

Online Small Group Essentials:

Making the Most of Your Virtual Community

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Introduction

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24–25 (NIV)

Sometimes it takes a sudden change to help us rethink our priorities. If you're reading this guide, you believe that meeting together is an important part of the Christian life. That we meet is a priority. When, where, and even how we meet is a matter of preference, philosophy, or practicality. If the writer of Ecclesiastes were alive today, he may add to his list of seasonal realities:

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:
a time for meeting in person and a time to meet online.

The pandemic of 2020 changed how most people view online groups. Prior to the virus and its impact on the world, most online experiences were relegated primarily to professional spheres of business-people. Most often, it was the domain of the telecommuter and the businessperson interacting with colleagues and clients spread around the globe. While some cutting-edge churches experimented with online communities, there was little beyond streaming church services or engaging in online chats that constituted what we'd call an online small group experience. Most churches saw this format as a niche that few would have interest in. It was a noble experiment. All that changed in the spring of 2020.

Only time will reveal if a pandemic-motivated trend will have a lasting impact on small groups. Yet, as more experience the beauty and value of digital communities, it seems likely that online groups are here to stay—with increasing numbers choosing to stay in that sphere—or at least make use of both in-person and online experiences. Over time platforms, resources, technology, and training will all improve to help leaders navigate this new opportunity.

So how do we make the most of them? What can they do well and what can't they do so well? In the immediacy we are faced with a challenge—but we also have an amazing opportunity! Let's make the most of it. Who knows, some people may move from tolerating online groups to preferring them at times!

As you consider leading online small groups, this guide will highlight the essentials related to the following questions: Why? How? What? Who?

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- The 7 don'ts of online small group member etiquette
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Consider

The first thing you'll need to consider is whether or not leading an online small group is a good fit for you at this time. How will meeting digitally help everyone grow spiritually? Do online small groups help your church fulfill its values and mission for ministry? Excuse the pun, but virtually anything is possible in this new season. This could be the perfect time to explore new ideas and opportunities. So, what are the considerations for leading online small groups?

TOP TEN REASONS ONLINE SMALL GROUPS MAKE SENSE

When the idea of small groups in the virtual space first emerged many (including me) thought the idea would never gain steam. How would it even work? What technology platforms exist that make it possible? Could we train people to do it? Would anyone even be interested? It all seemed like a Star Trek fantasy. But 2020 answered those questions and more! And along the way we've learned groups that meet online have something significant to offer.

1. Zip codes don't matter.

Members don't live near each other? Got a friend who moved away? Or, is your friend in the next town over? No problem, as long as they have an internet connection, you can be in the same group.

2. It saves time!

Even the shortest commute still adds up – especially when you add in the time getting ready, getting in the car, and back again. You might have saved an hour or more of your day!

3. Small is good.

Even if your group is only 3 or 4 people gathering it still works. In fact, it might even work better than a group of 12 or more. Here's the thing: if the in-person group only draws 3 people it could feel like a dud. Not so with an online group.

4. Accommodates travelers.

You have a group member that is on the road often? Parents of kids on travel sports teams? This might work for them much better than a traditional group.

5. Fits more schedules.

Most small groups wouldn't dream of starting at 8 at night, but an online group may consider that the perfect time.

6. Parents save money.

Parents of young children often struggle to afford a sitter to watch their kids. If they don't have family support nearby then the small group moves out of their price range. But if you host the group when the kiddos are down for the night no one has to pay a sitter.

7. Health conscious.

Allows those with restrictions and health concerns to be part of a group without risking exposure. Most homes don't easily accommodate some with a physical disability, but this makes involvement possible.

8. Low risk.

Let's be honest, it can be scary to go into a home and meet new people. But it's almost no risk to log into Zoom. Members can "test drive" the group before making a commitment to the group.

9. Topic focused.

You can start a small group focused on a specific theme, such as parenting toddlers or getting out of debt and not worry about filling a whole room if the topic doesn't have a broad appeal

10. No room.

You literally do not need a room – at the church, the coffee shop, or your house. No reservations to make and no living room and kitchen to clean!

SURPRISINGLY POSITIVE REALITIES OF ONLINE GROUPS

Small groups that meet online have been saddled with a mixed reputation. And truthfully, it's hard to replace in-person connections. However, if we don't compare, and just enjoy what virtual communities can be, there are actually some qualities worth celebrating.

