



ONLINE GROUPS

WHY ONLINE GROUPS?

God created us for community. While in-person, face to face communication is always the best option, it doesn't mean community can't occur from a distance. Paul, a church planter in the early church and the author for the majority of the New Testament, utilized the long distance technology of his time. To connect with those he was unable to see face to face he sent them letters! Here is what he says in some of those letters:

"I long to see you... (Romans 1:11)

"After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea." (Colossians 4:16)

"I charge you before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers and sisters." (1 Thessalonians 5:27)

"I long to see you, so that I may be filled with joy." (2 Timothy 1:4)

In fact, of the 27 books of the New Testament, 21 were letters written from a distance! Since the beginning of the church, creative measures were taken to stay connected when face to face interactions weren't possible. Paul didn't replace his church planting ministry with letters only, he just viewed letters as a weapon in his arsenal to help people find the way back to God.

Online groups are not intended to replace in-person groups, but that doesn't mean they aren't important and can't help people find the way back to God. They are a weapon in our arsenal to help people find the way back to God!

There's an endless list of reasons why an online group is a great idea, but here are some significant reasons Bridgewater has online groups:

- We want to help people stay in community when their work schedules don't allow them to connect in person.

- We want to help people stay in community when their life circumstances don't allow them to connect in person.
- We want to help people stay in community when our governing officials urge us to practice social distancing.
- We want to give people an easy on ramp to get a taste of community that results in an in-person group.

HOW TO HOST ONLINE GROUPS

Many solutions are available to host your group online. We recommend the software called **Zoom**. It offers the most features for no cost. See Appendix A for a step-by-step tutorial on setting up Zoom. **Please note:** Zoom has a forty-minute call limit for free users. All you have to do if Zoom kicks you off after forty minutes is, click the same invite link you sent to your group to start up another forty-minute call. Let your group know that is all you need to do to continue without skipping a beat!

Notes Regarding Devices and Technology

- While mobile phones can be used, laptops and/or desktop computers are recommended as they offer a larger screen size.
- Only use one device per household. Multiple devices can cause audio feedback and internet bandwidth issues.
- Your device will ask for permission to access your audio and video. Approve all of this ahead of time, since it may require a reboot.
- Place your device on a table or stable mount, not on your lap or in your hand. Having your hands free allows you to reference your Bible or additional study materials.
- Make sure your device is plugged in or at full battery level.
- Use landscape mode [sideways] instead of portrait [up and down].

BEST PRACTICES FOR VIDEO CALLING / ONLINE ETIQUETTE

- 1. Recommend that group members download any needed software prior to meeting and get used to how it works in order to be ready to fully participate and not delay the meeting.**
- 2. Be aware of how you look on camera.**
 - Make sure your face has sufficient lighting. In general, lighting works best in front of your face, not behind. Brighter light is preferred to yellow/'warm' light.
 - Make sure your face is centered in the video camera. It's best to position the camera to eye level or slightly above.
 - Speaking tip: When talking, look directly into the camera. When not talking, look at the computer screen to watch others.
- 3. Select the quietest room/location you can find.**
 - Turn off anything making noise in the background (TV, radio, appliances).
 - If pets may cause a distraction, care for them as necessary beforehand to ensure they are calm and quiet.
 - If you're at home, have a plan for childcare so as to minimize interruptions.
 - Places like a coffee shop or restaurant can work but sometimes background noise can be an issue. Noise canceling headphones can help with this.
- 4. Mute your computer unless you're the person talking.**
 - Whichever platform you're using, know how to turn off and on your mute button.
 - If everyone's microphone is turned on at the same time, the sound quality can be an issue and it can be hard to hear the person who is talking.
 - If you are muted, make sure to nod your head and listen well so people can recognize you are following them. Find creative ways to practice non-verbal communication.
 - Recognize that the moderator has the ability to mute individual participants if needed.

5. Be both positive and assertive as a moderator/host.

- Your demeanor will set the stage for the attitude of everyone else in the group.
- The moderator/host of the group will need to be welcoming and in charge. Make sure as host you jump on a few minutes early to welcome everyone.
- Redirect the conversation or mute participants as necessary. This may feel rude, but it is sometimes necessary to manage a good online experience.
- As a rule of thumb, the host should talk, at most, 30% of the time.

6. Create a plan for participants to indicate that they'd like to talk.

- You may try things like raising a hand, answering in a specific order, or another signal.
- Since participants will often be muted, having a plan will help you know when to mute and unmute.

7. Encourage group participants to give their full attention (i.e. don't multitask).

- When participants are not giving their full attention, it can be as big of a distraction with an online group as it can with an in-person group.

TYPICAL ONLINE GROUP SCHEDULE

Practice Session

- If you think your group would need it, it may be wise to have a practice Zoom call to let your group become comfortable with the software.
- This session would be a great time to take your group through the Best Practices/Online Etiquette section that applies to them.

Typical Meeting

1. Moderator/Host welcomes everyone to the online group

- Buffer time is important, as people tend to arrive late online (as with in-person groups).
- Allow for people, if necessary, to adjust their lighting, camera, and microphone settings.

2. Warm Up/Connection Time

- The key here is to get everyone talking. This also allows the group members to get comfortable learning how to mute/unmute themselves when talking and listening.

4. Discussion Time

- **PLEASE NOTE:** When using a video study (example: Right Now Media), encourage your group to watch it prior to the meeting.
- Discuss the corresponding questions that apply to the study.
- Remember that the objective of group isn't to get through all the questions – rather, it's to hear from everyone in the group.
- Listen well and ask great follow-up questions. Let the conversation flow among your group members and redirect/keep-on-track as needed.

5. Take Prayer Requests and Close in Prayer

- Have a designated person to write down/record these prayer requests.
- Have one person pray for the group, or assign prayer requests to different people.
- Be sure to follow up with requests from prior weeks.