



Fostering Engagement and Connection in ONLINE CHURCH GATHERINGS

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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What does “gathering” mean for Christians? What is it that we gather for? How does our gathering change if we cannot meet in person?

These are the questions that many have been exploring through experimentation and practice with online gatherings this last year. As we’ve adapted to the widespread digital shift brought by coronavirus, we’ve been learning how to not only

meet online but also to connect, build relationships, grow as disciples, discern together and make decisions and creatively engage with the many different aspects of faith.

There are many things we’ve learned during this time about digital engagement in the context of Christian ministry. One of the key learnings is that building a connected and engaged community online is different than in person. When we gather in person for worship and other church activities, there are many moments before, during and after for people to connect with each other and actively engage in the activity, spiritual practice, project, learning or agenda that has brought us together. In the digital space, these opportunities need to be facilitated in an intentional way by those leading.

This resource provides tips for fostering community and connections on online gathering platforms like Zoom. Whether you are gathering for a session meeting, Bible study or prayer, these tips will help you facilitate deeper engagement from the gathered community.

Approach Online Gatherings with a Positive Attitude

God has created us for community, and it is wonderful when we are able to gather in person. God has given us amazing communication tools, and it is wonderful when we are able to gather online. Both these statements are true. Yet we often approach online gatherings as if they were secondary alternatives to in-person gatherings. When we do this, we might be turning away from the wonderful possibilities that God has for us in gathering online. It’s important to treat the online space created when “two or three are gathered in Christ’s name” with the same regard as you would if the gathering were happening in person.

- Open the meeting or gathering with the same level of enthusiasm and welcome you would at the beginning of a meeting in person.
- Adopt a posture of honesty and humility. There is a certain amount of awkwardness when meeting online (tech issues, delays, people speaking over each other). Treat this with light-heartedness. Admit that certain things are awkward, model what it means to go-with-the-flow and encourage others to be patient.

- Start with prayer. Thank God for all of creation, praise Jesus for his presence and call on the Holy Spirit to guide your time together.

Plan and Prepare Well

Virtual gathering planning involves more than just creating an agenda. Meetings are greatly improved when hosts also consider the purpose, context, design and activities that will allow for engagement in a virtual space. Here are a few things to consider in preparation for your gathering:

Distributing Roles—The facilitator/leader/moderator of the meeting or gathering needs to focus on the material and dynamics of the gathering itself; therefore, it is helpful to ask other people to cover the other roles necessary for a smooth and successful online gathering.

- **Host:** The person who will be responsible for ensuring that the technical aspects of the online meeting are running smoothly. In Zoom, the host is the one who can divide people into breakout rooms, mute and unmute, kick out Zoom bombers, etc. There is also the option of two people sharing the hosting ability (co-hosting). This is recommended if it is a large gathering where there may be more participants facing technical issues.
- **Chat Moderator:** It can be difficult for the leader to monitor the chat box while also presenting or moderating. If you will be encouraging people to use the chat function, ask someone to monitor the chat throughout the gathering. Be sure to pause at different moments during the presentation so that the chat moderator can bring forward questions, comments or ideas that have come in. For smaller meetings, this role can easily be fulfilled by the host.
- **Notetaker:** If you need notes from your meeting or gathering, choose one or two people to take notes ahead of time.

Pacing—It is easy to misjudge the pacing during an online gathering because we do not have the same visual feedback from others that we would in person. For example, when you are in the same room together, a leader can gauge when people need a break by their body language. When you are putting together the agenda of the meeting or plan for the gathering, schedule breaks in.

- Be realistic about how much information, discussion or activity people can handle before needing a break. It is ok to have breaks that vary in length. Short 3- to 5-minute breaks can be as effective at reenergizing and refocusing people as longer breaks.
- Use the polling function to see when people are ready for a break. For example, when the time comes for your first scheduled break, create a poll that asks, “Would you like your break now, in 15 minutes or in half an hour?”
- Check in with yourself during the meeting: How are you feeling as the leader? Chances are that if you are getting tired or distracted, so are others. If this is the case, take a 5-minute break, even if it isn’t in the agenda.
- Set an end time and stick to it.

