

The 5 Virtual Meeting Essentials:

How to Transform Your In-Person Small Group into an Engaging Virtual Group

The Value of Virtual Groups

- Social connection while physically distancing
- Community and interaction are necessary in times of stress and confusion
- Reach hurting people while we cannot gather together
- Provide encouragement for those feeling discouraged and isolated
- It is the wave of the future – great potential for outreach
- Many have reported that people go deeper quicker on a virtual platform; this is a good thing

Planning Ahead

- Make sure you fully understand the digital platform(s) you are using.
- Make sure you have a strong internet connection. If possible, plug directly into an ethernet cable.
- Select a quiet place in your house – turn off background noise (TV, music, appliances).
- Lighting is important – it works best in front of your face, not behind.
- Make sure your face is centered in the video camera, not your forehead or neck.
- Only use one device per household - two devices used in the same room produces feedback that affects all participants.
- Online people start to lose interest at around the one-hour mark. We recommend keeping the full session to no longer than 1 hour and 15 minutes.
- If you are showing a video, make sure to download and test it.
 - Plan to have a plan if the video doesn't work in live time (share in the chat perhaps?)
 - You may want to send out meeting suggestions/guidelines and discuss these with your group in the first weeks.
- Recommend all participants download meeting software prior to the first meeting. You may want to be available to a “test session” for reluctant participants.
- Troubleshoot Zoom while people enter the meeting. Review how Zoom functions if needed or how your group will use it.
- Keep to a consistent agenda

Creating Lasting and Meaningful Relationships

- Ensure you engaging people right from the beginning of the online session. Say hello to people; greet people by name.
- Take attendance to make sure all are there and that you “see” them in the interface.
- Get your group members engaged in conversation right away with an Ice-Breaker Question. It could be on the theme or topic of the lesson or something light, funny or fun. Have every member answer the ice-breaker.

- Have group members speak in a certain order, call on someone randomly, have people raise hands.
- In the prayer, celebrate the diversity of the people, their insight, their willingness to share. Pray for a good meeting. Leverage your group – have someone lead opening prayer. Obtain this person's commitment in advance, offline so people don't feel pressure live.
- Prepare for Discussion: Do your homework. Review questions ahead of time. Mark (or make note of) the questions the Holy Spirit may be leading you to talk about during group time.
- It's really important to have more than enough prompts and icebreakers prepared.
- You may want to ask the group what questions they want to cover.
- Make the space safe. Respect any and all questions. Smile often. Use warm, affirming language. Thank the individual for talking. "I respect that..." "I understand..."
- Use the following participation techniques: have group members speak in a certain order, call on someone randomly, have people raise hands.
- Watch for signs that people want to talk: they open their mouth; they shift in their seat; they raise their hand; they nod in agreement or they "unmute".
- Generally speaking, the host should talk 30% of the time and listen 70% of the time. The role of the host is not to answer questions, but to allow the guests to give their perspective. Practice empathetic listening.
- Take note of who is talking or not talking and for how long. It is ok to interrupt the "long talkers" for the sake of the group. Say: "John... great point, however, we need to be mindful of the time; Sandy, what are your thoughts on this topic."

Getting Creative with Content

- Chat, Breakout Rooms, Polling
- Note: Free Zoom doesn't offer breakouts or polls and is limited to 40 minutes. If you run out of time without finishing, simply go to the link and everyone can click on it and start a new 40 minute session from that point fairly seamlessly.

Ensuring Online Hospitality and Engagement After the Session

- Close the meeting with gratitude and optimism. Thank participants for their perspective. Discuss announcements/next week if needed.
- Send weekly emails or re-capping last week's talk/discussion
- Pray for the guests in your group by name, daily.
- Ask guests to share their thoughts via email.
- Make sure to check-in if someone missed a night.
- Thank members for their participation or how special they are Use Facebook Group, WhatsApp, Meeting Space, Zoom, Skype, Google Hangout as a place to stay connected and keep the conversation going throughout the week
- Have Host Office Hours: Through Zoom, you can schedule daily or weekly time that you will host a Zoom call for anyone who wants to show up. Or let members know what time you are available for a phone call.
- Considering sharing wellness/spiritual resources during the week.

- Encourage journaling to help group members process their thoughts and emotions.
- Send hand written notes or encouragement from the group leaders to the guests.
- See if a group member would assist you in connecting with the group during the week. This might be someone's strength.

ADDITIONAL VIRTUAL RESOURCES

ZOOM

- Live Training Webinars: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/360029527911>
- Support Resources: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us>
- Breakout Rooms: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476093-Getting-Started-with-Breakout-Rooms>
- How to Chat: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/203650445-In-Meeting-Chat>
- Polling: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings>

GOOGLE MEET

- Training and Learning: <https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9282720?hl=en>

MICROSOFT TEAMS

- Training and Support: <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/office/microsoft-teams-video-training-4f108e54-240b-4351-8084-b1089f0d21d7>