Renewal

How to facilitate engaging online groups with Zoom

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(Adapted for Connect Groups from extracts of an article by media.com)

Note from Karen, Groups Assistant Pastor:

I realise that some of this content would be very advanced for the purpose of use in our own Connect Groups, but want to refrain from limiting or prescribing how much of these tips and guidance you would like to implement. I therefore decided to share probably more information and tips than necessary, allowing you to filter in what you feel necessary and comfortable to use. I speak often of the role as a facilitator of the group meeting and this would probably be the role of the group leader unless someone else who might be more tech-savvy takes on the role of facilitating the online meeting.

This guide includes:

- Getting started — Zoom best practices
- Planning your Group meeting
- Methods for creating engagement
- Tips for facilitation

Getting Started - Zoom best practices

Here are some tips for using Zoom which is a good idea to share at the beginning of any call.

1. Turn on your camera

Not everyone will have the option to turn on a camera, but if it is possible and they feel comfortable, ask them to do so. Being able to see each other already increases the feeling of connection and engagement. It also means people are more likely to be present in the call and not work on other things simultaneously.

2. Gallery view

In Zoom you have the choice between gallery view and speaker view. Gallery view means you can see everyone in the call at once and not only the speaker, which makes you feel like you are part of a group.

3. If you are not speaking, put yourself on mute

This makes a HUGE difference to the sound quality. It also means people are less likely to talk over each other throughout the meeting. As the meeting host, you are also able to mute and unmute people. You can also mute and unmute everyone at the same time. Another tip to increase sound quality is to use headphones if possible.

If someone would like to speak, they can either:

- Simply unmute themselves
- Raise their physical hand
- Raise their digital hand
- Write in the chat

It's up to you as the facilitator to decide how you would like the communication to happen and to make this clear to the group.

If you have a larger group where you cannot see everyone at once, using the digital hand raise is really helpful. As the host you can see the raised hands in the order they were raised and then call on the people to share.

4. Your name

Sometimes people call in from a phone and their name shows up as a number. Ask everyone to rename themselves with the name they would like to be addressed by.

5. Hide yourself!

Zoom gives you the option to hide your self view. Click the three little dots at the top of the video image of yourself and click - hide self view. You might find it less tiring and distracting if you aren't looking back at you!

Planning your group meeting

The purpose of our group meeting online remains to 'be' church and build the body through relationships.

We aim to worship together, encourage in faith together and to learn and grow together. Furthermore to increase hope, to serve together and to grow in relationship with Jesus and each other.

It still remains important do reflect upon a few thoughts regarding every meeting. These could also be discussed as a group to set the expectations for future meetings:

- What outcome do you want?
- What information do you want to share?
- What learning do you want to enable?
- Is the intention to study, pray, share, connect or all of these and the time you want to allocate more or less to each?

Overview of session design

It is worth putting some thought into the agenda and time plan for your call. The sessions generally always follow the same basic format. In the next part we will go deeper into each of these areas:

- Arrival
- Check-in
- Content, engagement, reflection and prayer
- Check-out

Arrival

So let's say you've organised your group meeting and the people are about to arrive. Now what?

For the arrival you have two choices: you can use the Waiting Room function so that everyone enters at the same time, or you can open the Zoom room and wait for people to come in one by one. Note that if you use the waiting room, people who join the session later will also go to the waiting room until you let them enter the group.

In a smaller group, it's nice to greet people by name as they join, and invite them to take a few quiet moments to get present while you wait for the others to arrive.

Once you're ready to start, it's good to go over the ground rules for using Zoom which we shared above, as well as to share the agenda for the session, so that everyone knows what will happen and feels comfortable and ready for the session. It can then be helpful to start the session with prayer.

Check-ins
'Check-ins' is a simple tool to open a group. In an online setting it is especially important to give everyone the chance to have their voice heard at the beginning of the meeting. This can support increased engagement later on.

The method you use for the check in will depend on the size of the group. Here are a few methods to get you started, yet you can get creative with how you do it.

