



ONLINE HOSPITALITY GUIDE

PT. 2 THE BIG PICTURE: DESIGNING A MEANINGFUL ONLINE GATHERING

As we are collectively transitioning to a new way of meeting, you may be feeling energized by the opportunity or disappointed at the loss of your usual ways of connecting - or both. This guide hopes to provide you some inspiration and encouragement to imagine creative and meaningful online gatherings by adapting principles of in-person gathering to an online format. Just because it isn't what we're used to doesn't mean it can't be great!

WHY ARE YOU GATHERING?

The first step in planning any gathering is to ask yourself, “Why are we meeting? What is the purpose of this gathering?” Try to craft a specific and clear purpose for your meeting, then consider how best to communicate that purpose to your attendees via the invitation. Your gathering time will be greatly improved if you help your attendees to know why they are logging in and what will be expected of them.

For example, the purpose of the Online Open Office Hours hosted by the Thriving in Ministry coordination program is to build a learning community and introduce grantees to one another as resources for project implementation. We communicate this purpose by framing the online meetings as a place where you can come to meet your colleagues and workshop your questions/problems/learnings among a community of peers.

Some questions to consider:

- Will this online meeting be formal or informal in tone?
- Do the participants know one another or not?
- Will there be an agenda?
- Who will facilitate the conversation?
- Do participants need to prepare anything ahead of time?
- Should they be logged on for the duration or come and go as they are able?

Try to answer these questions in your invitation so your participants know what to expect from you and what you expect from them.

WHO ARE YOU GATHERING?

Once you have decided why you are gathering, you need to determine who you are gathering. How will the “who” support the “why”? Determine whether the gathering’s purpose will be best served by inclusivity or exclusivity.

Another question to consider is group size. Based on your stated purpose for gathering, what is the ideal group size to promote that purpose?

Here are some general guidelines around group size:

- Groups of 6 are best suited for high levels of intimacy and sharing but perhaps not well-suited for a conversation needing a large diversity of viewpoints and opinions. Groups this size benefit from having a single facilitator.
- Groups of 12-15 are still small enough to foster a sense of intimacy, hold a single conversation and have a single facilitator and may be best for a conversation served by a diversity of experiences/expertise/perspectives.
- Groups of 20 or more are too large to sustain a single conversation. Any group larger than 20 would benefit from an instructor-led conversation or could be broken into smaller conversation groups (of 6-8, ideally) each of which should have an appointed facilitator.

Using Breakout Rooms

If you choose to use breakout rooms, consider the following:

- Will you appoint a facilitator for each group or ask them to self-select?
- Will you assign them randomly or manually? (See the technical section at the end of this guide for more instructions on how to do this in Zoom)
- Will you provide an agenda or discussion questions or will the conversation be more unstructured?

WHERE ARE YOU GATHERING?

This question may seem silly – you’re meeting online of course! Part of your job as a meeting/retreat/event convener is to choose a venue. You may think that since you are not meeting all together in one room that your job of choosing a venue is forfeit – Zoom is the venue, right? Wrong! Rather than you – the planner – selecting the venue, each individual person is now choosing their own venue. Your responsibility now is to guide them about how to choose and design their own venue.

Any detail you may have considered as you planned your retreat, class or small group meeting still applies – just on an individual basis! If you would've had candles at your retreat, consider asking your participants to light a candle at their kitchen table, desk or coffee table. If you would've had a journal, pencil or other gift for your participants, consider mailing a "care package" to your attendees ahead of time.

Some questions to consider:

- What sort of setting would facilitate each person to join this meeting fully and intentionally?
- What will they hear? See? Taste? Touch? Smell?
- What guidance can I offer to my attendees about where they should choose to be when they log in and/or how they should set up their space? This may mean setting guidelines such as turning off phone notifications, lighting a candle, making sure children won't interrupt if that is at all an option, setting up an icon or painting to look at, etc.
- How often will participants want/need to stand up and move around? How would this rhythm have naturally fit into an in-person meeting? How can I recreate natural breaks for movement in an online format?

