

# Well-being of Participants

## Objective

Design events that are deeply satisfying for participants and that promote their total well-being.

Have you ever been to an event or conference that could have been located anywhere in the world because it didn't really matter where you were?

You were indoors most of the time with little or no views of the outside. You were housed and processed in rather generic buildings. The schedule was packed and consisted primarily of people talking at you. You were sitting for most of the time. You ate fast food or standard hotel food. At the end of the event you were feeling exhausted and drained. You made few, if any, significant emotional connections with other participants. You were overwhelmed with information and paper. You were glad to be going home.

This may be a worst-case scenario for a gathering. However, it does mirror our society. We tend to lead busy lives, divorced from our natural surroundings, out of synch and out of proportion with creation's biological rhythms and often feeling isolated from other humans. In addition, every day we unwittingly or knowingly help perpetuate various forms of social injustices, addictions and other problems.

We can begin to design gatherings that give people a refreshing alternative experience, if only for a moment. We can encourage participants to be full present—physically, emotionally and spiritually—in their particular location and deeply connected in an experience of Beloved Community.

## How Tos

- Site selection is key. Will you be indoors or out? If indoors for most of the time, does the building have much natural sunlight? Will you have views of the outdoors in the main event room(s)? Is it easy and enjoyable to walk outdoors around the building? If you are providing child care, is there safe and pleasant outdoor play space for the children? If you also need accommodations, these questions should also be asked for that facility.
- Formal program: Shape the formal program so that somehow participants enjoy natural sunlight, being outdoors and/or engaging with the local ecology in a way that deepens their appreciation and understanding of it. Encourage people to go outside and breathe if the event is more than 3 hours.
- Schedule: Pacing, flow and break times are important design elements. Grace and great things happen when there is time to breathe, informal spaces to talk and reflect. Build in informal fellowship and social time.



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- Stretch breaks and breaks at least every 90 minutes are highly recommended. This will help refresh attention spans and allow people to attend to their needs without distraction from the program.
- Help participants feel welcome, safe and involved. This can be through hospitality and community building activities, inviting participants to take charge of parts of the program, offering optional informal support groups, etc. With these sorts of things, participants can feel safe even if you are asking them to take risks in some other way.
- Model just relationships in the arrangements. If you are concerned about how materialistic our culture is, then don't schedule or promote shopping activities as part of the event! If you want to celebrate the benefits of multiculturalism, plan speakers, workshops, event themes, cultural activities and site visits accordingly.
- Participants have easy access to water.
- Beauty. It doesn't have to be big or expensive—or cost any money whatsoever. How can you make your space a bit more beautiful? Can you do something simple for the altar/worship center? Simple table decorations from something natural and local? Paying attention to event room beauty is particularly important if you are event in a space that feels cold, institutional or commercial.
- Especially for large events, provide a quiet space for meditation/prayer and advertise this well. Chaplains or compassionate listeners who are given some expectation of their role are important, especially for large events.
- Depending on the topic and size of gathering, consider naming some compassionate listeners or a “right relationship” team.
- Utilize transformative education techniques in designing the program. This will keep things lively, ensure that real learning has occurred and that action results. United Methodist Women national staff can assist planning teams with identifying appropriate speakers, workshop leaders and techniques that are just right for what you need.
- Encourage movement. Detail local possibilities for exercise (e.g., walking, yoga, running, swimming, dancing, etc.) in registration materials and on-site and factor time to do this into the program. If you can, arrange for some participants or volunteers to lead this at certain points during and outside of the formal program. There are styles that work for all ages and all mobility capacities!
- Invite feedback in your evaluation process. Regardless of how you are handling evaluations, make sure to ask for feedback specifically on physical, emotional, educational and spiritual dimensions of your event, and then take this into account in planning your next one! See the sample evaluation questions for ideas.

## Helpful Resources

- Sometimes transformative education is called “popular education.” Here is more background on the philosophy and techniques:  
[www.popednews.org/newsletters/definitions.html](http://www.popednews.org/newsletters/definitions.html).

## Fast Facts

Medical studies document faster recovery periods and relief from stress and pain for hospital patients whose rooms have a view of nature and sunshine:  
[www.healthdesign.org/chd/research/role-physical-environment-hospital-21st-century](http://www.healthdesign.org/chd/research/role-physical-environment-hospital-21st-century).

Spending time outdoors/in nature can help address various kinds of attention-deficit disorders and ease depression. (Source: *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv)

## Glossary

**Chaplain:** Chaplains are those who are trained and ordained to listen and support those who are finding themselves in a difficult time on their journey. Official chaplains have been trained to have resources that can help support a person beyond the actual contact with the chaplain, if needed. The conversations with a chaplain are highly confidential unless the situation is endangering the physical or psychological welfare of either the person in need or others. This confidentiality is extraordinarily important. A space where the chaplain can speak quietly with the person must be provided.

**Compassionate listeners:** Compassionate listeners are laypersons who have some experience and perhaps training in how to listen without judgment and without advice-giving, being fully present to the person who is in need of their ear. Compassionate listeners know when situations would be something for professionals. Compassionate listeners’ conversations are highly confidential unless the situation is endangering the physical and psychological welfare of either the person being listened to or others.

**Right relationship team (RRT):** RRT is a new practice that some denominations are trying in larger events. The RRT exists in addition to chaplains and has a distinctly different role. This team monitors the formal proceedings of the event. They watch both what is happening positively and any group dynamics or challenges that come up that are blocking the well-being of the community as a whole and report back to the whole group on both what is going well and what needs improvement (e.g., AV arrangements aren’t working for some people with disabilities or something a speaker said offends a group of participants). The RRT gets plenary time to make reports and work things through with the entire community. If a participant is feeling out of right relationship with someone, the participant may come to the RRT for guidance on how to deal with the situation, but the RRT does not mediate between people. The RRT

has diverse members, reflecting the full diversity of the participants. Some members may be clergy, but this background is not necessary. No formal chaplaincy skills are required. Members do need skills training in antiracism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism.

Transformative education: This approach to adult education assumes we all have something to learn and something to teach. It is highly interactive and is not simply a matter of transferring facts and information from the speaker (“expert”) to the learner. Rather, the learner brings her experiences and knowledge into the group process and all the material is presented and worked with in a way that transforms how the “learner” sees herself or himself and the world and transforms her or his feelings, values, beliefs and relationships. When done well, this kind of education enhances the learner’s sense of empowerment and ability to act in the world.

### **Policy Foundation**

*The Book of Discipline* “The Nurturing Community” (§161), the Social Principles.