

Ritual at a Distance – What We Have Learned – What We Suggest

AMBS Pastors and Leaders Conference 2020

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During the Christian Ritual course in 2017, we used the Zoom meeting platform to bring six students into the campus class of nine students. Rather than talking about campus and distance or non-campus students, we called our colleagues from Virginia, Kansas, and Oregon “Zoomers” and those in Elkhart, “Roomers.”

Types of Rituals Done in the Christian Ritual Course

Baptism	Lament for a miscarriage
Communion	Hand blessing for medical professionals
Funeral	Open camp ritual
Wedding	Blessing for parents with a disabled child
Blessing for a caregiver	Grieving the pain of a physical loss
Receiving a refugee family	Blessing of pets and service animals
Lament for youth in emotional or spiritual pain	

What Made This Way of Doing Rituals Work?

- The *imagination* and *adaptability* of the Zoomers
- The increasingly *willing spirit* of the Roomers
- *Strong leaders* who thought through the logistics of the ritual, set the expectations of hospitality, and inspired patience along with flexibility

- Having *good enough technology* for stable internet connections, powerful enough microphones, adequate cameras, and good lighting
- Everyone’s *minimum level of comfort* with technology
- Having at least one person available who was *well-versed in the technology* being used
- Testing the technology *before* the ritual began
- *Adaptability* on everyone’s part and a *willingness* to talk about what did not work well

- Roomers treating the Zoomers as their colleagues *along with* commitment from Zoomers to attend, engage, and stay focused on what was happening, refusing to be distracted by the home environment
- Having the screen images of the Zoomers *physically centered* between the Roomers on both sides of the table
- Having *more than one* Zoomer

- Informal greetings and small talk *among Roomers and Zoomers* before activities began
- Opening the gathering with singing, a scripture reading, and silence helped everyone “gather in”

- Having the rituals engage as *many senses* as possible (much more than listening)
- *Sharing in* the physical actions of the ritual, not just witnessing the action of others

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Rules of Etiquette and Hospitality

1. Prepare and think through the logistics in advance of the ritual.
2. Communicate with the Zoomers in advance of the ritual telling them what things they will need to participate (e.g., Bible, candle, bread, oil, cup).
3. Provide Zoomers with a script (or service outline) and printed music (if needed).
4. Test all of the technology before the ritual begins.
5. Formally acknowledge the presence of the Zoomers and welcome them by name if appropriate.
6. Address the camera and the Zoomers directly.
7. Use hand signals to take turns speaking, gesture if group is to be speaking together, or hold a cupped hand to an ear if speech is unclear or too soft.
8. Identify one or two Roomers to serve as monitors of what is happening in the room and on the screen – e.g., asking participants or leaders to direct their bodies and voices toward the camera if needed or watching for hand signals from Zoomers.

Extra Leadership Requirements During the Ritual

Leading rituals with engaged worshipers at a distance requires a strong imagination to envision how to bring the Zoomers into the action effectively. Thinking from the standpoint of a Zoomer and on behalf of a Zoomer is essential – even when the Zoomer is not the focal person of the ritual. Leaders need to think of a Zoomer as if she or he was physically in the room. This means placing a computer or screen in a place that the leader can see and make eye contact with the Zoomers. Enunciating clearly and with sufficient volume for the sake of hospitality is worth the effort. Speaking a bit more slowly is also a gracious act, since there can be delays in transmission or varying periods of internet disruption.

And if everything freezes...

Keep calm, consult your tech, and assess what is the most reasonable thing to do.

The Limits of This Ritual Engagement

- Zoom (Google Meet, Skype) is great but it's not magic. ... it wasn't always awesome.
- For Zoomers the experience is not the same as being in the physical presence of everyone else. They sometimes were not able to connect either because of technology barriers or emotional/spiritual barriers.
- For a one-time event, there is less opportunity to build connection between the Zoomers and Roomers prior to the ritual.
- In close personal conversation, we often drop our voices when emotions get high. With Zoomers, Roomers lowering the volume of their voices was not an option, no matter what emotions were surfacing.
- Also, touch is powerful in rituals and can be extended to others through Zoom. In a few times of intense emotion, Roomers had to tend to one another through touch or offering a hug. Zoomers could witness what was happening, but could not always feel the intensity or offer support.