

Online Video Conferencing For Spirit-Centered Gatherings

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Preparations: They matter more than for most meetings: _____

1. **Have a designated facilitator or convener.** Online meetings are new enough that any session will benefit from clear leadership and guidance from the beginning. More collaborative participation can happen later, after helpful orientation.
2. **Have someone else (not the facilitator/convener) mind the tech, if you can.** Some video conferencing systems (or upgraded Zoom plans) allow for shared “administrator” roles. I write from experience using a Basic Zoom account without a shared administrator option. Volunteers can help support some of the tech as participants. See #7.
3. **The facilitator/convener must know how to use the video conferencing platform to:**
 - Speak and interact effectively—manage their own volume and lighting on their faces; prepare a visually uncluttered background; and know how to focus attention to their device’s camera so as to be “looking at” participants.
 - Mute others when background noises interfere with the session.
4. **Communicate beforehand with participants** about how to set up their device, who to contact for help, how to sign on, and what to expect in the session. Sample one page overview follows these facilitator notes.
5. **Plan for 15-20 minutes at the beginning** of a session to smooth kinks and allow all to participate fully. For larger groups, invite new users to sign on 15 minutes before the session. The facilitator then helps the people who need it most before others arrive.
6. **Have a telephone list** of participants on hand. Someone may need to telephone a participant who’s missing, or is having trouble with signing on.
7. **Plan ahead for tech support from within the group.** Some possibilities that do not require shared “admin” functions on Zoom videoconferencing:
 - Arrange for a volunteer who can telephone and talk through the sign on process with someone who’s having trouble.
 - Arrange for a volunteer to keep track of who’s present, who’s spoken, or who’s left. The convener/facilitator of a larger meeting may not be able to track everything.

The Beginning of a Spirit-Centered Gathering Online:

Assume nothing about behaviors or processes that work smoothly in other face-to-face gatherings with these same people. All behavioral norms and even a participant’s sense of possibilities in an online medium are up for grabs. From the beginning, a facilitator can help shape a Spirit-Centered gathering. What’s been very helpful in online retreats and worship sessions:

1. **Anticipate the need for patience and Grace.** Say something out loud to participants. As you are helping with tech during the first 15-30 minutes, appreciate others’ patience and prayerful support.

- A facilitator could say: *“This may feel new, odd, awkward, imperfect. You’re deciding whether/how to look at yourself or not, how to connect with others in this format. It does get easier/more natural, and our patience and holding it all in the Spirit helps!”*
- *“It helps to remember that this online format is no hindrance to the movement of the Spirit. The Divine works invisibly over distance and time beyond our understanding. Physicists are exploring Quantum entanglement...”*
- *“We can cultivate curiosity about how the Holy might touch us and work through us in this unfamiliar process.”*

2. **Introduce what you plan to do during the online session.** Help people feel at ease with what’s coming up, and the tech processes that will support group intentions.

- *Worship sharing:* Let people know that you will explain at that time how it can work best in the online format. See #6 below.
- *Share your screen:* The administrator/facilitator can display poetry, prayers, quotes, an image, or an entire slide show on all participants’ screens at one time. Explain how it will work. In Zoom, participants do not have to change display settings.
- *Small groups or pairs:* For a participatory or interactive session, A Basic Zoom account allows the administrator to create “break out” groups. As in any spiritual gathering with more than 8 people, “break outs” allow participants more time to share or reflect on session content. Name this facet of your session at the start, since some may not imagine it’s even possible. Reassure participants that you’ll explain what to expect when needed. See #8 below.

3. **Teach tech basics to everyone up front:**

- **Zoom comfort levels:** Invite participants to “Raise their hands” all at the same time on screen. Use one to five fingers to reveal their comfort level with the tech.
 - 5 = completely at ease and present in this format;
 - 1 = stuck, terribly distracted, expecting big trouble to participate
 - Tend to the stuck places first...
- **In groups larger than 8 or so, every participants’ microphone needs to be muted** unless they wish to speak. The location of microphone controls differs on varied devices and conferencing systems. Allow everyone the time needed to find them.
 - **Why?** There are unpredictable echoes and background noises that shift our attention from our gathering.
 - A facilitator could say: *“Sometimes we hear things you don’t from your surroundings. Even small background noises can be distracting—a cough, shuffling papers, a dog barking, or phone ringing. We wish to mutually uphold our best intentions to be fully present with each other now.”*
 - Tell participants you have the capability to mute or unmute their audio as needed. In Zoom, the facilitator can mute from an administrative option labeled “manage participants”.
- **For longer sessions, also teach how to turn off participant cameras.** “Cameras off,” in addition to muting audio, is useful for quiet, individual reflection time and group breaks. If online interactions continue during a break, the tone can shift from spiritual reflection. After break, when others reenter the online meeting room, they can feel out of step, or as

if they've missed something. Quiet breaks with audio and cameras off help maintain group cohesion and sense of the Spirit's presence. See more on atmosphere in #3