Remember, we are each still embodied creatures, even as we meet online. Encourage your participants to be mindful of their bodies in the midst of this shift to virtual gathering.

HOW ARE YOU GATHERING? WHAT WILL YOU DO?

"Connection doesn't happen on its own. You have to design your gatherings for the kinds of connection you want to create." Priya Parker, "The Art of Gathering"

All gatherings have five key movements: the pre-gathering, crossing the "threshold" in, the gathering time itself and crossing the "threshold" back out into the world. Most organizers focus their energy on the gathering time itself and perhaps also the pre-gathering; but truly great gatherings take each movement as an opportunity to intentionally and creative design for connection.

Pre-Gathering

The pre-gathering includes both your invitation as well as the time that passes between an attendee receiving the invitation and the day of the gathering itself. Revisit your gathering purpose; how can you communicate this purpose to your attendees through your invitation in a way that will prepare them to attend your gathering?

- Do you want to ask anything of them prior to gathering? For example, reading an article or poem, answering a reflective question, sending in a photo of something related to your topic, etc. For example, if this is an online retreat to close a cohort's year together, you may ask them to send in one photo and one memory from the past year which illustrates what the year has meant to them. Then, you can have a time for everyone to share their photo and memory during your retreat.
- Do you want to do anything for them prior to gathering? Consider sending a care package, mailing hard copies of materials you will use during your meeting/retreat, etc.

The act of asking something or providing something to attendees grabs their attention and begins to prime them to be together. How can you shape each person's journey to your gathering?

The Threshold In

When you attend an event in person, there is usually a physical threshold you pass through. That threshold demarcates the world outside of the gathering from the world of the gathering itself. At a dinner party, this may be the time and location during which a host greets their guests and introduces them to others. In lieu of a physical threshold, think imaginatively about how you can create a virtual threshold.

- How can you signal to the group that the gathering has begun? This could be a sound like ringing a chime or having a song playing as everyone logs on. You might ask everyone to set their space with a small bowl of water and facilitate a "hand washing" moment or baptismal remembrance for the group. You might mail a candle ahead of time and create a ritual of lighting your candles together. You may read aloud a poem or prayer. Choose something that says, "We are here, we have begun, you are no longer in the world outside but you are now within this world."
- How can you build your own "door", greet participants in the threshold and invite them in?

The Gathering

Since the content and agenda of your gathering will be specific to your event and purpose, we won't dive deeply into that here. Instead, we will cover some basic guidelines and best practices for hosting and participating in Zoom meetings.

Muting

- If the content of your gathering is highly conversational, you may not want or need to ask participants to mute themselves. However, you may wish to ask them to use headphones if they anticipate there being any distracting background noise around them.
- If your content does not require participants to speak frequently or if they will be speaking one at a time, you can ask them to mute themselves or you may mute them as the host. This reduces background noise and other distractions. Remind them to un-mute when they would like to speak.

Small Groups

- If you plan to break your groups into small group conversations, please review the links in the "Breakout Room" section above. You will learn how to enable breakout rooms, create them as the host and manage them during your meeting time.
- There is also a link there that you can send to your participants with instructions about how to participate well in a breakout room.

Collaborative Tools

- You may wish to use polls as a way of increasing engagement with your attendees. See the "Polling" section above for instructions on setting up and launching polls.
- You can create a collaborative whiteboard space. See the "Screensharing" section above.

The Threshold Out

Just as you created a virtual "threshold" for your participants to enter in to the world you create with your gathering, you can creatively consider how to have them cross back out into the world. You may all blow out your candles together or read a closing poem or prayer. You may sing or play the same song you used to mark the start of your time. You may ask someone to give a benediction. What you decide to do doesn't matter as much as the fact that you choose to do *something*.