Variety—Setting an agenda with a variety of modes of delivery and means of engagement will help people to stay focused on the meeting or gathering and participate to the best of their abilities.

- Design your agenda to allow for participant engagement every 10 minutes. This may seem like a lot, but participant engagement can simply mean drawing their attention to an image and inviting them to comment in the chat box, asking for a “show of hands” using the raise hand function, putting a quote up and inviting people to silently reflect for a moment, or asking people to review a short piece of written content.

- Make use of the features of whatever platform you are using that allow for engagement: chat box, polling, raising hand, breakout rooms, whiteboard. There are lots of instructional videos and explanations on the internet if you need guidance on using these different features.
- Plan with different types of learners in mind: visual (seeing), auditory (hearing), tactile (doing), reflective, etc. Can you incorporate videos or music into your gathering? Will there be an opportunity for participants to “do” something physical during the gathering? Are you using charts, graphs and images? Will there be opportunities for different types of discussions?

PowerPoint or Other Visuals—Visuals are extremely important in online meetings or gatherings. Images help participants stay focused, make important connections between material and remember content for longer. PowerPoint slides are great for highlighting key ideas.

- Limit the number of words you have on a slide. There is no hard and fast rule about how many words is best; just be aware that it is best to keep sentences short and use bullet points sparingly.
- Use relevant images. Images that are not related to what you are talking about act as a distraction rather than an aid
- Changing the visual field regularly maximizes participant attention, so change the slides at regular intervals as you move through the meeting or gathering.
- A good rule of thumb is that have one key idea with a strong image to support it per slide. Remember that your slide will look different depending on the device people are using. Keeping it simple is will make it easier for everyone joining the meeting to see all that is on your slides.

Beginnings are Important¹

Gathering—When people join an online meeting or gathering, it is often an abrupt transition from whatever they were doing before straight into “being on” in front of a group of people. Unlike meetings in person, where we often must physically travel somewhere (e.g., to the boardroom, to church, to the local café), most online meetings that happen these days happen in our homes. We are being asked to transition from private to public in the matter of minutes. There are ways that those hosting and leading the meeting can make this transition easier on participants.



- If there are people who are new to the meeting platform you are using, put up a welcome slide as people are signing on that illustrates the basics of the meeting platform and the features you will be using to invite participation.
- Clarify who participants should contact if they are having technical issues. In your welcoming remarks, say something like, “If you are having technical issues during the webinar, please message so-and-so in a private message using the chat function. They are here to provide technical support and would be happy to assist you.” Also put this information in the chat box.

¹ This point, as well as “Endings are Important,” were adapted from an article in University Affairs called “Staying Human in the Zoom Boom” by Carly Stasco.
<http://universityaffairs.ca/career-advice/career-advice-article/staying-human-in-the-zoom-boom>

- Put the meeting agenda or gathering outline in the chat box for people to reference whenever needed.
- If there are specific technical instructions about the meeting, be sure to put them in the chat box. For example, “For this meeting, we invite you to keep your webcams on but microphones off. We’ll be inviting you to turn on your microphones at different points for participation. If you have questions at any point during the gathering, please put them in the chat box.”
- When you are welcoming people, acknowledge the transition that is being made. Think of what a meeting is like during the first few minutes when you are gathering in person. Allow for a few minutes for people to get comfortable and, if appropriate, give people a bit of time for chit chatting before starting.

Introductions—Take the time for good, rich introductions at the beginning of the gathering. Engagement in the content part of the gathering will not be as strong if opportunities for human connection are not prioritized at the beginning.

- Invite people to share who they are and something else about themselves. If it is a large group, it is best to use the chat box for introductions. With smaller groups, invite people to turn on their microphones and cameras to share.
 - ◆ Consider making the introductions more fun by inviting people to share something from their lives (e.g., favourite drink or snack, book they are currently reading, a photo that they treasure) as part of their introduction. Be sure to let people know ahead of time what object they are invited to share so they are prepared.
 - ◆ If you will be discussing a specific topic, consider tying the introduction to the topic. For example, if you’ll be discussing prayer, invite people to bring an object that they use as part of their prayer practice (favourite Bible, cross, prayer beads, devotional book etc.). In tying the introduction to the topic, introductions allow for people to meet each other and start learning from each other right away.