- A facilitator may say: *"I invite you to maintain "quiet in the meeting room."*
- **If the meeting requires someone be recognized before speaking, explain how** they will get the facilitator's attention. Some online platforms have a "raise hand" feature (Zoom). Sometimes it's just as effective to physically raise one's hand in front of the camera before speaking. I like the physicality of actually raising one's hand, because it's the most like "being there" in person. Seems like the more ways we continue known behaviors, the more comfortable we'll be in the new medium.
- **Explain participants options for how to view the group:** Zoom has "gallery view" and "speaker view". They are both useful. Each participant controls their own view option. Again, controls vary on differing screens and devices. Invite participants to find and experiment.
 - **"Gallery View"** displays all participants in a grid of small boxes on the screen. This "view" is good for a sense of group belonging, and for calling on people to speak. But in larger groups, the images are often too small to follow facial expressions. Note that on tablets or phones, participants may have to "swipe" right or left to see more of the group than fits on the smaller screen.
 - **"Speaker View"** displays a large image of the person who is making the most noise at any one time. If others don't have their microphones muted, someone talking may be visually interrupted with a flash of someone sneezing, chewing loudly, or talking to someone else who came into their room. Note that most phones and tablets default to speaker view.

Speaker view is the best way to feel connected to one person who is sharing, generally for a longer period of time. We see facial expressions in an "up close and personal" perspective, like looking through a window.

4. **Explain Interaction Courtesies:** A facilitator/convener teaches people how to participate politely so that all may feel included. Mention these points:
 - If some have joined the meeting by telephone/audio only, they will not see who is speaking. **Ask participants to say their names** when they begin to speak.
 - **Slow things down in all interactions.** It's really difficult to understand overlapping voices in this format. All can help uphold a better dynamic:
 - A facilitator may say: *"Leave more space around your words than usual. Speak slowly. So we don't overlap each other, and know who is speaking."*
 - Avoid quick cross talk or other verbal interruptions. It disrupts the flow of someone's sharing and shifts video images in speaker view.
5. **Ask if there are any other questions.** Is everyone ready to settle?
6. **Create an atmosphere of prayer/worship:**
 - Once the tech is smoothed, intentionally shift the focus. Most of what has come before could happen in any online secular setting. When participants are ready, a facilitator/convener can bring conscious attention to the Sacred potential of the gathering.

- *Intentions*: To be present with and to each other in the Sacred, like worship in person. A facilitator/convener might say something like:
 - *“Again: tech and distance are no hindrance to the Holy”*
 - *“It’s not the same as worship in person. Can’t be. It’s like entering a new meeting house... We show up with the Spirit and see what happens.”*
 - *“We’re aiming for tone of prayer or worship in your own home!”*

7. **Worship:**

- For groups new to online Quaker worship, a facilitator could start with 5 minutes of silence. The silence helps “change the inner channel” from the specificity of tech and problem solving, to a more spacious readiness for spiritual reflection.
- **Articulate intentions for 5 minus silence** to gather attentiveness and readiness to be present here, to what the Spirit might offer us together. Invite the group too sense toward their connectedness and belonging, what they know and care about each other.
- Continue in worship as planned.
- **Worship Sharing is a really effective format for beginners to online worship.** It’s also helpful during our current health crisis to hear from all members and attenders, however briefly. It builds community while increasing comfort levels with the technology and format.
 - **Introduce the worship sharing process and how it will work online.** The outline and queries that follow were used in an online Quaker meeting in March 2020:
 - A. *Name our purpose*: listening to many personal experiences on a theme for the group’s benefit.
 1. We wish to hear from everyone, if they are willing to speak, unlike open, or expectant waiting worship in the unprogrammed Quaker tradition.
 2. We want to reconnect verbally, touching base with what’s happening to you in challenging time.
 - B. *Process*:
 1. One at a time sharing
 2. Speak only once.
 - a. I messages, about our own stories and experiences. Not for teaching or preaching.
 - b. Short considered speaking on a query.
 3. Others listen, without commentary or cross talk
 4. It’s a prayerful, slower pace than conversation
 5. After you’ve spoken, invite someone who hasn’t shared
 - a. "mutual invitation" or "pass it on”
 - b. [Name of person] is keeping track of who’s shared, if you don’t know who’s left to speak.
 - c. Can pass if wish. Speak later.
 - C. *Query*: Pause in quiet to consider for yourself.
 1. What is one word that describes your condition right now?