1. Flexibility.

They prove people are quite flexible in how they connect. Once you get over the awkward nature of online connections it is amazing how deeply members can connect with one another.

2. Honesty.

People are often more direct and honest. Maybe it's the filter of an electronic device, but some people share at a deeper level than they do in person.

3. Age doesn't matter.

Young and old can navigate the technology with confidence. From Baby Boomers to Gen Z, it's easy to navigate the technology. This is particularly helpful for more older, more vulnerable members of your church who should not venture out but still want to enjoy community.

4. Authenticity.

Tough topics aren't off limits. One church found that groups specifically designed to draw unbelievers and seekers had a larger turn out and a more honest rapport that they anticipated. It's far less threatening to log on to a tough topic group than it is to show up in person.

5. More depth.

You can cover a lot of territory in a short amount of time. In one hour an online group can cover what takes an in-person group two hours to cover through intentional time management.

6. Cast a wider net.

It's a great supplement to friendships. If a group of friends already meet regularly in person, adding an online portion during certain seasons (summer, holidays) can increase the depth of relationships that have already formed when getting together in person is inconvenient.

RECOGNIZING THE LIMITATIONS OF ONLINE GROUP PLATFORMS

Online groups may not be perfect, but they may be necessary for a season for one reason or another. As a group leader, it's important to know and occasionally share with your group the reality of these limitations. It may help people navigate expectations.

1. Nonverbals.

Body language and eye contact just don't work. Since we were infants, we learned to read the non-verbal expressions of others. This simply is not possible for online groups. If we are looking at the image of the person on the computer screen, we aren't looking at the camera (which makes us think others are giving us eye contact) and if we are looking into the camera, we aren't looking at the person speaking!

2. Taking Turns.

Only one person can talk at a time. Do you have that friend who can finish your sentences? It won't work on Zoom! All the noise is garbled, and words become incoherent when multiple people talk. Compared to the electric environment of many small groups, online groups feel more formal.

3. Pinwheels.

Tech glitches and internet buffering are all part of the experience. Try not to be distracted by frozen faces or dropped connections. It happens. Make a joke about it and move on.

4. Work.

Most online group meetings seem less dynamic and energetic than in person meetings because they are! It's a business platform designed for business meetings so don't be surprised that it feels like one. That isn't a bad thing if you enter it knowing what to expect.

5. **Fatigue.**

It's common to feel worn out after an hour in an online group. A small group in your house might feel like it's just getting started after two hours together but 45 minutes into your Zoom group you're ready to wrap it up. Don't let that surprise you. Just grab a cup of coffee and keep going! Or plan to meet for only an hour.

6. **Chemistry.**

Not all groups naturally hit it off. Some just don't gel—that's true for groups meeting online and in-person. If that happens, don't get discouraged. Try again!

HUMOROUS (AND TRUE) ADVANTAGES TO AN ONLINE SMALL GROUP

You don't have to look hard before you bump into a humorous meme of online meetings going wrong. There is a chuckle to be had for the ways online group meetings can put a smile on your face.

1. **Never clean your house again.**

Just aim the camera into the cleanest corner—or set a virtual backdrop and let the dust grow and the dishes stack in the sink!

2. **Be a cheap host.**

You never have to make refreshments. Your personal snack budget can go up because your small group snack budget just went to zero!

3. **Save that gas.**

Instead of spending gas to get to your group spend it going to your favorite restaurant instead and log in to the group. You just eliminated your commute.

4. **Show and Tell.**

You get a window into everyone's house—from collections to artwork, often the camera lets you peer into the home. Some people collect some weird stuff!

5. **Let it snow.**

Do you live in a wintery climate? Turn up your furnace, put on shorts and flip flops and go to group without the slightest chill.

6. **Bermuda.**

Pants are optional. Just don't let that camera catch your lower half and you'll be fine.

7. **Top Tech.**

You have an excuse to upgrade your tech—getting a new computer or tablet is spiritual now!

8. **The View.**

No matter how many suggestions you make some people will point that camera right up their noses—literally. Don't be grossed out, be amused!

