



Guide to Zoom worship

This guide is a starting point for exploring how to worship together on Zoom (<https://zoom.us>). Much of this will apply to other video conferencing software but Zoom has been most widely adopted in recent weeks and seems to offer the best set of features for worship. The main advantage to worshipping in this way is that it allows people to gather in community to encounter God and to encourage each other in living out our faith, something we find ourselves called to do in scripture:

“For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20)

“Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” (Hebrews 10:24-25)

Preparation

The first thing to do is to decide who can help you lead your worship. A regular service might have different people leading and helping with practical duties such as welcoming, hosting coffee etc., and it is equally useful to have a team to host your Zoom worship. It is best if the person leading the service is not also the main host, so that they can focus on leading worship rather than the technical side of things. It can also be helpful to nominate someone to look after the chat box.

Once you have assembled your team it is a good idea to practise with each other before your live service, as it may take a while to get used to the features you plan to use. It can be useful in any worship context to run through the service in order so that everyone knows what they should do and when. Features you might like to use are discussed below; make sure you enable them in advance of your meeting and try them out during your practice.

When advertising your service it is important to consider a balance between accessibility and security. We would recommend advertising widely that the service is happening on Zoom but, rather than making the meeting link and password public, provide an email address where people can get the meeting information. This means that you know who you are expecting, and this, combined with the waiting room feature should avoid anyone joining your service with the intention of disrupting it, as has unfortunately happened to some churches. Make sure you contact people who aren't online and let them know how they can join the meeting by phone.

Worship together

This is a new way of worshipping, so remember that you don't have to recreate the service you would lead in person. Just as buildings have influenced our patterns of worship, so you can play to the strengths of a virtual space. The main advantage of Zoom over livestreaming is that it enables participation and maintains a sense of community, so make use of this. Most people are learning skills from scratch so this is an opportunity to try things that you might have been reluctant to introduce during your regular worship services – don't be afraid of trying something new or making mistakes.

Physical Space – You should consider the space that will appear on screen. There are many options; using an existing room, setting up a special space at home, or using a virtual background (such as an image of your church sanctuary). You can encourage people to make their own space sacred for your time together through simple actions such as lighting a candle at the start, or preparing a craft to have on display that ties into the theme of worship.

Beginnings – Be sure to allow enough time for people to gather, to greet each other, and to get comfortable with the technology. Consider opening the meeting 15 minutes before worship is to begin to give people time to chat. At the start of the worship it is always useful to take a few minutes to talk through the practical points people need to know about, including any features you will be using during your time together. The main things to mention are the mute function, gallery/speaker view, how to raise your hand, and the chat box.

Sharing – It can be important for communities to hear from each other so allow time for people to share how they are, either by asking for updates or by having a time for chat before or after worship. You may like to encourage people to use the chat box, to raise their hand, or to use breakout rooms. Many people find it more comfortable to talk in small groups and it can avoid a few people dominating conversation.

Prayer – There are many ways to make your prayers participative. You can ask people to unmute their microphones and pray out loud, either spontaneously or by raising their hand and a leader inviting them to pray. Participants could type prayers into the chat box, either to leave there for everyone to read or to be read aloud by a designated member of your team. You can use breakout rooms to go into smaller groups to pray. It can also be meaningful to spend time together praying or reflecting in silence.

Music – Unfortunately it is not possible for everyone to sing together and to hear each other singing. However, there are still various ways to include music in your service. For example, while one person plays or sings live, everyone can join in singing from their own space – with their microphones on mute. God can still hear us and blend our voices together and it can be meaningful to see each other sing. Alternatively, one person could perform a song for reflection or share a video/recording for everyone to listen to together. If you are using songs that are in copyright, or recordings produced by others, it is important that you have the appropriate permissions/licences.