Small groups

In smaller groups, it is nice to give everyone the chance to speak. Here it is important to frame the check-in with a question.

Examples include:
- How much energy do you have right now on a scale of 1–10?
- Consider some of the Icebreaker questions in the 'Connect Leaders Guide'
- You can then go around the 'circle' (as they appear on your screen) and call their names one by one to share. You can also ask the person sharing to then nominate the next person.

If you have limited time, you can also ask people to just share one sentence, or even just one word, or use a method for bigger groups.

Larger groups

For larger groups it's not always possible for everyone's actual voice to be heard, but you can still give them the chance to share. This however should not be the case in our groups as the purpose is for all to share and connect. But I include the examples nevertheless as ideas should you at some point need to facilitate a larger meeting:

- Show your energy level on a scale from 1–10 using your fingers
- Ask a check-in question and ask them to write their answer in the chat, then read a few of them out
- Use the breakout rooms to put them in pairs or small groups and share among themselves or answer a check-in question. More on breakout rooms below.

Tip: the check-in is a great opportunity to demonstrate that honest sharing is allowed. So as the facilitator you can also share how you are doing. For example, if you are nervous about the session, say so — often many other people will be nervous if they haven't joined an online session before, and this will help them feel more at ease. But only if it's really how you feel of course!

Methods for creating engagement
Ok so now you've set the ground rules for using Zoom, everyone has checked in and your group is ready to go! Now it's time to create some engagement.

Sharing

Rather than launching straight into a group discussion or bible study, it can sometimes be more efficient if you first give people a chance to gather their thoughts and share how they are or what has been happening for them in the last week/s since your last meeting. Again, you can do it in order of the 'circle' as people appear on your screen or you can nominate the first person and allow them to nominate the next. Keep note on who has spoken and as facilitator, make sure everyone had a turn to share.

Breakout rooms — pairs or smaller groups

Breakout rooms is a function for a paid premium account and as Renewal now have a dedicated account for the use of groups that you are able to book in advance from

the office, you can consider using this function. Breakout rooms are a great feature of Zoom which make it possible for people to talk in smaller groups. This allows people to connect on a deeper level even in a large group.

Before putting people into breakout rooms it's important to give clear instructions.
- How long will they be in the room?
- What question or situation should they explore?
- Should they decide in the smaller group how to organise the discussion, or will it be timed (e.g. each person has 2 minutes to share)

Listening Circles

Listening Circles are a great method to give everyone in the group the opportunity and time to share their perspectives and ensure that everyone is heard equally. Start by defining a central topic or question. Then you go around the 'circle' (as you see them on your screen) one by one and ask each person to share. Ask everyone to only speak when it is their turn. Everyone is allowed to say pass if they don't want to speak. Depending on the topic and available time, it is possible to have one or more rounds.

An alternative to the facilitator naming the person who will speak next is to again ask each person to nominate the next person once they've finished sharing. And once again, just make sure you keep an overview so that no one gets left out!

Popcorn

Popcorn essentially means that anyone who would like to share — or go 'pop' — can do so. Here it is helpful to use the digital hand raising tool to keep track of who wants to share. This is a good method to use if there is not enough time for everyone to share in a listening circle, or if you want to create a more natural dialogue. Yet it's still important that people don't talk over each other and give each other space to share.

Tip: sometimes the conversation can go off topic or one person can talk for a long time. As a facilitator it's your job to bring the conversation back — while still letting it flow naturally of course. Yet sometimes you need to step in and ask the person or group to come back to the topic at hand, or to wrap up so that other people have a

chance to share. It is also an option to give people a time limit, e.g. 1 minute each to share their thoughts. Timed speaking can be a great practice in getting to the essence of your point.

Shared document

A great way to harvest insights, knowledge or ideas from your group meeting is to have everyone write into a shared Google document. This is an advanced used of Zoom so please do not feel you have to do this but the very tech-savvy will probably find this easy. This has the benefit that everyone can see what everyone else is writing, it creates the feeling of contributing together, it's really efficient and you have something documented for everyone to keep. It works best if you set up the document with the questions you want them to answer beforehand, then post it in the chat.