Leading

OK. So, *if* you're going to do this, *how* do you do it? While some of the best practices for small groups still apply in a digital setting, meeting online introduces other unique opportunities and challenges as a leader. ([Click here](#) for more on how to lead your group)

DECIDE WHAT TO DO DURING YOUR ONLINE GROUP

You have decided to start an online group, but how are you going to spend that time? If you have an hour or more for your group experience how will that be divided up? There are obvious elements that won't be part of online groups, such as the prolonged arrival and greeting as you wait for people to physically arrive and snack time. However, given the natural fatigue from attending a meeting online it's imperative to keep it simple! The following are the core elements that will make up a successful group experience:

1. Connection.

People join groups to build relationships. If that wasn't true they'd just listen to a podcast, read a book or watch a video and call it good. Just as you greet people as they physically come to the group, do the same as group members log in to the meeting. Spend time at the beginning of the meeting catching up.

2. Discussion.

If the only thing a group member desired was to form friendships, any social group, civic organization, or exercise club would work. The reason a person joins a small group is to learn about God and deepen their faith. The discussion time should do just that. As a leader, avoid lengthy speeches and long videos. Get the people talking. It's harder online to help people connect with one another than it is in person. So attend to those interactions and make the most of them.

3. Prayer.

Life is tough and prayer is God's prescription for our anxieties. A group can show support for one another through sharing prayer requests and spending a few moments taking those requests to God in prayer.

TAKING YOUR ONLINE GROUP FROM GOOD TO GREAT

If you want a great group experience, there are a few things you can do before the meeting to help it move from good to great! Consider sending an email or text with the following elements to prepare your members for the group:

1. The purpose of the lesson.

Usually the purpose is connected to the lesson title and sometimes the material tells you up front. Even if you have to dig a little, it's worth it to know where the lesson is trying to go. Share this with your group members.

2. Icebreaker.

A fun, silly, or personal question can help group members get in the right frame of mind for the gathering. You may even invite members to answer the ice-breaker via email.

3. The agenda.

If you're meeting for an hour it's probably something like this: Catch up (10 minutes), Discuss (40 minutes), Prayer request and closing (10 minutes). You can adjust those times and change the order, but that's a standard online agenda. With good time management your group can cover a lot of territory in minimal time.

4. Links, podcasts, and clips.

Some groups prefer to watch video content together keep in mind that every minute the group is watching a video is one less minute for discussion and prayer. This is really important if your group only has an hour together to meet. Help your members by sending out links to key content before the meeting.

5. Discussion questions.

By giving the questions in advance you're encouraging your group members to think ahead. While some are quick on their feet, most of us benefit if we have those questions early. Those questions really come in handy if members have access to them before they watch or read key content.

HOW TO AVOID DOING EVERYTHING AS AN ONLINE GROUP LEADER

It seems counter-intuitive, but an online group requires even more care or the community will fizzle. However, the solution is not for you to do more but for you to recruit members of your group to step up into a role within the group. But make sure the job is simple, meaningful and makes a positive impact on the group. Otherwise, it's a waste of time and the volunteer will be frustrated.

1. Schedule Moderator.

Let's face it, some people really, really love managing a calendar. If that's you, great. If that's NOT you, then give that job away!

2. Chat Moderator.

Most platforms have some chat feature; however, it can be hard to keep tabs on the written interaction and the verbal interaction and facilitate the discussion. If your group uses chat, then appoint a moderator to interact with the written interaction and occasionally bring some of that chat into the verbal interaction.

3. Prayer Coordinator.

Ask a group member to write down the prayer requests shared during the meeting and email them after the group meeting is over. For extra credit, the prayer coordinator can follow up during the week with prayer requests.

4. Encourager-In-Chief.

Is there a member of your group with a cheerful, exuberant personality? Recruit them to encourage fellow group members throughout the week via text, social media, or phone calls and email.

5. Social Coordinator.

While some online groups may never meet in person, and during times of crisis it may not be possible, most online groups grow stronger if they are able to meet in person. If that works for your group, appoint a coordinator who will plan and organize socials.

Online

Now for the most intimidating or exciting part, depending on your personality and comfort with technology. What exactly do you need to know if you're considering an online small group?

CHOOSING THE RIGHT ONLINE PLATFORM FOR YOUR GROUP

Even people who weren't familiar with online meeting platforms like Zoom before 2020 were probably using video chat in their professional or personal lives through popular platforms such as Google Meet or Apple's FaceTime. If your church doesn't provide access to an online platform for small group meetings, you'll need to make the call on what works best for you and your group members.