Spotlight Reason for Gathering—People have the greatest attention span in the first 15 minutes of an online gathering; therefore, it is important that leaders capture the attention of participants from the beginning by drawing attention to *why* you are gathering.

- What is your purpose in bringing people together? Like with in-person meetings, online meetings that lack a specific purpose can be frustrating for participants. The purpose of meetings or gatherings can vary widely and include learning, sharing information, producing or creating something, discussing, deciding, reflecting, celebrating, planning, and practicing. It is good to be *clear* and *specific* about the purpose of your gathering ahead of time and to remind people of why you’ve gathered at the beginning of the call. For example, “We have come together today to learn more about prayer from our guest speaker. This is, however, an interactive session so we will be inviting your input at different times so that we can learn from one another.”
- You may want to use an icebreaker as means of spotlighting the reason for gathering. Icebreakers have a reputation of being cheesy and uncomfortable games, but they do not need to be. Icebreaker ideas you may want to consider:
 - ◆ A strong discussion question that helps participants relax and ease into the meeting but also introduces the theme in an engaging way. Avoid open-ended questions that lead people to talk too much by being specific or setting a time limit to answering. An example of a good icebreaking question is: “What is one thing that you find challenging about leading online worship? Please keep your answer to one sentence. We’ll have plenty of time to unpack these challenges later in the gathering.”

- ◆ Another good icebreaker is to invite participants to share one word or sentence in the chat box to describe their interest in the topic or what they hope to get out of the gathering.

Intentional Relationship Building

Relationships are the foundation of online community just as they are in in-person community. During in-person gatherings, there are multiple non-verbal ways that people are connecting: sharing coffee and treats, giving handshakes, sitting beside each other, offering friendly smiles or looks, etc. Online you will need to intentionally facilitate opportunities for people to get to know each other.

- Build in time for informal chat. Invite people to join the Zoom call 10–15 minutes early if they'd like to chat with others before the official program starts. Offer to keep the call running after the official goodbyes are done to encourage more discussion between participants.
- Use breakout rooms. Breaking into smaller groups helps facilitate a better flow of conversation and allows for those who may hesitate to share in the larger group to participate. If you assign people randomly to rooms, it allows for participants to get to know people they might not already know from other church events.
- Photos are a powerful means of relationship building in online spaces. A few ways to use photos include:
 - ◆ Put 8–10 different images on the screen. For example, pictures of different types of weather (sunshine, rainy, hail, lightening) and invite each person to select which image best describes their mood.
 - ◆ Invite participants to snap a picture of something in the room where they find themselves that is significant to them. Invite people to share the photo and tell a bit about it.
 - ◆ Ask people to look at the most recent photo on their phone that they would feel comfortable sharing. Invite them to show it to the group and describe what is happening in the photo in a sentence or two.

Prioritize Participation²

We all know the importance of participation in meetings. Many of the principles that work in in-person meetings apply to the online space, but it is important to be intentional about creating opportunities and activities that allow for information, ideas and activities to flow between participants. There are different categories of “activities” that create opportunities for participation. At gatherings and meetings, you may use multiple different types of activities.

Getting and Giving Information—At most church gatherings or meetings there is information that we want to give (the content we want to “deliver”) and information we want to get (the feedback, ideas, and experiences of those gathered together).

- **Keep Presentations Short:** There are times when it is necessary, and sometimes even helpful, to have one person giving information and others listening. In these cases, keep presentations short and intersperse information giving with opportunities for engagement. For example,

² The activity categories and some of the suggestions in this section have been taken from an online PDF resource called “So You Want to Host a Web Meeting?” by Nancy White, with Pete Cranston, Susan Stewart and Bonnie Koenig. It can be found here: <http://fullcirc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/SoYouWanttoHostaWebMeeting.pdf>



speaking for 10 minutes then give participants an opportunity to discuss in breakout groups for 10 minutes before returning for another 10 minutes of listening to a presenter.

