

Importance of Programming

THE VALUE AND IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAMMING: A TALE OF TWO CENTERS

By Veneta Lorraine, D. Min.

Conference centers are like middle children, sandwiched between hotels and camp or retreat centers – sometimes more like a hotel, sometimes more like a camp. They are seldom the first and the greatest, the last or the least, but primarily middle of the road entities – hospitable, comfortable, filling a niche, affordable and amenable, but without the pizzazz of other venues. And like the middle child, the conference center is always looking for ways to stand out, to brand itself; to make itself more memorable and even sought after. Frequently built to suit the needs of a particular denomination at a particular time, conference centers now find themselves in need of re-visioning and revamping, often through programming.

Programs in the conference center take on forms as varied as the individuals who create them. Visioning for programs is crucial, but it is most often the interests and training of the directors of programming that shape the programs offered. There is, however, much more to be considered.

Programs, like the conference center itself, have their own identity issues. They raise questions such as:

- *Who are we when we have programs, a conference center or a program center?*

Key Principles in Programming...

1. All aspects of center operations must be integrated with the Mission statement.
2. A two-way communication system between management and staff is essential.
3. Written personnel policies must be developed and communicated to all staff members.
4. Finance is the fuel that sustains mission.
5. Successful centers anticipate who and where their customers are, what they will need and want, and what they are able and willing to pay.
6. All aspects of operation and appearance contribute to the hospitality of a center.
7. Good facilities management, although not always visible, is critical for a positive guest experience.

- *How do we create a mission statement that works for both?*
- *Which has preference when times and spaces overlap, conference guests or program guests?*
- *Where do we get started with programs?*
- *How can programs be affordable and also cover their costs?*
- *What programs are going to make it in a particular setting?*

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- *Which do we market – the programs or the center?*
- *What constituency can we count on?*
- *How do we staff a program department and how does the program staff work with the operations staff?*
- *What are the resources needed?*

I'd like to tell the story of two centers where I have worked in programming. The stories are of two opposite approaches to programming, and they illustrate how the above questions were handled, offering a sense of both the strengths and weaknesses involved.

The first story is about a retreat and spiritual life center in Rhode Island. Our Lady of Peace (OLP) was originally built as a men's retreat center in the 1950's and had the monastic ambience of small cell-like rooms with a community bath at the end of the hall. In the 1970's, when it could no longer support itself as a men's retreat house, a group of nuns brought to the Center their previously established three-year adult Christian formation program, The Spirituality of Christian Living (SCL). For nearly twenty years under their direction, the center operated as a retreat center staffed by religious women who worked for a stipend sent to their communities.

At its peak, OLP had a program staff of 8 people and three primary programs: SCL, a spiritual direction training program, and sabbatical program. The hospitality was renowned, the grounds beautiful, and the programs innovative. Ministry was the focus, personal spiritual transformation the vision, and the programs flourished in the first 15 years. Conference groups coming to the center were relegated to spaces left after all the programs had been scheduled for the year. Although a brochure was mailed each year, marketing was primarily word-of-mouth and focused on the programs rather than the center. This worked well for some time – the desire for a deepened spirituality was rising in the culture of the 1980's and

1990's, and SCL was a cutting edge spirituality that enabled folks to retain their denominational identities and theology while supplying

the missing components in their lives.

OLP did well because the vision was clear, focused, and unswayed, allowing the center to concentrate its program energies in very specific directions. Leaders honed their skills and expanded the diversity of their presentations, making the programs increasingly attractive. The programs were relevant to their market, filling a niche that was neglected by the churches in general. Their reputation extended nationwide, providing a market sufficiently large to maintain the center and the staff for many years.

Consistency and stability in programming is a valuable asset. People like to know what to expect and to have those expectations met and exceeded. It did not matter to the guests that the buildings were outdated and the beds were small. The food was good and the hospitality and caring were top-notch.

Some of the shortcomings of the OLP model became evident in the economic slowdowns of the late 1980's and early 1990's and as the target audience of religious men and women began to diminish. The "program first" approach became a growing detriment to the viability of the center. Changes in leadership did not provide the strength needed to expand the vision for the center to hosting other groups. A major marketing focus was desperately needed. Known only for its programs, OLP was not considered a venue for meetings or conferences, despite its unique character and beautiful grounds. Insufficient attention had been paid to the state of the buildings to attract a different clientele. And the program staff, now diminished by half, was reluctant to relinquish its favored status. The shrinking program numbers were not offset by a rise in other business, and OLP had not anticipated the expenses incurred in rising salaries and benefit costs for staff not being paid a minimal stipend.