It would be unhelpful and unwise in this resource to attempt instructions and recommendations for specific platforms since technology is constantly improving, adapting, and emerging. Instead, let's focus on the realities that never change even when technology does. Choose the right platform for your group by considering the following:

1. Cost.

What does it cost to use? Many free platforms will work well for most groups, however, some of those platforms have added features for a fee. Is there a financial investment required by the leader or by each member of the group? Is so, is it reasonable to expect such an investment for leader and/or group member?

2. Accessibility.

Some groups are filled with confident, tech-types while others aren't. Is it easy to log on? Is it simple to navigate? The more complex the less likely it will fit the needs of the average group. However, the technologically sophisticated group won't mind more challenges.

3. Features.

Can a leader share a screen or can the group watch a video together? Is there chat? Is the video quality good? Can it be used on smart phone, tablet, and computer? While the typical small group won't need an abundance of options, examining your needs and what's available will help narrow down your decision.

4. Limitations.

What can't the platform do? Does each session only last for 40 minutes before ending? How many participants can join? While most platform limitations probably won't be a factor, it's still an important consideration.

5. Connection.

Ask within your group if someone has access to a platform through their place of employment. You may discover that a great platform is available for your use through one of your members.

PRO TIPS FOR A GREAT VIDEO EXPERIENCE

1. Adequate lighting.

Lighting should be in front of you and behind the camera if possible to avoid glares and shadows.

2. Avoid windows.

Don't sit in front of windows unless you want to look like you're in the witness protection program and testifying in a court.

3. Right Seating.

Sit in a comfortable chair that doesn't promote slouching. You don't want to give the impression you're about to take a nap.

4. Eye contact.

If you want to maintain eye contact then you have to look in the camera when talking, not the screen. Look into the camera as much as you can!

5. Camera placement.

Place the device with the camera level with your eyes. No one wants to look up your nose or get vertigo from your ceiling fan! If the group has many participants, try to fill the camera with head and shoulders since our expressions are best seen in our face. The farther you are from the camera the harder it is to see you.

6. Do not disturb.

Turn off the dings, rings, and bells. If you can hear the notifications, everyone can hear the notifications.

MAKING THE MOST OF GROUP CHAT FEATURES

While the video interaction is the primary vehicle for interaction and communication, the chat feature allows more members to participate. It's a way to affirm, encourage, give details, and ask questions. While it can become distracting, it's a useful tool to connecting more deeply as a group.

1. Appoint a moderator.

It's tough for most people to lead the group and monitor chat. If possible, appoint someone to monitor all chat.

2. Ask questions.

Since interrupting a speaker often creates audio glitches, put questions in the chat.

3. Add content.

Share Bible verses, links, and helpful resources that move the big idea along.

4. Repeat the main points.

If you are watching a video together as a group, use chat to affirm or repeat main points to help your fellow group members. Who hasn't at some point asked, "What verse did she just read?" Or, "Where did that quote come from?"

5. Use humor.

Keep things light and fun. Try to avoid becoming distracting, but appropriate use of humor can engage the group through witty insights.

6. Take prayer requests.

Chat is often a good place to write detailed prayer requests – just don't do it while someone is verbally sharing their prayer request.

AMPLIFYING HOSPITALITY IN YOUR ONLINE SMALL GROUP

When we host a group in person, we usually present our "A-game." But since online groups are new to many of us, we don't often know what an "A-game" would might like. It's more than just logging in. As a leader there are things, we can do to set a pattern for our members to see.

1. Prepare your heart.

Online groups are awkward—since we know this already, a wise leader prepares through prayer and reflection on the upcoming group meeting.

2. Prepare your space.

You're going to be "on camera," so make sure the lighting is behind and beside the camera, the camera is set up at eye level (no one wants to look up your nose), and nothing in the visual range of the camera is distracting. It doesn't have to look like Martha Stewart arranged your room, but it shouldn't look like a garage sale exploded, either.

3. Prepare yourself.

Dress and groom as if you were meeting in person. Since each group is different, dress appro-

priate to your group. Remind yourself to smile. Some people have a natural serious or stern look on their face but online that conveys frustration or displeasure. Everyone responds well to a warm expression on the face.

