



## Leading Virtual Small-Group Sessions

Meeting online is a great option for a number of situations. During a time of a public-health hazard, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, online meetings are a welcome opportunity for people to converse while seeing each other's faces. Online meetings can also expand the "neighborhood" of possible group members, because people can log in from just about anywhere in the world. This also give those who do not have access to transportation or who prefer not to travel at certain times of day the chance to participate.

The guidelines below will help you lead an effective and enriching group study using an online video conferencing platform such as Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or other virtual meeting platform of your choice.

### Basic Features for Virtual Meetings

There are many choices for videoconferencing platforms. You may have personal experience and comfort using a particular service, or your church may have a subscription that will influence your choice. Whichever option you choose, it is recommended that you use a platform that supports the following features:

- **Synchronous video and audio:** Your participants can see and speak to each other live, in real time. Participants have the ability to turn their video off and on, and to mute and unmute their audio.
- **Chat:** Your participants can send text messages to the whole group or individuals from within the virtual meeting. Participants can put active hyperlinks (i.e., "clickable" internet addresses) into the chat for other participants' convenience.
- **Screen Sharing:** Participants can share the contents of their screen with other participants (the meeting host's permission may be required).
- **Video Sharing:** Participants (or the host) can share videos and computer audio via screen share, so that all participants can view the videos each week.
- **Breakout Rooms:** Meeting hosts can automatically or manually send participants into virtual smaller groups, and can determine whether or not the rooms end automatically after a set period of time. Hosts can communicate with all breakout rooms. *This feature is useful if your group is large, or if you wish to break into smaller teams of two or three for certain activities. If you have a smaller group, this feature may not be necessary.*

Check with your pastor or director of discipleship to see if your church has a preferred platform or an account with one or more of these platforms that you might use. In most instances, only the host will need to be signed in to the account; others can participate without being registered.

Zoom, Webex, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams all offer free versions of their platform, which you can use if your church doesn't have an account. However, there may be some restrictions (for instance, Zoom's free version limits meetings to 45 minutes). Check each platform's website to be sure you are aware of any such restrictions before you sign up.

Once you have selected a platform, familiarize yourself with all of its features and controls so that you can facilitate virtual meetings comfortably. The platform's website will have lists of features and helpful tutorials, often third-party sites will have useful information or instructions as well.

There are additional features on many that help play your video more effectively. In Zoom, for example, as you click the "share screen" option and see the screen showing your different windows, check at the bottom of that window to choose "optimize for video clips" and "share audio". These ensure that your group hears the audio and that, when using a clip, the video resolution is compressed to fit the bandwidth that you have.

In addition to videoconferencing software, it is also advisable to have access to slide-creation software such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Google Slides. These can be used to prepare easy slides for screen-sharing to display discussion questions, quotes from the study book, or Scripture passages. If you don't have easy access to these, you can create a document and share it—but make sure the print size is easy to read.

## **Video Sharing**

For a video-based study, it's important to be able to screen-share your videos so that all participants can view them in your study session. The good news is, whether you have the videos on DVD or streaming files, it is possible to play them in your session.

All of the videoconferencing platforms mentioned above support screen-sharing videos. Some have specific requirements for assuring that sound will play clearly in addition to the videos. Follow your videoconferencing platform instructions carefully, and test the video sharing in advance to be sure it works.

If you wish to screen-share a DVD video, you may need to use a different media player. Some media players will not allow you to share your screen when you play copyright-protected DVDs. VLC is a free media player that is safe and easy to use. To try this software, download at [videolan.org/VLC](http://videolan.org/VLC).

*What about copyright?* DVDs like those you use for group study are meant to be used in a group setting "real time." That is, whether you meet in person, online, or in a hybrid setting, Abingdon Press encourages use of your DVD or streaming video.

*What is allowed:* Streaming an Abingdon DVD over Zoom, Teams, or similar platform during a small group session.

*What is not allowed:* Posting video of a published DVD study to social media or YouTube for later viewing.

If you have any questions about permissions and copyright, email [permissions@abingdonpress.com](mailto:permissions@abingdonpress.com).

**Amplify Media.** The streaming subscription platform Amplify Media makes it easy to share streaming videos for groups. When your church has an Amplify subscription, your group members can sign on and have access to the video sessions. With access, they may watch the video on their own ahead of your group meeting, watch the streaming video during your group meeting, or view again after the meeting. Thousands of videos are on AmplifyMedia.com making it easy to watch any time, anywhere, and on any device from phones and tablets to Smart TVs and desktops.

Visit AmplifyMedia.com to learn more or call 1-800-672-1789, option 4, to hear about the current offers.

## Communicating with Your Group

Clear communication with your small group before and throughout your study is crucial no matter how you meet, but it is doubly important if you are gathering virtually.

**Advertising the Study.** Be sure to advertise your virtual study on your church's website and/or in its newsletter, as well as any social media that your church uses. Request pastors or other worship leaders announce it in worship services. If a time is publicized, be sure to list the time zone in case folks would like to join from a different location.

**Registration.** Encourage people to register for the online study so that you can know all participants and have a way to contact them. Ideally, you will collect an email address for each participant so that you can send them communications and links to your virtual meeting sessions. An event planning tool such as [SignUpGenius](#) makes this easy, and give you a database of participants and their email addresses.

