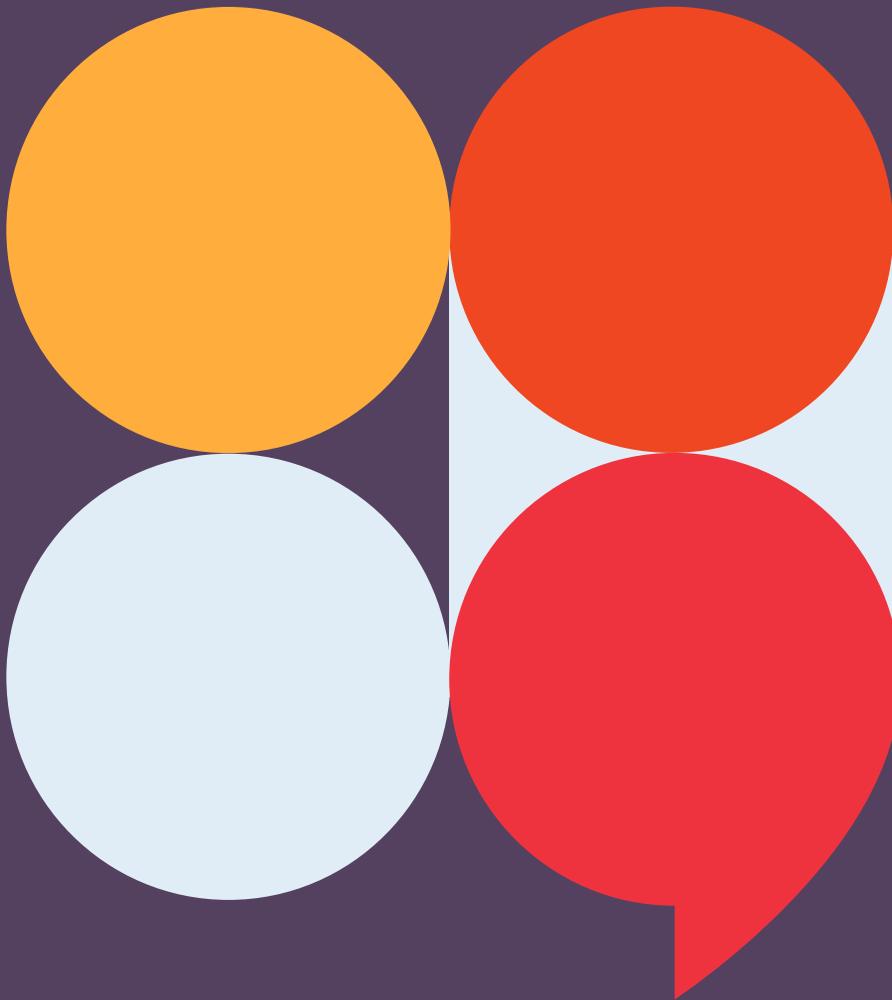

CASE STUDIES FOR LARGER VIRTUAL GATHERINGS

Design Our Way Forward: FTE's Guide to Gathering Virtually: Addendum



Since 2020, FTE has experimented with different ways of hosting our gatherings online. During that time, we gained insights and considerable experience in facilitating large gatherings in a virtual space.

Read the two case studies below detailing what we have uncovered in our own virtual gatherings.

CASE STUDY 1

2021 YOUTH THEOLOGY NETWORK GATHERING

Invited Guests: 218 program participants

Number of Speakers: 15 leaders

The Goals:

- » *To host a virtual gathering that feels more like an in-person conference than a typical online meeting.*
- » *To find an event platform that could host up to 300 people and also provide features that offer opportunities to engage in some of FTE's signature practices.*
- » *To relieve the burden of managing back-end tasks.*

The Platform: After comparing options, we decided to experiment with Hopin, an “all-in-one” virtual event platform.

The Pros

We discovered many valuable reasons to use Hopin for our virtual gathering. Those include:

There's a presence of familiar conference features in an online environment. With features such as a main stage and lobby, Hopin successfully provided a “conference feel,” which is something we found lacking in a typical online meeting using a platform such as Zoom. The lobby allowed participants to see all available sessions and gave them the ability to come and go to each session as they pleased. In addition to these features, we were able to provide a virtual chapel, something that was difficult to do on Zoom.

It makes attendee management easier. Rather than using a selected moderator to send people to breakouts, participants could choose what session they wanted to attend and simply click to get in. This feature relieved some of the back-end management burdens previously experienced by our team.

There are options for live and pre-recorded content. Pre-recording content such as welcomes, framings for workshops, and worship allowed us to plan well in advance and invite attendees to help lead some of these elements.

There are many networking capabilities. Unlike Zoom, Hopin allowed participants to have one-on-one video chats that they could schedule on their own within the platform. This allowed for networking opportunities similar to what would happen at an in-person event.

The Cons

As with any new platform, there were also some downsides we discovered using Hopin. Those include:

The cost is higher. Hopin offers inexpensive options, but ultimately, this platform is likely beyond the budget for many organizations. To access all of the robust features, you must either work with a production company or purchase a license.

There are challenges to learning a new platform. While most attendees were comfortable with Zoom, this was the first time many of our participants used Hopin. Learning a new platform proved daunting for many.