Spoken Responses – You can ask a few people to lead spoken responses or a dramatised reading to create a sense of participation. It can be difficult for everyone to join in with responses with their microphones unmuted, but you can achieve a sense of congregational response by asking them to speak along while muted. However, it can work well to say relatively short well-known words together unmuted. It won't sound together, but this can be a moment of "holy chaos". The Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed, the Grace, and the sharing of the Peace could all work in this way.

Visual Responses – While it is difficult to have many people speaking at once, it is much easier to see each other. You can send craft ideas for people to prepare in advance or make something together during the worship. Simple sign language could be taught for sharing the peace or for other places where you might all have spoken together. Use the actions for a song or a prayer or a drama. Anything visual you might have done when physically gathered together can still be done together in your own homes.

Communion – Some clergy have been celebrating communion with their congregation by asking everyone to provide their own bread and wine. You can use this as an opportunity to be creative with your own liturgy, or the liturgies in Common Order will only require minimal adaptation.

Technical considerations

There are some particular functions and technical considerations which you will find useful for worship. Make sure you have activated these settings in advance and practised before using them with a group.

Co-hosts – Whoever sets up the meeting should make the rest of your team co-hosts to give them the same level of control. They should log in to the meeting first before you admit others.

Mute all – With larger groups it is best for the host to use this function to mute everyone's microphone during times when one person is leading.

Share Screen – Make sure you set this up in advance if you plan to share images, videos or words for people to join in with. You should also familiarise yourself beforehand with the available options, such as sharing computer sound, allowing annotation, and showing the videos of other participants. A good slideshow can be helpful in guiding people through worship, but avoid moving in and out of sharing your screen too often. If you are using video or audio it can be helpful to embed these into a presentation.

Spotlight – This selects one person as the main active speaker that participants will see. This can be useful if someone is leading an extended reflection or sermon.

Chat – It can be chaotic in larger groups if people try to speak all at once. The chat box is an alternative way to encourage people to communicate with each other.

Raise your hand – This feature in the “Manage Participants” box allows people to indicate when they want to speak. This can be helpful if you have a large group. Of course, people can also physically raise their hand if they find it easier.

Breakout rooms – You can create small groups, either randomly or by allocation. This is useful for times when you are asking people to chat or pray with each other.

Headphones – Wearing headphones is recommended, as it will remove the potential for feedback. This is particularly helpful when anyone is speaking for longer periods.

External microphone – If you are going to be speaking or singing a lot it might be worth buying an external microphone to improve your sound quality. It can also be helpful to explore the advanced audio settings such as “Enable original sound” and “Disable background noise”.

Paid Account – Both the free and the Pro accounts limit you to 100 participants. On the free version a meeting is limited to 40 minutes before it is stopped and everyone has to rejoin. You might consider upgrading your account if you need to allow more participants or have longer meetings.

Phone – It is possible to phone into a Zoom meeting from your landline or mobile by dialling one of the numbers generated in the meeting invitation and entering the meeting ID number. Please make it clear that this is an alternative way to join the meeting and is not a catch-up feature. A separate guide is available which walks you through this process step by step.

Safeguarding and Security

There are several issues to consider around safeguarding and security and the Church of Scotland Safeguarding Team and Data Protection Officer have produced guides to help with this. These can be found on the Church of Scotland website (<https://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/resources/covid-19-coronavirus-advice>)

Further Guidance

If you need help with any of the features mentioned above, Zoom’s own support site offers lots of articles and videos to walk you through these features and much more (<https://support.zoom.us>)

A community of practice is developing around using Zoom for worship, started by a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA). (<https://reyes-chow.com/zoom-worship-laboratory>)

Those of us in the Priority Areas team who have experience of using Zoom (Iain, John and Naomi) are happy to offer support and guidance. There is no such thing as a silly question and we can offer one-to-one support. You can get in touch with us by email (priorityareas@churchofscotland.org.uk).

Author

Iain McLarty (Worship Development Worker – Priority Areas)
imclarty@churchofscotland.org.uk

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