4. Greet them well.

As members join the meeting, call on them by name and welcome them. Since people tend to “arrive” all at once, make sure you call on the name of each person. You may start with a simple question like, “How is everyone doing?” Then proceed to facilitate that question by calling on different people. This minimizes everyone talking all at once or no one talking at all.

5. Host them well.

During the meeting own your role as a leader. That means you are the right person to facilitate the discussion. Call on individuals to answer questions. Draw out the less extroverted members. Don’t dominate, facilitate!

6. Send them well.

Keep an eye on the clock. If you have an hour for the group preserve the last ten minutes for sharing prayer concerns. As you wrap up thank everyone for coming and conclude with a wave and smile.

7. Be the last to leave.

As leader, be the last to leave the meeting. Just like your house, sometimes people hang around to talk with you. Build a little time buffer in your personal schedule just like you do for in-person meetings.

Small Groups

Now that your head is full of practical and philosophical considerations for building virtual community, training in best practices for leaders, and tips for making the most of your online experience, don't forget the most important thing in digital community—real people. Ultimately, your goal is to connect people with one another and with God through Bible study, prayer, and day-to-day life. People can get information from any number of sources: books, blogs, videos, podcasts, etc. Small Groups provide a relational experience. This final section will touch on group dynamics and making the most of your digital community in a physical world.

HOW TO FIND MEMBERS FOR YOUR ONLINE SMALL GROUP

You've made the decision—I'm going to do this! I'm starting an online group. Great. Now where do you find people for your group? Here are some circles of influence to get you started as you prayerfully consider who could be in the group:

1. **The Friendship Circle.**

Do you have a friend group that already hangs out together? Then suggest they form a group.

2. **The Random Circle.**

Do you have a bunch of friends who don't know each other? They all have one thing in common: you! So ask them to circle up! Who knows, your "Random Circle" may become a "Friendship Circle"!

3. **The Unknown Circle.**

Ask your pastor who they may suggest or simply offer your willingness to lead an online group.

4. **The Next Level Circle.**

Do you have friends at church that comment how they wish they could extend that Sunday experience? They enjoy the worship service but they are looking for more. Circle up and discuss the weekend service. Use questions provided by your church or write your own. The easiest question of all is, "What impacted you in the message this morning?" Anyone can answer that!

5. **The Mission Circle.**

Instead of intentionally pulling believers together consider using your group evangelistically and invite in a specific group of people who have a particular need. Choose a topic like parenting, marriage, or specifically dive into a tough topic like doubt.

MAKING SPACE FOR INTROVERTS AND EXTROVERTS

God made introverts and extroverts and we need each other! Your group will probably have a pretty even mix. In person groups are challenged to honor both, but online platforms seem to draw out extroverts and allow introverts to recede. Keep this from happening with a few guidelines.

1. Up front.

Explain at the start of the group that since the group platforms allow only one person to speak at a time you will facilitate the conversation in a manner more structured than a typical small group that meets in a living room.

2. Facilitate.

Ask specific questions of specific people. If you start with the introvert, then open it up to everyone else the extroverts will take their turn.

3. Batter up!

If you have many questions to work through, consider creating an order like a batting line up in baseball and work through the lineup.

4. Flag.

Given the technology, ask members to raise their hands to flag (if the platform has such notifications) and call on specific people. You can still call on your introverts – even if they don't raise their hands.

5. Edit.

Cut short the “rabbit trails.” Off-topic observations are a favorite pastime of many extroverts so halting them politely and quickly will help keep extroverts from dominating.

6. Look.

Take note of who is not sharing and invite them into the conversation.

7. Draw out.

Be an assertive leader without dominating yourself. Avoid monologues and lectures and think of yourself as a facilitator of dialogue that gets better the more people are involved.

THE 7 DO'S OF ONLINE SMALL GROUP MEMBER ETIQUETTE

Since groups meeting virtually is new for most people, they aren't accustomed to how to behave. Adults are veterans at social settings. But this online thing is all new. To avoid bad habits setting in it's good to coach your members on good online conduct. After your group has experience two or

three meetings it's time for everyone to up their game. Share these tips of "DO's" and the following list of "DON'TS" with your group members and perhaps revisit them from time to time as necessary. It might be best to email this list out with the heading: "Preparing for a Great Meeting Experience".