**Welcome Email.** Before your first session, several days in advance, send an email to everyone who has registered for the study, welcoming them to the group, reminding them of the date and time of your first meeting, and including a link to join the virtual meeting. (Be sure to include the time zone with your meeting time, in case you have people joining from another area.) It's also a good idea to include one or two discussion questions to "prime the pump" for reflection and conversation when you gather.

If you have members without internet service, or if they are uncomfortable using a computer and videoconferencing software, let them know they may telephone into the meeting. Provide them the number and let them know that there is usually a unique phone number for each meeting.

**Weekly Emails.** Send a new email two or three days before each week's session, again including the link to join your virtual meeting and one or two discussion questions to set the stage for discussion. Feel free to use any of the questions in the Leader Guide for this purpose. If you find a particular quote from the book that is especially meaningful, include this as well.

**Facebook.** Consider creating a private Facebook group for your small group, where you can hold discussion and invite reflection between your weekly meetings. Each week, post one or two quotes from the study book along with a short question for reflection, and invite people to respond in the comments. These questions can come straight from the Leader Guide, and you can revisit the Facebook conversation during your virtual meeting.

You might also consider posting these quotes and questions on your church's main Facebook page, inviting people in your congregation join the conversation beyond your small group. This can be a great way to involve others in your study, or to let people know about it and invite them to join your next virtual meeting.

## **During Your Virtual Sessions**

During your virtual sessions, follow these tips to be sure you are prepared and that everything runs as smoothly as possible.

### **Getting Ready**

- Familiarize yourself with the controls and features of your videoconferencing platform, using instructions or tutorials available via the platform's website or third-party sites.
- Be sure you are leading the session from a well-lit place in front of a background free from excessive distractions.
- As leader, log into the virtual meeting early. You want to be a good host who is present to welcome participants by name as they arrive. This also gives you time to check how you appear on camera, so that you can make any last-minute adjustments to your lighting and background if needed.

### **Creating Community Online**

- During each session, pay attention to who is speaking and who is not. Because of video and audio lags as well as internet connections of varying quality, some participants may inadvertently speak over each other without realizing they are doing so. As needed, directly prompt specific people to speak if they wish (for example, "Alan, it looked like you were about to say something when Sarah was speaking").
- If your group is especially large, you may want to agree with members on a procedure for being recognized to speak (for example, participants might "raise hands" digitally or type "call on me" in the chat feature).
- Instruct participants to keep their microphones muted during the meeting, so extraneous noise from their location does not interrupt the meeting. This includes chewing or yawning sounds, which can be embarrassing! When it is time for discussion, participants can unmute themselves.
- Remember some participants may wish to simply observe and listen—do not pressure anyone to speak who does not wish to.
- Always get your group's permission before recording your online sessions. While those who are unable to attend the meeting may appreciate the chance to view it later, respect the privacy of your participants.

- Communicate with your group in between sessions with weekly emails and Facebook posts to spark ongoing discussion..

In challenging times, modern technology has powerful potential to bring God’s people together in new and nourishing ways. May such be your experience during this virtual study.

## **Help, Support, and Tutorials**

The creators of the most popular virtual meeting platforms have excellent, free resources available online to help you get started using their platform, which teach you everything from how to join a meeting as a participant to how to use the more advanced features like video sharing and breakout rooms. Most of them offer clear written instructions as well as video tutorials, and also provide a way to contact the company in case you need additional assistance.

Below are links for five platforms: Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Google Meet, and GoTo Meeting. If you are using a different platform, go to their website and look for the “Help” or “Resources” page.

**Zoom Help Center:** <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us>

Contains a comprehensive collection of resources to help you use the Zoom platform, including quick start guides, video tutorials, articles, and specific sets of instructions on various topics or issues you may run into.

**Microsoft Teams Help & Learning:** <https://support.microsoft.com/en-us/teams>

A collection of articles, videos, and instructions on how to use the Microsoft Teams platform. Teams offers a number of features. You are most likely to find the help you need for group meetings by navigating to the “Meetings” page, or by clicking “Microsoft Teams training” under “Explore Microsoft Teams.”

**Webex Help Center:** <https://help.webex.com/en-us/>

Contains articles, videos, and other resources to help you use the Webex platform, with everything from joining the meeting to screen-sharing and using a virtual whiteboard.

**Google Meet Help:** <https://support.google.com/meet/>

Contains a list of support topics to help you use the Google Meet platform, in an easy-to-read expandable list that makes it easy to find just what you need.

**GoTo Meeting Support:** <https://support.goto.com/meeting>

Here you’ll find links with instructions on various topics to help you use the GoTo Meeting platform.

## **General How-To**

In addition to these official support pages, there are numerous independent sites online with great, clear instructions on using multiple platforms. Here is one excellent resource:

**Nerds Chalk:** <https://nerdschalk.com/>

This site is easily searchable and contains numerous articles and how-go guides, with clear titles

to help you find exactly what you need. Simply search for your chosen platform and/or what you are trying to accomplish, such as “Breakout rooms” or “Zoom screen share,” and navigate to the most relevant link.