The Second Center

The second center, in which programming has very recently been introduced, is the Duncan Conference Center, owned and operated by the Episcopal Diocese of Southeast Florida. Built with

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a vision of housing the Cursillo movement in the diocese, the center is now more than twenty years old. The Duncan Center has grown from a simple two-building facility with lots of trees and land to a sprawling seven-building complex. The master plan foresees a third dormitory, a fitness room, maintenance and housekeeping areas, an expanded dining room, and a pool on this small five-acre site bordered by a church, a monastery and a golf course. People often say that to walk on the grounds is to walk into peace, and this is true – the center is an oasis in a busy, urban area. The Executive Director for the previous nine years knew how to create hospitality, and he and his wife made the center renowned for its special caring for people and their needs. Every detail was attended to by them personally, and people remembered. Business boomed in the late 1990's and early 2000's, and the center raised funds to build two new meeting rooms and a beautiful chapel with an exquisite marble labyrinth floor. Finding clientele to utilize these new offerings became the thrust, even while Cursillo continued to use the best weekends throughout the year at the lowest price. The 40-bed, 7-building center had a full conference center staff of 12 or 13.

Looking to expand its horizons and needing to fill empty weekdays and summer times and compete with other sites, the center hired a programming director with a background in spirituality and retreats. A vision for the integration of programs into center operations had not been formulated nor were the expectations of the program director clearly stated. The job description included helping out when needed for hosted groups, and the title was Associate Director. It was a mixed message, free to flow into operations or programming, wherever demand was greater. Within a year programs were up and running, even without a vision or a branding concept. But the staff was not informed about their role in supporting programs. Issues such as silence in particular areas for contemplative retreats were not given the needed attention, and when program dates conflicted with hosted groups seeking the same dates, the programs were the first to go.

An advertising and marketing budget had not been established, and the center had previously marketed only to churches in the area. The mailing list was limited to large donors to the Center and closely guarded. Few resources, no previous marketing experience, and no understanding of the SE Florida market constituted a recipe for failure. Programs began to flounder as the program director, increasingly involved in operations, had less and less time for them, and results were disappointing. During the subsequent transition in Executive Directors, there was serious consideration of dismantling programs altogether.

With impetus from the board during the transition, the Associate Director was separated from operations and allowed to focus entirely on programs. With the resulting undivided attention, programs exceeded the goal set for the year. They continue to be developed and to grow today under new center leadership and the necessary support systems. Only as time goes by can the outcome be clearly defined, but there is great potential, even as the economy seems to be slowing significantly.

Let's go back now to the opening questions in this tale of two centers.

- **Who are we when we have programs, a conference center or a program center?** *We are both, and both require equal attention. If one is neglected in favor of the other, programs are doomed to fail or be cancelled, creating a negative energy that can be hard to overcome.*
- **How do we create a mission statement that works for both?** *The emphasis for each facet of the organization must be equally exemplified in the mission statement. Staff needs to be educated on how to accommodate both hosting and program efforts, and every staff person must see the distinct needs both as equally important.*
- **Which has preference when times and spaces overlap, conference guests or program guests?** *This will always be an ongoing and is a dance that both sides must accommodate. Programs can provide a cutoff date for registrations that can be enforced when*

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the needs for hosting are demanding. At the same time, committing and allocating space for programs must be a priority.

- **Where do we get started with programs?** Create a vision and mission statement. This is the crucial first step, guiding every other decision that follows and cannot be emphasized enough. Then realize fully that sufficient time and resources must be allotted for programs. Value hosting and programs equally. This is an entirely new business venture, a professional effort at entrepreneurship within a supportive context, and it will grow over time.
- **How can programs be affordable and also cover their costs?** With undivided attention, it takes 3-5 years for programs to become truly profitable. Plan ahead for this reality. Move slowly; provide ample time to develop programs. Develop pricing structures that cover costs while providing a percentage of profit for programming. The cost for center programs for meals and housing should be the center's cost. Offer presenters a per-person fee and agree on a minimum number of people. Be sure to price programs for a profit but not beyond what your market is willing to pay
- **What programs are going to make it in a particular setting?** Poll your constituency. If you are a church based center, ask what you can offer that the local parishes do not. Don't compete with them - work with them to support their vision. Who lives in your area? In Florida, the population during the winter season is primarily elderly and Jewish. Research is the key here.
- **Which do we market, the programs or the center?** Any marketing program automatically markets the center. On average, programs can increase hosting groups by 10 to 15%, and overnight retreats and programs pay the cost of housing people. With good pricing structures, it can be a win-win-win for the center, the programs, and the participants.
- **What constituency can we count on?** Find your strong points. The labyrinth is a key focal point at the Duncan Center, and we are promoting it in as many ways as we can. It draws people here both for programs and hosting.
- **How do we staff a program department and how does the program staff work with the operations staff?** Collaboration, cooperation, and education are the keys to this effort. Use all the resources of a center to make programs a success, but realize that as it grows, it will need additional personnel and support staff.
- **What are the resources needed?** Determination, commitment, time, support, and a drive to succeed. You can do it and do it well if everyone is on board.

About the Author

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