

It's almost time to CongRegate

Cong in Mayo's annual 'Mind Mesh' [CongRegation](#) is returning for its seventh run. We spoke to the founder of CongRegation Eoin Kennedy about this unique event.

Around 100 Irish and international speakers will gather in the village of Cong in Co Mayo from Friday 23 November to Sunday 24 November for CongRegation.

Consisting of eight separate events over the weekend in eight different venues the conference features an evening of 'Community Talks' in Ashford Castle, Adults Maker Meets, Full Day Unconference, Children's Engineering, Electronics and Drama workshops, a learn the tin whistle music workshop, poetry recitals, music premiere and finishing with a Mindfulness walk in Cong woods.

The centrepiece of the weekend is the unconference which sees coffee shops, book shop, art gallery, restaurants and shops in Cong Village turned into mini conference centres or 'huddles' with attendees debating the theme of 'Community' from the how future colonising space missions communities will look like, how to build online communities through to what we can learn from bee hives. Spread over four 1-hour huddles 100 ten minute presentations will be delivered by the attendees.

As part of the festival a problem-solving muse is being offered to attendees. Simply enter a problem at www.thypia.com and a creative muse will deliver an anonymous personalized response.

The price of entry to the 3 days of the conference is a 600-word unique article on the theme of 'Community' that is posted on the conference website.

The digital king of Cong

We spoke to Eoin Kennedy who masterminded this unique 'mind mesh' event and why the future of communities are the future of Ireland.

What first led to you creating CongRegaton?

Two reasons. First I wanted to explore and test a better way of people communicating knowledge and connecting with each other. I had long noticed that when I presented at a conference I had a totally different experience to people who attended as I was prepared and focused. It also struck me that people who were in the audience knew more than me and I often thought that if you could harness the collective experience and knowledge of those attending that it would lead to a better

result. My aim was to create an experience where everyone prepared their thoughts in advance and where everyone presented creating a true peer to peer experience. On average people remember 10pc of what they hear at conferences two weeks later and many zone out even sooner. CongRegation was designed to create a better result while making it really easy for people to connect with each other rather than gravitate to normal cliques.

The second reason was I wanted to see if you could run an event in off-tourist season that would normally only take place in an urban setting by reimaging spaces and getting the community to work together.

Seven years in, what do you believe you have fostered through CongRegation?

Over the seven years a community of attendees has developed – partially due to the unique and intense discussion but also due to the hardship of earning their way rather than simply paying an entrance fee. This lack of hierarchy on the day and the close proximity of huddles (we break people in to small groups in social venues) means that people get to see the real person and can share their own thoughts with ease. This has led to many collaborations because by the end of the weekend, when the layers of the onion are peeled back, people really understand what makes the person tick and know if they could work with them. Quite often this looks like engineered serendipity, where the three degrees of separation are further dissolved. Each year new themes are developed but I see an increased questioning of current route of acquiring, sharing knowledge and collaboration.

The event takes place over various venues across Cong and it did so at a time when the recession was still being heavily felt in the West. How would you describe CongRegation impact on community and enterprise?

A conservation economic analysis of the impact carried out in 2015 showed that in excess of €15,000 to €20,000 was spent locally by attendees through accommodation, food drink and gift purchase. In addition many people returned during the summer months to experience Cong in warmer seasons. Cong is well known for the Quiet Man movie and its naturally amenities but CongRegation opens up new options to reposition the spaces and village and attract a different type of visitor. A conference/event attendee spends a lot more than a bus full of tourist who have 15 minutes to spend in the village.

I also firmly believe that villages and towns through the country where pubs and other premises are closing down could benefit from reimaging those spaces as different type work and creative

spaces. In addition to the recession November is a quiet tourist month so the cumulatively €100,000 is welcome. Outside of the immediate cash injection some venues report that the busy nature of CongRegation attracts more people – nothing like a packed venue to attract more people.

To take part in Congregate, delegates have to write blog post. How has this creative approach set it apart from other regional events with a tech flavour?

The rationale about earning their way in to CongRegation with a submission from written blog to audio and video is that people arrive prepared and ready to share their knowledge, knowing that they will get more out of it than they give. The process of writing or composing the submission also internalises the learnings and forces people to consider the topic in a more in-depth way. Everyone goes through the same process, so everyone has equal right to be there and have their voice heard. This is important to quieter and authentic voices who may have deep knowledge but are not comfortable standing in front of a large audience. Their submission is posted on the website and they get to decide how, when and where they present.

One year we installed projectors in all locations but they were never used with people gravitating to natural conversation flows based on their submission. My experience of traditional events is that the presenters can overly focus on their content of the slides and forget how to communicate. Finally the absence of PowerPoint means that people get stuck into the real gold of their thoughts and leave out the heavy self-promotion – something that is discouraged at CongRegation.

What does the future hold for Congregation, especially at a time when more and more people are looking outside of expensive cities toward locations that offer a better quality and affordability of life as well as new ways of working either at home or in co-working spaces?

One of the reasons some people attend is because it is out of the city and normal hotel locations. This means that people must slip out of the normal conference going persona – a jarring experience initially. They also get to see that real business can be done outside of personality-less faceless conference venue. This realisation sometimes makes people question the current structure of other areas. If they can do more at a conference in small venue and really enjoy it, then perhaps they can do similar with their work structure.

The evolution of pubs into co-working spaces that is taking place in Castlebar is evidence of this. We are now at the perfect reflection moment, broadband is widely available (not everywhere but at much more reasonable speeds and costs), technology platforms from Zoom to collaboration software are intuitive and freely available, management experiences has evolved to manage remote workers along with a more positive perception of the role, freelancing platforms cover all specialities and city living is getting more expensive. Meanwhile rural locations are aging and the

have spare capacity in most areas at cheaper rates than their big brother cities.

In the absence of nothing but rising rent and living costs something has to change. The key is that people can do the same job, be equally as productive and not be penalised for living in a rural location. The increased quality of living should not have to come at the price of decreased career options. It should be a win win for the employer and employee..

My personal experience is that my commutes to city and office locations are much more productive and enjoyable when balance with working from home.

Looking back, what debates/motions put forward by delegates still resonate today and continue to long into the future?

When the themes revolved around was social media and technology, the impact on children and the education system featured high in debates on the day.

One particular debate that struck me when the theme was 'The Future' emerged when the group tried to use what they had learnt during the day to create a better future. This particular huddle was made up of senior business people and they decided that to answer this challenge they needed to agree what was a better future. When they could not agree on this they finally worked back to what made them truly happy. The unanimous response was doing things for others and the community and related sense of purpose and fulfilment.

In our overly complicated world it's good to drill back to what really matters. Hence this year's theme.

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