1. Practice good manners.

Take your turn and don't interrupt, it's not polite!

2. Speak clearly.

Not every microphone and not every speaker on every device picks you up perfectly, but if you announce you will be heard!

3. Be yourself.

An online small group is not a TV show and you're not an actor. Most of the time in life we can't see ourselves talking. But thanks (or no thanks) to online platforms we can. Just relax and don't worry about how you look.

4. Eye contact.

When it's your turn to share, look into your camera, it makes participants think you're looking right at them.

5. Dress appropriately.

Don't show up to small group in your jammies—at least not in your pajama top!

6. Chat.

Make use of online chat features if your platform offers it—but don't be distracting with that chat!

7. Have a great time!

Small group isn't supposed to feel like a chore, and neither is an online small group!

THE 7 DON'TS OF ONLINE SMALL GROUP MEMBER ETIQUETTE

Share these tips with your group members in the first few weeks of starting up your group and perhaps revisit them from time to time.

1. Don't shout.

Even if a member of your small group is in a different country the internet will make you heard—shouting won't help.

2. Don't talk over other speakers.

Online group platforms tend to either switch screens to the speaker or allow only one

speaker at a time. Talking over may have a place in some group dynamics but is frustrating online.

3. Don't carry on side conversations.

This happens when two or more people are sharing a device or make use of a chat feature and are obviously not listening to the person speaking.

4. Don't turn off your camera.

When someone turns off their camera I assume they are checking out. Sure, sometimes nature calls and turning off your camera and microphone are a really good idea. But if you're getting a snack it can wait.

5. Don't multitask.

Look at the camera or the screen, don't text on another device, read email, or check social media. It shouldn't have to be said, but we all know people who do it or have done it ourselves—don't meet while driving!

6. Don't invite your pets.

It seems like a rule of nature that if you have a dog, someone will eventually come to the door and the dog will start barking. Cats often walk around. The sounds and movements of your pets (even the cute ones) can be distracting. If possible, put pets away during the group meeting.

6. Don't eat.

There's nothing like a close up someone shoveling food into their mouth. If at all possible, eat before or after but not during an online group.

DEALING WITH THE MOST COMMON DISTRACTIONS

Both online and in-person groups have to address distractions. For years, in-person group leaders were told to be aware how room layout, lighting, temperature, pets, and kids can all distract from the purpose of the group. Online groups have some overlapping challenges but also some unique to the online experience. It's wise to be aware of them and address them as needed.

1. Kids.

Sure, kids aren't officially a distraction, we love them. But they can be an interruption so if possible, schedule the online group after the kids are in bed or taken care of by others. Older kids should be able to take direction from parents and not interrupt during the meeting.

2. Pets.

If you have a dog it will bark during the meeting. If possible, put the dog in a different room to

minimize the noise. Dog owners are numb to barking but non-dog owners are easily distracted.

3. Other Tech.

We are used to multi-tasking. We brag about it. But it can be a big distraction. Put away your other devices, turn off the TV in the background and focus on what's happening in your group.

4. Dings, rings, and bells.

Put your device on "Do Not Disturb"—if you can hear alerts, so can everyone else.

5. Other adults in your house.

You probably can't put your roommate or spouse on the porch, but you may be able to use a quieter space, schedule the group when they are occupied elsewhere, or just ask them to keep things quiet in your meeting.

GETTING STARTED WITH INTENTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

What do you do with that section of time before the lesson starts? It's abrupt to log in, welcome everyone, and simply dive in. That feels more like a class than a group. What are some of the keys to leading through a successful relationship-building time?

1. Honor the agenda.

A good group agenda incorporates relationship building time. If the group is all content and business, it will quickly lose steam. But if it's only social it will lose steam. Keep a well-balanced agenda that includes conversation space, a Bible-based discussion, and prayer.

2. Set a Limit.

Keep the social time contained to 10-15 minutes. Many groups find one hour the limit of their focus but even if your group goes longer, social connecting time can easily shift from interesting to dull. Better to shut it down before the group starts to shut down.

3. Updates.

For friends a simple question such as, "How was your week?" is probably good. For a newer group it could be, "What was the high point of your week and what was the low point?" Be aware that the longer a group is together the longer the update section will creep into the discussion section.

