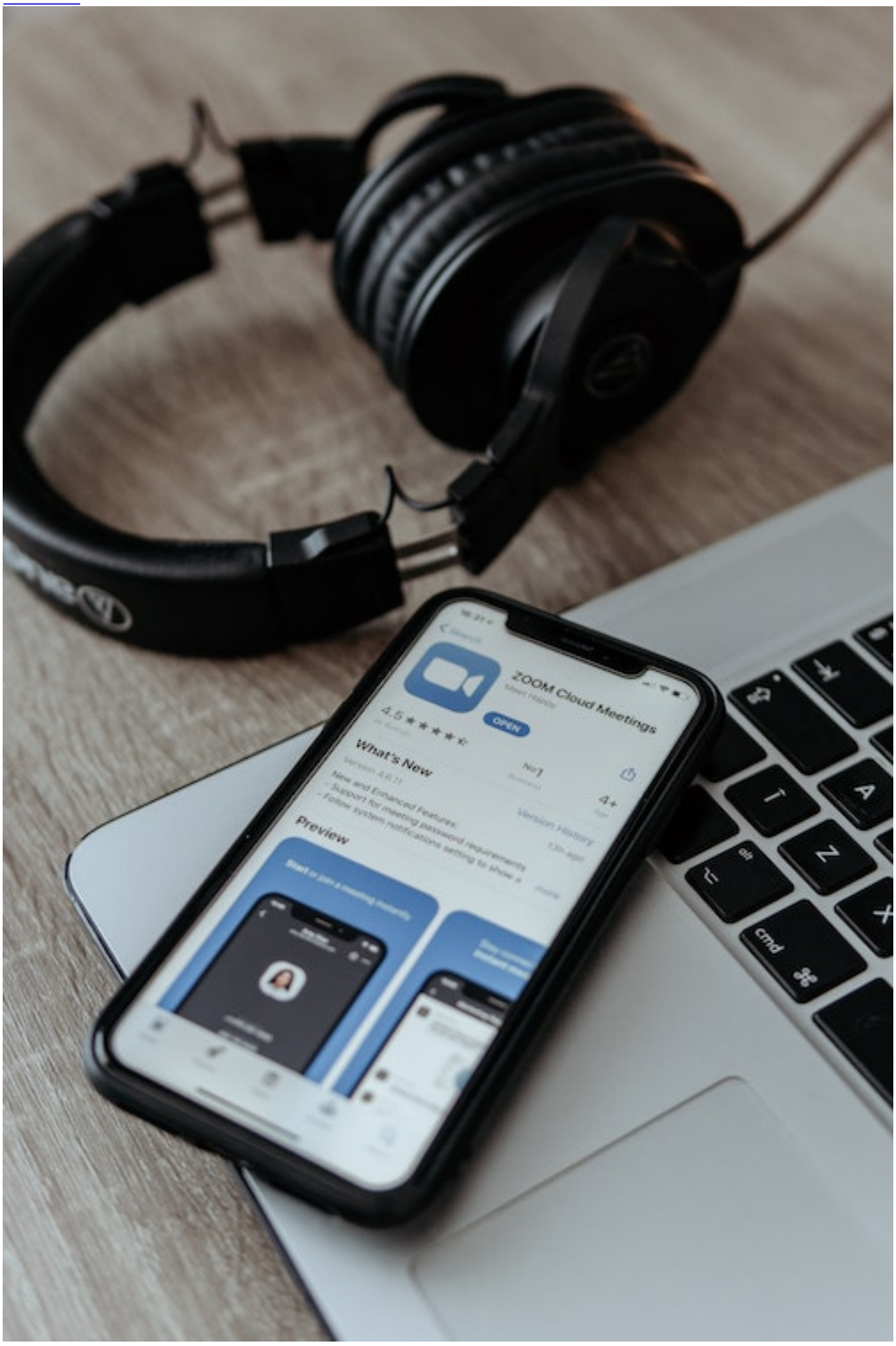
News



(Unsplash/Claudiu Hegedus)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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While most academic conferences have been cancelled or postponed this spring because of the coronavirus pandemic, one group of theologians is planning to go forward with its annual event—completely online.

The College Theology Society (CTS) has moved its three plenary addresses, 42 workshops, the president's address and even an abbreviated awards ceremony and business meeting to a digital platform for its May 28-30 convention.