2. IN one or two sentences: What's taking up a lot of space in your head/heart this week? Challenges, hopes, need for upholding in community
- D. Whoever wishes to begin, please do so. Invite the next person when you're done.
- E. End with silence, approx 5 mins.

8. Pairs or Small Groups in online video conferencing:

- This is a new option for many participants' in online meetings. Some reassurance and careful directions allow small groups online be as meaningful as in residential retreat or workshop settings.
 - **Reassurance:**
 - Pairs or small groups are private: Facilitators can say, *"No one else can see or hear what is shared in your pair/group. The facilitator will not be part of the groups, and will remain in the main meeting room."*
 - Participants don't have to choose or sort the groups: Facilitators can say, *"I will set it all up from here."* or *"Staff have discerned groups in advance."* Zoom also sorts random groups. If you're organizing pre-arranged groups, ask for patience as you input the names on the screen. I haven't yet found a way to do this ahead of time.
 - If participants need help while in the breakout room, they can click the "ask for help" button (upper right on the Zoom window bar). The facilitator/administrator can join the pair/group with video and sound as needed.
 - **Tech intro:**
 - Switch to "speaker view." Pairs or small groups make best use of the larger image size in "speaker view." Facilitators can say, *"Switch to speaker view so you can see expressions, and sense each others' presence as if through a window."*
 - Explain what they'll see. With Zoom: *"You'll see on your screen an invitation to "enter a breakout room. Click the "join" button. The large group or main meeting room will disappear. You will only see and hear your sharing partner/group."*
 - *Participants keep track of timing themselves.* I've tried alternatives. Zoom has a feature to broadcast a message to all groups from within the "manage groups" window. Take care to distinguish this option from a chat message "broadcast to all." Using "manage breakout rooms," a message appears on all participants screens. Sounds useful, but when I tried to cue changes of turns, participants who kept their own time were not well synchronized. It was a distraction. Others who weren't keeping time, missed the message entirely, and someone missed their turn. I suggest keeping it simple. Let adults keep their own time.
 - *Ending pairs/small groups:* I warn participants that "I will prompt end of group time. You'll see a 1 minute remaining until the room "closes" and you are automatically rejoin the larger circle." They do not need to push the 'end session' button to rejoin the larger group.
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Zoom for First Timers

- It's free.
- Join the online meeting with visuals using a smartphone, tablet, or computer (with camera, speakers, and mic). Click the link.
- Join the online meeting with audio only using any phone. Dial in. Your carrier rates will apply.

Connect here

- You'll click on a link like this: **SAMPLE**<https://zoom.us/j/789261952>
- Meeting ID: SAMPLE789 261 952

What's it like?

The online meeting will be open only to people who access the meeting link or ID. Each person connects from their own home and device. On a smartphone, tablet, or computer screen, you'll see others' faces. If you connected with a camera, they will see your image too. Your name or phone number will appear under your picture. All of us will be able to talk and listen, share silence and worship. When we begin, we'll take time to orient everyone to the system. You'll learn how to mute your microphone except when you are speaking.

What do you need?

You'll need to download a free Zoom app for your smartphone, tablet, or computer (with camera, microphone, speakers). You do not need a Zoom account to access the meeting, only the Zoom app and a meeting link. Give yourself an extra 15 minutes or so for set up.

- Download Zoom app from GooglePlay or Apple App Store. Click the meeting invitation above, and you'll be prompted through the download process.
- Connect with the widest bandwidth setting possible for your location: (5G over 2.5G). If you don't have an option, just use whatever is available to you.
- Find out how to join audio and video from Zoom. [Short instructional video here.](#)
- If you're on a desktop or laptop computer, check that you have a camera, speaker, and microphone. Some older desktops do not have microphones built in.
- Check your lighting. Avoid windows behind you. Arrange nearby lighting to help others see your face.
- If you have headphones, plan to use them. It helps to focus attentiveness to the session. It also keeps others' sharing private to you, no matter where you're sitting.
- Mind your own background: Simple and less cluttered is helpful. No one else should walk through your camera view. Keeping your screen private contributes to group cohesion and sense of safety.
- Plan to disconnect from other tasks and relationships during the meeting.
- Contact _____ for help:

To Join by Phone:

You can join the online meeting using a landline or cell phone. If you dial in, your carrier rates will apply. Phoning in is useful when:

- You do not have a microphone or speaker on your PC/Mac,
- You do not have a smartphone (iOS or Android) or tablet.

CALL one of these numbers:

+1 408 638 0968 US (San Jose), +1 669 900 6833 US (San Jose) Enter Meeting ID: 789 261 952