Alternatively you can use a shared document for the agenda and send it to everyone beforehand.

Screen share

Sharing your screen with the participants is not a particularly engaging method, but it is a great way to share information in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, video, image, or anything else you wish to share. If possible, it is good to limit the input time to keep everyone's attention.

Check-outs

In the same way check-ins are important to open a session, check-outs help to wrap them up. They give people the chance to share the impact of the gathering on them, to share final thoughts, reflections and take-aways and to close a gathering in an intentional way. You can use the same methods described for check-ins.

Example questions include:
- How do you feel now?
- Share one word which summarises how you feel now/how the meeting was for you
- How much energy do you have on a scale from 1–10?
- What was your take-away or 'aha' moment from this meeting?
- Share one thing you appreciated in the meeting?
- Pray for one another

Check-ins and check-outs make a big difference in terms of creating a safe space online, so it's really recommended not to skip them. They are also a great tool to use for 'in person' group meetings.

Tips for facilitation

The role of the facilitator or group leader

Firstly let's talk about the role of the facilitator or group leader. As a facilitator, your job is to guide the group process. You don't have to be the 'expert' in the topic necessarily. Rather, it's your role to give the participants clarity about what is happening, take care of the atmosphere, guide the conversation back if it goes off topic, support all voices to be heard and give the group the chance to reflect, share their knowledge, insights and ideas.

Communication Ground Rules

As a facilitator, you have the opportunity to set the standard for how communication will happen in the session. This not only includes if they should raise their hand or not if they wish to speak, but also how they then communicate. Here are a couple of tips which really support good communication online (and in real life!):
- When you speak, try to get to the essence of what you want to say (especially in larger groups when there are a lot of voices to be heard).
- When you are not speaking, listen. Often when we listen we are already preparing the next thing we want to say in our head, or are quick to jump in with advice,

opinions or ideas. Invite your participants to listen with a lot of openness and curiosity and to not cut each other off. Using the mute button is great to practice listening!

- Use pauses. Invite your participants to take a silent moment sometimes to gather their thoughts, notice what is present for them and calm down if needed.

Dealing with silence

That moment when you ask the group a question and nobody responds!?! As a facilitator, you will inevitably have to deal with these moments of silence at some point, so you may as well choose to embrace them. Sometimes it is simply a matter of rephrasing a question, or asking a specific person to share. Yet avoid the urge to immediately fill the gap: sometimes people just need a few moments to collect their thoughts. Sharing with the group how valuable these moments of silence can be is a great way to take away potential awkwardness. If the pressure is off to start talking simply to fill the space, and they feel it's ok to slow down the pace of conversation, you often get greater ideas and insights as a result.

Working with questions

You might have noticed that pretty much all the methods mention thinking about the question you want to ask. Questions are a really powerful tool to tap into the knowledge, experience, creativity and insights in groups. Designing questions is a super important skill for facilitators, and they don't have to be complicated. Try introducing a topic with a question, for example: 'why do you think knowing your values is important for leaders?' instead of telling them why you think it's important straight away. You might be surprised by the level of depth and insight you get, and it breaks down the dynamic of an expert lecturing the audience or you supposedly having all the answers.

Reflecting on experiences

As a group leader, it can be a really powerful tool to ask people to reflect on the experience itself, as well as the content of their discussion. Example questions include: how was the experience of the break out room for you? What did you notice about yourself in this exercise? This gives everyone the chance to step back from their discussion and notice the different layers present — the discussion itself, their personal learnings, the group dynamics, etc.

Practice, practice and more practice!

In the end, the best way to grow as a group leader or facilitator is through practice! Pretty much everything we've learnt about online facilitation has been through experimenting and trying it out. So the invitation to you is to just give it a go and don't worry if you don't feel you know enough to start, trust in your ability to figure it out as you go! And remember to be yourself and have fun.