on sharing, that while each has their own calling, many of those callings may have a 'calling within a calling' such as an interest in First Nations peoples or a tug towards South East QLD.

Then there will be a group for those who don't yet think they have a calling, a prayer burden or a ministry. For them, at the first group session they will introduce themselves and share a bit about either the context for the strongest spiritual experience of their lives or about what they have seen God do in their lives recently, and then share something about what they are currently struggling with, be it having a regular prayer time or a fracturing relationship or a health battle etc. At the second session there will be input to help them understand how a calling, prayer burden or ministry begins to manifest itself. Group members will then recall and share about the top three intercessory prayers in their lives, about the kinds of charities that they give more willingly to, and why, and about the type of injustice that spurs them most to action. From the time of sharing in the first two sessions it might be possible to see patterns emerging in individuals and in the group. If so, work with that. The main session will be about asking God to reveal more of His plan for each of the group members, and lingering in prayer waiting upon Him to speak directly to each heart. Pray for each other, and over each other, and if all else fails use the remaining time to pray against the injustices shared and for any top 3 intercessions that some of the group members had in common.

Day 4 Thursday

By now conversations at break times and during meals should be well beyond small talk. Today is creative lectio divina day. For today everyone gets a copy of the Gospel passage for the coming Sunday, and groups are made up of people with similar creative gifts. So there

will be a good of musicians (vocalists, song writers, those who can play musical instruments), there will be a group of artists/illustrators, there will be a group of wordsmiths (writers, bloggers, poets), there will be a group of dramatists (actors, playwrights, dancers), a group of digital artists (photographers, videographers, meme makers), a group of cooks/chefs, and if there are any who declare they have no creative talents, they will make up the intercessors for the day. Comedians can choose whether they prefer wordsmiths or dramatists. If perchance there are potters, sculptors, wood workers, people who create scenes with Lego, or anything else 'hands on' (eg knitters and those who can make amazing things come out of sewing machines) then they can form a group too – if they have brought their equipment with them.

For the first session of the day, group members share about the creative talent God has given them, and what they have been doing with it (eg hobby, volunteer, career, ministry), and a blessing they feel when they use that creative talent and a challenge they face (burn out, barriers to success, rejection, finding the time to practice/hone skills etc). Pray for each other.

The second session of the day is where each group seeks God and prays through the Gospel passage in a lectio divina way. Group members share what struck them afresh about this Gospel passage. Then members talk about how they could convey that message through the medium of their creative talent, and whether they want (or feel called) to do that solo, or in collaboration with others. It is time to brainstorm, and to help each other develop the initial ideas they have been given. The cooks will each be given an amount, say \$20, to go shopping for ingredients with, in order to produce Gospel inspired nibbles to be enjoyed at the night session. By the end of this session everyone should have a plan for what they will be creating in the afternoon session.

In the afternoon session the intercessors will be praying while the creatives produce what they can in the time available, together with a written explanation if necessary (eg for art, instrumental music, nibbles).

Then in preparation for the night session, the creative work that can be displayed will be arranged around the room. Creative work that requires performance will go onto whatever stage-type arrangements can be made, like a variety concert, and the nibbles provide a celebratory feast afterwards. Those with computer/technical skills will be called on to help set things up for viewing where necessary, or to help get them printed. It should be an absolutely amazing night seeing the Gospel coming alive and depicted in so many various ways and mediums. Of course, someone will need to fill the role of M.C. for the night, and someone else will need to schedule the various performances into some semblance of order.

Writers can choose whether to read out their short story, poem, limerick, blog post, or article, or whether to print it and display it instead. It may even be deemed worthwhile for all of the displays to be photographed and uploaded onto a computer, and then projected onto a big screen while the artist/creator explains his/her work. If that is done, then you would need schedule a few displays followed by a few performances, and then a very short

time for conversation and continue with that pattern until all of the creative individuals and groups had presented. No performance or display explanation should exceed 5 minutes. At the end, the intercessors should be called up to take a bow, because they were the powerhouse of prayer calling down God's creative inspiration upon everyone and obtaining the grace of creative flow. Then God Himself should get a big clap for the gift of His Word and for the wide diversity of creative talents He has bestowed upon His people.

Day 5 Friday

This is Dare to Dream day, or Vision day, or Start-Up day. For today people will need to be able to set up their own computer technology in working groups. In preparation for today the team will have needed to contact diocesan leaders, business people (eg lawyers and accountants), local political leaders and others who have links with entrepreneurs and large donors. These people are to receive invitations to the night session. The more that come, the better.

By now there should be a good level of trust and working relationships between the conference participants. The more there is of that, the more fruitful the day will be.

The first session of the day is the 'Pitch it to me' session. Anyone who wishes to pitch a project to the group has to notify the team the night before and be given some cardboard to write out the essence of the pitch upon. People can give multiple pitches if the ideas or projects are significantly different. Each person gets no more than 2 minutes to pitch their idea or project to the entire group. But they have to be 'big', ie they need to be well beyond the scope of one person to achieve (funding \$10K+, require an ongoing team of at least 4 people, and prayer partners). Effective pitches generally present a community need and a solution to that need.

Some of the pitches will be pre-existing dreams that currently seem too far out of reach, others will have arisen out of the experiences of the conference. Catholic hospices, family-friendly retreat centres, initiating a new faculty at a Catholic university (eg Australian Catholic history), a project to translate a classic spirituality text into English, setting up a travelling troupe of dramatists to perform Passion plays are examples of possible pitches.