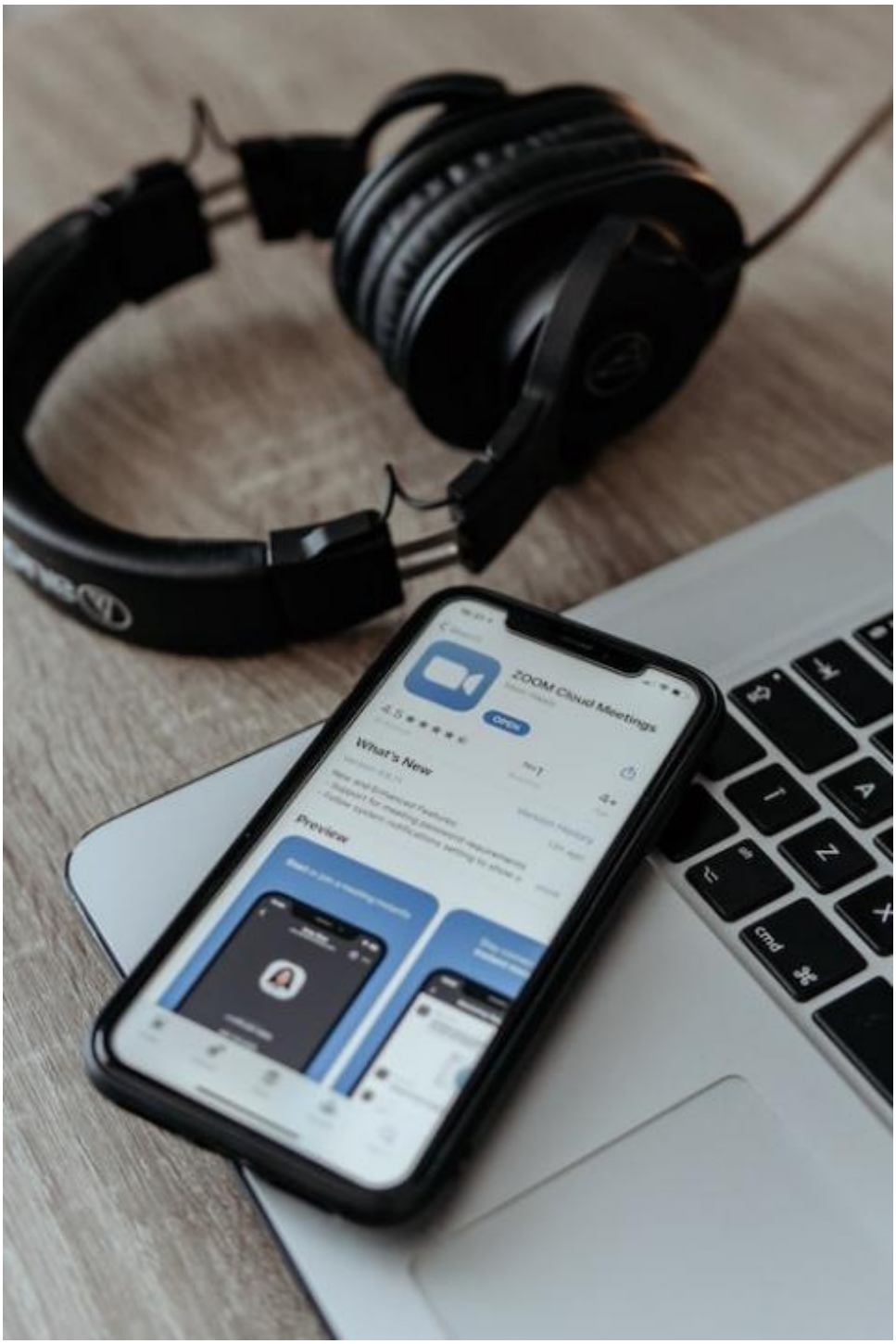
Originally scheduled to be held at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, the convention's theme is "Human Families: Identities, Relationships, and Responsibilities."

"We're doing it because we can," said CTS president Mary Doak, who is a professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego.

The organization — known for attracting younger scholars — didn't want presenters to miss out on the professional development that comes with receiving feedback from peers on their work.

"We thought it was very important to allow scholars to be able to reflect on and present their work," she said. "It just seemed a shame to put that off and lose that momentum for a year."

Another theological group, the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) — an older, larger organization — cancelled its annual convention, originally scheduled for June 11-14 in Baltimore. The theme of " 'All You Who Labor...' Theology, Work, and Economy" has been transferred to the 2021 convention, to be held in Portland, Oregon.



(Unsplash/Claudiu Hegedus)

The CTSA, however, will hold an online "Liturgy of Gratitude and Resilience" to mark its 75th anniversary and to remember members who have died in the past year. Registration is required for the June 13 event.

For the CTS, usual conference attendance is about 300 people; current registration is at about half that. Because there are no housing or food costs, registration is only $40 for members and $20 for graduate students and contingent or retired faculty.

Doak said a typical College Theology Society conference attendee is a younger scholar, most of whom are already adept at technology — and even more familiar with online learning since the coronavirus pandemic forced the closure of on-campus classes this spring.

Technological logistics are being handled by CTS' executive director of national conventions, Andrew Getz, with assistance from several of the organization's board members. Getz will staff a breakout room to troubleshoot those with any technical problems.

All sessions will be held through password-protected Zoom rooms. Keynotes will be pre-recorded and include live Q-and-A during the scheduled time.

The schedule has been tightened a bit, ending Saturday evening instead of Sunday. "We tried to shorten it a bit, so people don't get Zoom burnout," Getz said.

One thing that can't be re-created is CTS' final banquet and after-party, which traditionally has featured a sing-along of liturgical and other music. Organizers may, however, try to create "coffee break" rooms where smaller groups can connect.

"That's one thing that's not going to be the same," said Doak. "And it's a deep regret, because the face-to-face interaction is so important. Personal encouraging, camaraderie and companionship in the journey of theological work is really crucial."

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