

Virtual Groups Guide

Meeting online may be new to you or the members of your group. That's ok! The best thing you can do is be prepared. We are so grateful for our interactive online options and our hope is that your group would continue to find meaningful ways to connect. Here are some simple things you can do to create a great experience for the whole group:

Best Practices For Hosting An Virtual Group

- **Don't skip conversation starters or icebreakers!** It's a great time to get people comfortable with taking turns speaking. Unlike meeting in person, you don't want as much overlap in people's comments... But you also don't want awkward silences. Practice facilitating this kind of flow during the icebreaker.
- **Plant some seeds ahead of time to spark discussion.** Before the Group meets, share some of the questions, icebreakers, or transitions to allow them to be thinking about their responses and answers. Having that first and second person share and engage in the discussion will help spark everyone else to participate.
- **Explain some tips to your Group members at the beginning.**
 - **Ensure your computer/tablet/phone is stationary.** Tell your group this from the very beginning — before anyone tries to do laundry or make a sandwich. People can feel free to move around the room if they are muted and their device is stationary.
 - **Don't forget about the MUTE button!** Depending on the app or software you're using, hosts can usually mute anyone. One person's noise or feedback will be distracting and can silence other people.
 - **Make sure the background behind you isn't distracting.** Check your lighting. A bright light or window behind you will make it hard to see your face. Natural light in FRONT of you is the best option.
- **Ask specific people to speak.** Talking to a screen is different than a room of people so help everyone get used to it. For example, if you're about to talk about the sermon, start out by asking two or three people to share their highlights or just ask someone by name what they thought. It keeps people engaged and gives them permission to share.
- **Use the chat function to post the discussion questions.** This helps people stay focused on the question even when someone else is talking. It might also provoke a response for some of your more shy group members. This also works well for prayer requests. You might want to consider having another person in the Group help with this function.
- **Silence doesn't have to be awkward!** Remember that this will get easier the more you do it. Here are some ways to keep it flowing:

- If no one is answering questions, say, "I'll post that one in the chat window for you guys to think about." Then ask again.
 - Ask someone else to read the scriptures, open or close in prayer, or even ask a few of the discussion questions.
 - Be ready to answer any of the questions first to get others talking!
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Video Conferencing Troubleshooting:

If you're experiencing some technical difficulties all of the platforms have great help desks and troubleshooting pages, but these are some remedies for common issues.

- Check that your video and microphone buttons are ON. If there is noise around you mute your microphone but remember to unmute when you want to speak.
 - Log in from a computer if you can as it will help show everyone's face on the screen. If you log in from a phone or tablet you will be able to listen & speak but you might not be able to see everyone's face.
 - If on phone or tablet, landscape/horizontal is best. Follow the prompts to test your video and audio before your group starts.
 - If your connection is 'choppy' turn off your video & simply use audio. It is likely that you do not have enough internet bandwidth at your location.
 - Many of these platforms enable "screen sharing", meaning one person can share their screen while video is playing and the group can still watch together with discussion to follow. Alternatively, you can ask the group members to watch on their own beforehand and then use video conferencing or group messaging for your group discussions.
 - Planning Center has this helpful [article](#) showing how you can update the Location of your Group Event, to a Virtual (link) as your location type. Then you can simply paste the meeting link of the video conferencing platform you use.
 - All of the video conferencing platforms have great troubleshooting pages and multiple videos on their website or YouTube. Try those first and then reach out to us if you're still having problems.
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Choosing An Online Platform

We trust you all as leaders to discern what the most effective and easiest way to connect with your group is. There are a lot of options out there; different features, different pricing, and you may already be more familiar using some. Click to learn more about using these popular online platforms and see what's best for you: [Zoom](#), [FaceTime](#), [Google Hangout](#), [Skype](#), [GoToMeeting](#), [Microsoft Teams](#) and more.

Below are a few easy to follow steps to download some of these apps and get you started.

Zoom Video Conferencing

1. Go to <https://zoom.us/>. In the upper right corner, you'll see a blue button: "SIGN UP, IT'S FREE". Click the button and follow the instructions to set up an account with your email address and a password.
2. We suggest installing the app, on your phone or computer, as it works much better.
3. Help with "[Scheduling A Meeting](#)"
4. Help with "[Meeting Controls](#)"
5. *Zoom* can host up to 100 participants but has a 40min limit on their free account.

Google Hangouts Meet

1. Go to <http://meet.google.com>. Download the iOS or Android app for phone/tablet use.
2. In the app, click "New Meeting". On the website, click the "+Join or start a meeting" in the middle of the page.
3. Video meeting will begin! You should see a link that you can share to invite others to video chat with you! You can click the "i" icon under the video screen to see joining info.
4. Text or email group members with the meeting link and get to conferencing!
5. Help with "[Getting Started](#)"

GroupMe (Group Messaging)

1. Go to <http://groupme.com> from your preferred device. Click the appropriate link to download the iOS or Android app to your device.
2. Go back to the website. In the middle of the page, click the green "Sign Up Now" button
3. Follow the instructions to set up an account with your name, email, AND your mobile number. Set your password.
4. You'll receive a PIN number to your phone. Enter that on the appropriate screen and click "Start Chatting".
5. Finally, log into the app on your phone and click the following link from to join your group chat. Add your group members and chat away!



Email Template

Whichever video conferencing platform you choose (Zoom, GoogleHangout, FaceTime, Skype, etc.) here is a helpful email template to send out to your group. We'll use Zoom as an example below.

Hey everybody,

As you know, everything suddenly looks different these days. During this season of change we are going to move our group meeting to online. I'm grateful for technology that enables us to stay connected and stay in God's Word even when we can't be together physically. He is so Good!

Please read the details below to prepare for our next group time:

- Our meeting will meet at our normal time: **Wednesday @7pm** .
- We will use **Zoom** video conferencing to meet. If you do not already have a Zoom account, here is how to set one up:
 1. Go to <https://zoom.us/>
 2. In the upper right corner, you'll see a blue button: "SIGN UP, IT'S FREE"
 3. Click the button and follow the instructions to set up an account with your email address and a password. If you are prompted to install the app, please do so as it works better that way.
 4. Test your *Zoom* account by clicking on this link:
<https://us04web.zoom.us/j/4206934660>
 - Does *Zoom* open and take you to an online meeting?
 - Can you see yourself on the screen? Follow the prompts to test your video and audio.
 5. If you have problems connecting to *Zoom*, please contact the *Zoom Help Center* (on the *Zoom* website).

I'm excited as we navigate a new thing and we will work through this together. What a great opportunity to fully depend on our great God through these unprecedented times. He is faithful, He is our provider, and He will continue to transform hearts.