In the break between sessions, the cardboard pitches are set up around the room. Each person is given two red sticky dots and a green one. The red dots are to vote for pitches that you think are particularly worthwhile, and the green dot is to indicate which pitch you would actively like to work on. At the start of the second session, people go and place their dots. During this time of milling around, you can ask clarifying questions of the people who gave pitches.

The more dots a pitch receives, the more likely it is that a working group for that pitch will be formed. Hopefully this process of ranking pitches will take no more than 30 minutes, less if at all possible. The number of working groups will be determined by the number of smaller rooms for those groups to meet in, with one room set aside for those who have no passion for any of the selected working groups.

Once the top ranking pitches are chosen, people gravitate to the one they wish to work on and form working groups. The rest of the session is spent in the smaller rooms doing introductions, and learning about each other's skills and professions. Each group will require someone with themes in the influencing domain if those giving the selected pitches do not already have an influencing theme. If any working groups discover that they don't have all the domains covered, then they need to find someone who has themes in that domain to join them.

The main session for each working group begins with prayer, followed by a more detailed pitch from the pitch-giver. Group members ask questions. Then the group decides what needs to be done to improve the pitch, and works on that. Each group will get 7 minutes at the night session to deliver a better pitch, and 3 minutes to answer questions from the floor about the pitch. Statistics, business plans, research, graphics, budget size, possible locations, any limitations via legislation and government regulations, staffing, legal and privacy restrictions considered, plans for how to attract both funding and clients/those in need of the project will all be required in preparing the better pitch. Also needed will be information about why this project is different to others already in existence, and whether or not it could be co-partnered or grafted onto an existing entity/ministry.

Since the 3 hours for the main session isn't a lot of time for work like this, the group leader/s need to quickly set tasks for each member. They work as hard as possible for 30 minutes on those tasks, then the group reassembles and reports, and then refines what is needed, and sends members away for another 30 minutes. After the second re-group they will need to decide whether more information is needed, or whether the group has enough to begin preparing the presentation, or to let a few pursue more fact finding and the rest begin work on how to present the upgraded pitch. Allow enough time to practice the presentation. Prepare a handful of contact cards to give away to any invited guest who shows interest in the project.

Pitch-givers are encouraged to let the original vision for the project grow, be enhanced, and even be diverted. For example, a pitch might begin as a scheme to find employment for young people, but during the work the group discovers plenty of similar schemes for that age group, however there is almost nothing for the over 50s, and they decide to keep the basics of the idea and project but change the age group for whom it is targeted.

Remember to do due diligence. Contact actual people for whom you have the vision or project. Ask them whether it would actually help them, or whether they have more pressing needs. For example, the initial project may be to improve ramp access for wheelchairs and walkers at the local cathedral, but you may find that while that would be well, good and appreciated, what they really need is trained people to help them fill out National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) paperwork.

Groups may decide to continue working between dinner and the start of the evening session.

Simplicity of presentation is better than complexity. Include what the need is, what the vision is to meet that need, why that vision is unique, and then detail that vision with plans

and rationales for those plans. Don't forget to include estimated budgets for the whole project, for each section of a project, or year 1, year 2 etc budget projections. If time permits outline the risks you are aware of, and your plans to deal with those risks. Make the vision as compelling as possible.

The night session begins with prayer, and the introduction of the invited guests. Then the detailed pitch sessions and associated Q&A begins. It would be better to have a random order of the presentations instead of a lowest initial interest to highest initial interest order. When the detailed pitch sessions are over it is time for a celebration to begin, and for invited guests to mingle and ask further questions about the pitches that most interested them. At the end of the evening, conclude with prayer asking God to bring into being those projects that most align with His will.

For those who ended up in the group without a selected pitch, they will do a similar skills and professions introduction to each other that will be led by a group leader. As part of that introduction, people will also include what topic would have motivated them to take part in a working group. Should there be any group members who have the same motivation, they will work together for the rest of the day. The rest get divided up into smaller groups that have all the theme domains covered, and then get to choose which of the non-selected pitches they would like to work on. Before the end of the main session, each smaller group presents a pitch to each other. Of them, the one considered by the group to be the best pitch will be presented as a 'wild card' pitch at the night session.

Day 6 Saturday

This is the final day, which finishes with Mass and lunch. The primary task of this day is to provide a time of prayerful reflection upon the experiences of the week. So after the morning praise & worship there are only two sessions.

For the first session everyone gets a small exercise book to take with them and to write down what they want to remember from the whole conference. Of primacy would be everything that they felt God speaking to their hearts. Questions that people may want to answer in this time are: What did I hear? What did I learn? What touched my heart? Where was God for me in the experiences of the week? What is challenging me? What questions do I have that I need to follow up on? What do I feel God is inviting me to do as a response to the experiences of this week?

For the second session everyone returns to the main room. This is a time to mingle with the purpose of going up and saying a personal thank you to those who helped you during the week, and for saying words of encouragement to those in whom you see great potential, or whom you have seen grow throughout the week. It is also a time to swap contact details with those you would like to keep in contact with. At the end of the session we gather for 5 minutes to stand and pray for the person next to us, that what God has done in them during this week and begun in them would be brought to perfect fulfilment.

www.societyofsaints.net Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, 19 Jun 2020