- **Take Turns Talking:** Getting everyone to participate without talking over each other can be challenging. It can also be difficult to get input from those who may not be comfortable sharing. Consider virtually “going around the table”—offering each person the opportunity to speak by calling on them—at key points in the conversation, such as before making a big decision or moving on to a new topic. If there are lots of people, do it in breakout groups and ask someone to take notes that you can then put in the chat. Be sure to give people the opportunity to “pass” if they do not want to share.
- **Share text, audio or visual:** We often think of giving and receiving information as speaking and listening; however, text, images, audio, video, charts and graphs are also ways of “giving” information and “getting” people’s feedback on them.
- **Capture Real Time Feedback:** Use the polling function to collect on-demand feedback from participants on specific topics in real time. For example, you can use the polling function to see what topics people are most eager to explore and start with those topics. This will help keep participants engaged. Just be sure to give clear instructions about how to use the polling function.

Discussing and Making Meaning of Information—As people of the Word, discussing and making meaning is part of our regular practice. At Bible studies, small group gatherings, retreats and conferences, we meet to talk about our faith what it means to engage in ministry and everyday life as Christians.

- **Question and Answers:** Schedule time for questions at strategic points during the meeting or gathering. After each major point on the agenda, pause and invite people to use the “raise hand” function or put their question into the chat box. You can also let participants know they are welcome to submit their questions at any time in the chat box and you will address them at regular intervals throughout the call. Remember that if one of your goals is multi-directional conversation, you will want to give space to allow participants to discuss the questions rather than jumping in with answers right away.

- **Evaluating:** If you will be evaluating something together as a group, such as a new children’s ministry curriculum you are considering using, be sure to use visuals. If you were presenting curriculum material in person, you would have the samples with you to show. You want to provide a similar experience by screensharing examples for people to use as the basis of their evaluation.
- **Small Group Conversations:** Divide the big group up into smaller 3 or 4 person groups. Send them into breakout rooms for a specific amount of time. For example: “You’ll have 10 minutes in your breakout rooms to discuss X.” When you bring the whole group back together, have someone give a two-minute report of what was discussed.

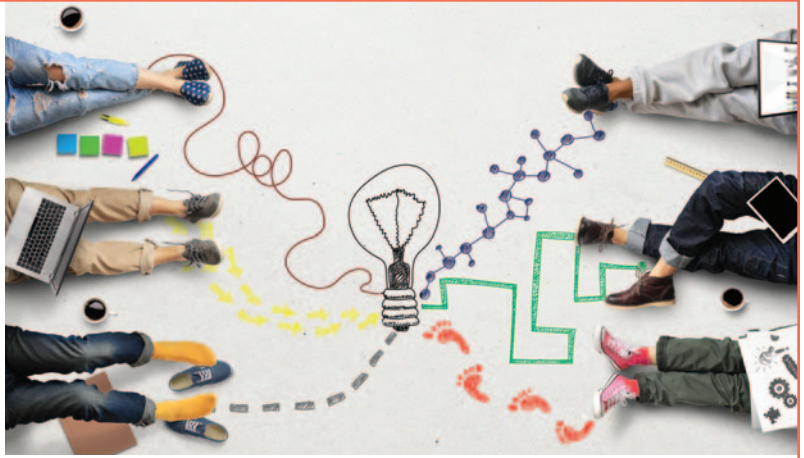
Coming up with New Ideas or Approaches—In being attentive to the workings of the Spirit, we often find that we are being called to pursue new ideas or approaches to contributing to God’s mission. This can be one of the most exciting things we do, but it can also be the most challenging.

- **Use a Virtual Whiteboard:** In an in-person meeting, brainstorming would be done using a flip chart or white board to keep track of the evolution of thinking in the group. Use the whiteboard function on Zoom to keep track of your brainstorming.
- **Short Series of Meetings:** If the goal of your meeting is coming up with a new idea or approach, consider having a series of short meetings rather than one long one. Effective brainstorming requires a balance of time spent acquiring new information and ideas and time spent mulling it over to allow new and unexpected connections in our brains to form. This also allows for time for discernment and prayer—for the Spirit to speak into the situation. This could look like a series of three 30-minute meetings: Meeting #1 = facilitator explaining the idea, a bit of initial brainstorming and a question for people to ponder before the next meeting; Meeting #2 = everyone sharing ideas, notes and questions that have come up; Meeting #3 = synthesis and discussion of key ideas.
- **Prayer & Scripture:** While it is commonplace to pray in in-person meetings, the practice is often neglected in online church meetings. It is great to open with prayer, but it is also helpful to stop and pray for guidance and direction when trying to come up with new ideas. Experiment with different types of prayer: centering prayer, praying scripture, listening prayer. Many of the practices found in Adele Ahlberg Calhoun’s *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* can be adapted for use in the online space.