4. Icebreakers.

Never be afraid to throw out a fun, creative question. It's ideal if the question is somehow tied into the big idea of the lesson. But it's fine if it's not.

5. Facilitate.

In a living room you can easily go in order. What is “clockwise from my left” for a leader isn’t reflected on the screens of other group members online. Don’t hesitate to explain you’ll call on individuals to provide an update.

6. Hot buttons.

Some members might use their time to make political stump speeches or share controversial opinions. Within a group of trusted friends, the circle is strong enough to handle that. But for most groups it’s best to politely navigate that through adept interruption or redirection.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS OUTSIDE OF THE GROUP MEETING

It doesn’t matter if long your group meets electronically, there are some simple things you can do to deepen that connection through the week that will lead to a deeper experience when you meet online

1. Relax.

Acknowledge that connecting purely online is not easy. Just say it so the group can breathe a collective sigh of relief. That way you help adjust expectations and prepare members when that eventual reality sets in.

2. Supplement.

Start a closed Facebook group where members can post pictures, links, and prayer requests. Encourage group members to follow each other on social media.

3. Partners.

Encourage group members to partner up in smaller groups to pray for each other through the week. Every month change prayer partners.

4. Ignite.

Start a text or group email and throw a funny question for the week (or the day) to spark conversation.

5. Ring.

Pick up the phone and call group members. It doesn’t have to be a long call, but sometimes old tech is the best tech to communicate you care.

6. Circle.

If possible, circle up in person at a park or in a driveway or patio.

7. Apps.

Have everyone download an app such as Whatsapp or GroupMe and use that to stay connected

without cluttering up inboxes and text messages. It's easy to communicate to the whole group.

BECOMING MISSIONAL AS AN ONLINE SMALL GROUP

Groups that become increasingly inward focused often become unhealthy. A Group is a family, and while a family loves being together, a healthy family balances the joy they have being together with the joy they have living out their calling outside of the family. Healthy small groups are best when they are cultivating hearts for other people. As your online group matures, it will add to the group maturity process to figure out how to be missional as a group. Here are some considerations:

1. The Empty Screen.

The “empty chair” is the visual often taught to small group leaders to always consider who might be a welcome member of the group. If your group has “room” for more, as a group pray about who might fill that empty screen and be a good fit for your group.

2. Divide and invite.

As groups grow it's more and more difficult for all to fully participate. That's true in a house and it's very true online. If your group experiences growth, or you identify additional leaders within your group, encourage your group to pray about splitting up and forming two groups. This may feel less traumatic for an online group than one that has met in a home for years.

3. Adopt a ministry within your church.

How could your group rally around one of the ministries within your church? Is there one in particular your group members have a connection with? Is there one underserved that needs some love? Use group time to update about that ministry, pray for the leaders, and consider getting involved with.

4. Adopt a need in your community.

This is essentially the same as the third consideration but outside your church.

5. Adopt a global mission.

Online groups have a distinct advantage in this endeavor since they can actually invite global missionaries to their group to share needs and updates. So long as that part of the world can support the technology (and they probably can) you can talk directly with the mission partner. Your group may become just the lifeline that missionary needs!

REMEMBER

Remember the words at the beginning of this guide:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24–25 (NIV)

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens.

Ecclesiastes 3:1 (NIV)

Whether you lead online small groups from now on as your new normal, just for a season, or occasionally mixed into the rhythm of meeting in person when travel or other circumstances make it beneficial, remember that you meet is a priority—how, when, and where may change.

Not everyone will take to a virtual small group experience. It may be a bold prediction, but I suspect it will never come close to the preference for an in-person group experience. Just like take-out isn't quite as good as food directly from the restaurant kitchen delivered to your table, the online experience may not compare. In fact, that may be the very point we need to embrace. In-person and online groups are different. And it's OK that they are different. Each fulfills its intended purpose.

In-person small groups will likely build community faster and deeper than online groups. But don't sell short the value of meetings in a virtual space. They can develop and enhance community. It may just be that the group meeting online would never have become a group were it not for the technology and the need.

When we peer back at 2020 it is quite possible that churches, adapting to the circumstances, discovered a space long abdicated to our professional and personal lives. And as necessity became comfort and then habit, we all may discover the joy of meeting as a group on that screen.