There is no built in registration capacity. Hopin does not have any registration features, so we had to build our registration form separately and audit our list with Hopin, manually making sure everyone got access to the event.

The back-end & technology is complicated. The back-end of the platform was too complicated to learn on short notice. As a result, we used a production company to help us set up and run the event, but even so, we experienced several technical difficulties or glitches.

There are limitations to breakout sessions. In the plenary sessions, breakout groups did not work efficiently on this platform. Participants had to leave the main stage and find their breakout sessions. Some participants got lost or had technical challenges, and some did not return. This difficulty ultimately outweighed the ease of attendee management noted above.

There are challenges in real-time attendee responses. We offered poll and chat features during sessions, which were successful, but the speakers had difficulties seeing responses in real time.

The Results

We learned a lot from our experience with Hopin. However, due to some of the roadblocks and the availability of more platforms to experiment with, we decided to use a different platform in 2022.

CASE STUDY 2

2022 YOUTH THEOLOGY NETWORK GATHERING

Invited Guests: 150 program participants

Number of Speakers: 25 leaders

The Goals:

- » *To host a large virtual event allowing for a mix of content presentation and participant engagement.*
- » *To find a platform that could streamline our workflow, including registration, a web page for the event, an app, an attendee hub, and data syncing to our database.*
- » *To find a platform that allowed for more intuitive navigation for participants.*

The Platform:

For this gathering, we used Cvent, a company that has managed nearly 5 million in-person and virtual events since its founding.

The Pros

We found many Cvent tools and features to be helpful to us in designing and hosting this virtual event. Those include:

It's a one-stop shop with a streamlined process and workflow

This streamlined suite, while requiring a learning curve, eventually made our event planning process much simpler. In addition to built-in registration capabilities, an event branded webpage, and an attendee app, Cvent also allowed us to continue offering a virtual chapel. Another valuable feature was the option to sync your attendee information into many popular databases such as Salesforce.

It's another option for a familiar conference feel online. Cvent offered the same conference feel as Hopin, but this platform also utilized Zoom technology (which we learned from the previous event that most attendees use regularly). This time, workshops and small groups were offered through the Zoom feature. Because of this feature, event managers could easily help attendees navigate groups, presenters knew how to share their screens, facilitators could be more present, and most attendees were comfortable with the familiar Zoom features.

There's a polished and professional appearance. In the plenary sessions, we utilized the Cvent "Studio," which was comparable to the main stage in Hopin but provided a better look, feel, and branding.

There's an option for on-demand content. All workshops and plenaries (including pre-recorded content) were recorded and made available almost immediately to play back in the attendee hub, which is available to conference attendees for at least 30 days after the event. This meant we did not have to share videos with our attendees because they could easily access them all in one place.

The platform works for in-person and virtual events. Cvent is a great resource for in-person, virtual, and hybrid events. As we begin to transition back to in-person experiences, we can use the Cvent registration, web page, and event app features. This will allow us to continue to master the technology while also being able to pivot from virtual, to in-person, and back to virtual when needed. Cvent can also accommodate a hybrid event, although we have yet to experiment with that.

The Cons

As with any new platform, there were also some downsides we discovered to using Cvent. Those include:

It comes at a high cost. Like Hopin, Cvent is expensive and requires either a license of your own or working with a third-party company that has a license. While the platform was much simpler to use, we still needed to pay additional costs for extra support needed for this complicated event.

The support from the company wasn't always helpful. The Cvent support did not always measure up to our expectations. For example, there sometimes was a disconnect between the Cvent support and our staff regarding standards for how things should look or what training was necessary for speakers.

There are challenges that come with navigating a new platform. Though the platform was easier for participants to navigate than Hopin, there was still some confusion about how to access events and where to go when needed.

The experience was harder for speakers to navigate. Cvent required separate links for speakers to test sound and video, which was confusing for some and generally unhelpful for others.

THE RESULTS

We found several Cvent tools and features to be helpful in hosting a large-scale virtual gathering. Like with any new platform or technology, we still hit some challenges with Cvent that will need to be addressed with this resource for future events.

Final Thoughts

No matter what platform you decide to use, we hope some of our own experiences might be helpful to you. As you move forward in your own virtual gathering, here are some key insights to keep in mind:

- » *Though many speakers want to be interactive, virtual platforms are tricky in this respect. Some platforms make it much easier to have workshops and breakout conversations. Plan accordingly and make sure your platform allows you to do what you want to do.*
- » *If you plan to stream your virtual event live to Facebook or another platform, make sure you have considered copyright issues. For example, Facebook will block your live stream if it includes a YouTube video. Research this ahead of time to avoid any issues in your actual event.*
- » *Utilizing polls such as Mentimeter can be a great way to engage people and get quick feedback. If you use a tool like this, make sure the facilitators also have access to the polling results or have a plan for sharing that information with them behind the scenes.*
- » *Planning explicitly for an orientation to the platform will greatly improve the user experience. This can be done in pre-recorded videos or live on the first day of the event.*
- » *Consider whether you want the ability to easily pivot from in-person to virtual events in the future. If you do, be sure to select a platform that will help you do that.*