Practicing Something—As disciples of Jesus, we are called to practice our faith in all aspects of our lives. Churches are now using online meeting platforms to teach, lead discipleship groups, host youth group and all sorts of other gatherings focused on faith development.

- **Practice Together:** Don’t just talk about spiritual practices, such as prayer or scripture interpretation; give people the opportunity to practice together during the online gathering. Breakout rooms allow for practicing in a smaller and more intimate space.
- **Breakout Room Facilitator:** Consider inviting a few people to act as facilitators in your online church gatherings. They will be responsible for guiding the conversation in breakout rooms and/or helping groups of participants succeed in a task they are given. For example, if people are gathering to discern a new mission, a facilitator might help guide that conversation towards measurable goals and objectives.
- **Collaborative Notetaking:** Ask everyone to write key ideas and takeaways in the chat box. Invite them to share what they find exciting or challenging about what is being discussed. This helps people to remain engaged in the gathering and meeting. It also allows for you, as the leader, to see how people are interpreting what is being said. You can also print off the notes later to use when finalizing the official minutes.

Planning—Planning is a key part of what we do as Presbyterians. At Session and committee meetings or at children’s ministry and youth leaders’ gatherings, we plan well so that our ministry will be a blessing to congregation members and the community.



- **Identifying Needs, Constraints and Opportunities:** Using the whiteboard function on Zoom will be helpful for planning. You may also want to consider using an online tool like *Miro*—a free, online collaborative whiteboard that allows for people to work on a project simultaneously. It has templates for concept mapping, mind mapping, ideation activities, and retrospective evaluation of projects: <https://miro.com>.
- **Collaborating in Realtime:** Use Google Docs as a tool for co-creating, editing and collaborating while you are on Zoom. Since Google Docs allows for multiple editors at the same time, each person in the meeting can have it open on their screens and add or edit as they are chatting together.

Deciding Something—Most meetings involve decision making. In online meetings, it can be harder to ensure that each person’s voice is heard in the decision-making process. It can also be harder to come to consensus.

- **Around the Table:** Before making any major decision, do a virtual “around the table.” Invite people to provide any final input in a few sentences. Use the participant list to call on each person to unmute and share their thoughts. Provide the opportunity to pass. No one is obligated to speak, but everyone is given the opportunity.
- **Show of Hands:** During in-person meetings, asking for a “show of hands” is a common technique to assess where people are at in terms of the decision that needs to be made. Use the “raise hand function” in Zoom or simply have people wave at the camera to assess whether more conversation is needed before decision making.
- **Polling:** The polling feature on Zoom meetings allows you to create single choice or multiple-choice polling questions for your meetings. It is best to create your polls ahead of time, but they can also be made during the meeting. You also have the ability to download a report of polling after the meeting.

Reflecting—Sometimes we forget get so caught up with delivering information that we forget that people need time to absorb the material being presented in order to engage with it fully. Give participants time to pause and reflect.

- **Individual Activities:** Don’t shy away from providing people with an activity that they can do on their own for 5–10 minutes during the gathering. For example, provide a Scripture verse that is relevant to the topic you are discussing, and invite tell people to turn off their cameras and microphones and spend time reading and reflecting on the verse.
- **Time to Think During Meeting:** Give people time to think and respond. One trick is to play background music for at least 2.5 minutes while people formulate responses. You can also use a timer. Tell everyone they have plenty of time to think and type, and that when the music is over, the group can begin to digest what has been written.

- **Time to Think Before or After Meeting:** Sometimes reflection takes time. Consider giving participants a question or idea ahead of time and ask them to come with a few short sentences prepared as a response. Have participants share their responses at the beginning to get conversation going. Or provide a question for them to ponder after the meeting and share with the group at the next meeting.

Endings are Important

Sometimes we rushed through the end of online gatherings because we are running behind schedule or are already thinking about the next meeting; however, endings are important. We conclude most in-person meetings with prayer and have time to say goodbye. It is important to mark the transition between the online gathering and heading back into the rest of the day.

- Use the “chat” function to check-in about any lingering questions or concerns. Offer to remain after the meeting to talk with anyone.
- Invite people to write in the “chat” a brief note about what they are taking away from the meeting or gathering.
- Allow time to say good-bye. If there isn’t time for everyone to say something individually, unmute and allow for a collective good-bye.
- Close with prayer or words of sending.

Be Creative with Types of Gatherings

It is important that we remember to have fun with each other. Every online gathering does not need to be treated with the seriousness of a formal meeting.

Theme Days—Set a theme for some of your online gatherings. For example, hat day (everyone wears a funny hat), worst shirt Wednesday (people wear ugly shirts), a colour day (everyone wears a specific colour). The seasons of the church calendar and other holidays are also wonderful inspiration



Staff at The Presbyterian Church in Canada national office took part in Orange Shirt Day on Sept. 30, 2020.

for theme days. For example, wear purple for a meeting during Lent or a Christmas sweater during the last week of Advent. You can invite people to dress up for the theme day or to bring a decoration or other item that represents the theme. You can also invite people to change their backgrounds to match the theme. Ask people to turn on their cameras and go into gallery view to share each other's get-ups. A simple Google search for "Zoom theme ideas" will yield lots of fun ideas.

Gathering over Food—Eating together is one of our favourite ways to gather as Christians. Conversation over a shared meal is an important aspect of building community and keeping people connected when we cannot gather in person.

- **Virtual Lunch and Learns (or just lunch!):** Schedule a time for people come together on Zoom to take a break from their day and eat lunch together. If there are a lot of people, you might want to use breakout rooms of 5–6 to allow for the type of conversation that happens around a staff lunch table. Also consider inviting a guest speaker to speak on a topic for 15 minutes while people eat their lunches and then have a 15-minute conversation about it.
- **Dinner Church:** Meeting on Zoom to eat dinner together is great in and of itself but adding elements of worship to your time together will make it even more meaningful. Pray, enjoy music, read from Scripture, share about your lives and reflect on the life of Jesus together over food. For more ideas, see the Equipping For "Joining the Joyful Feast: From Food Ministry to Worship": <https://presbyterian.ca/canadian-ministries/eq4-cl-leadership>. This resource was created with in-person gatherings in mind but can easily be adapted to the online space.
- **Virtual Coffee Hour:** At coffee hour at church, most people will chat in small groups of 3–4, so when you meet for virtual coffee hour it works well to use the video breakout rooms option on Zoom. The host can randomly cluster small groups so that people can get to know people they might not know already. It's a simple way to replicate the experience of people meeting in fellowship time.
- **"Lunch is On Us":** If you have a small enough group and/or a large enough budget, considering having food delivered to the people who will be attending your meeting. It is a lovely way to bless those participating and it is fun to have everyone eating the same food even though people are in different places.

Host a Cinq à Sept—Cyclical PCC, a church-planting support initiative in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, has been gathering people for a *Cinq à Sept*—a social gathering that involves a drink and hors d'oeuvres that in Quebecois culture normally happens after work. Cyclical PCC is bringing people together once per month to talk about topics related to church planting. They send along recipes and drink ideas ahead of time as well instructions to bring something to share to get the conversation rolling, such as a photograph or object related to the topic of discussion. It is set up as a fun and informal event that allows people to get to know one another and explore a topic that is relevant to their ministry. This idea could be adapted and used for congregations.

Do an Activity Together—Painting, baking, Yahtzee, Pictionary... the possibilities are endless when it comes to games or activities that people can do over Zoom together. A simple Google search will yield a lot of results for the types of games people are playing together on Zoom. Play a game as one part of your meeting or gathering or make it the whole purpose of gathering! A virtual church games night has intergenerational appeal; it isn't just the teens who want to play games online with each other.