



22 July 2020 version 2.4

Thoughts on blending physical and online worship

Introduction

This paper explores some practical issues about enabling friends to join a meeting for worship made up of people online and in person equally.

Moving forwards overall

Friends are seekers but we are also the holders of a precious heritage of discoveries. We, like every generation, must find the Light and Life again for ourselves. Only what we have valued and truly made our own, not by assertion but by lives of faithful commitment, can we hand on to the future. Even then, we must humbly acknowledge that our vision of the truth will, again and again, be amended. Quaker faith & practice, introduction.

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged how Quakers, come together as a worshipping community and live out our values, in ways we have not experienced in our lives before. We are a generation called to seek the “Light and Life” in an unprecedented situation. However, we were already being challenged to respond particularly to questions of diversity, inclusion, and sustainability, arising from our long held commitments to peace, justice, equality and integrity.

As a Quaker community in Britain we have been, for the most part, agile in rising to the new challenge of remaining a worshipping community when unable to meet in person. We have an opportunity now not simply to return to a version of what we did before, but to emerge from our lockdown cocoon in different shapes and colours. We have a chance now to “make our own”, creatively and adventurously, what is revealed to us by the light and life we have found. There have been benefits to our new ways of working .

Over the coming months, Quaker Life and Woodbrooke will work alongside Friends to explore how we go forward. We will listen, share, accompany, network and offer learning and resources. This will be done in partnership with colleagues from Quaker Peace and Social Witness.

This document is just one of our resources, about one approach that you could take. There will be more to share over the coming weeks – keep an eye on Quake! and on the Quaker Life Network page on Facebook. Also, share with us what you are doing, or ideas which you have: supportmeetings@quaker.org.uk. We can share your ideas, and put you in touch with like-minded people.

Blended worship

Here, we use the phrase ‘blended worship’ to mean where some Friends are together physically in one place, others are online, or on the phone and all are connected together in a single meeting for worship by technology. In this way, everyone will be able to hear one another, many will see one another, and all can minister and receive ministry together.

This paper assumes the technology uses a form of video-conference software. We recognise that opportunities for blended worship may emerge at different rates across Britain, as government guidance varies and changes, and as meetings decide to move at different speeds. We are not trying to address here the issues about safely holding the physical part of the worship.

Some meetings will have more people online than in the meeting room – others may have more in person than online. While here we mainly address aspects in the meeting room, do consider how this is for those online too.

Some possible scenarios for blended worship

Local circumstances will vary a great deal between meetings – their size, their building, their technical know-how, their hirers, their budget and their speed. Here are a few ways that a blended meeting might happen, to illustrate some scenarios:

A small rural meeting house

There is no broadband connection or wi-fi. A member’s mobile phone’s broadband signal is used as a wi-fi hotspot. (Alternatively, a neighbouring house has wi-fi, and the meeting pays a small fee each week to the neighbouring house to use their wi-fi connection during worship.) A small laptop has been purchased for the meeting, with its own webcam, sitting on a low table and forming part of the circle. A wireless conference-call mic sits discretely in the centre of the circle. The host sits at a slight angle beside the laptop screen and monitors it.

A large city meeting house

There are several rooms, widely used by a variety of hirers, with telephone but no wi-fi. The Meeting decides to install a broadband connection. It has a wired connection in the main meeting room and a second meeting room and wi-fi can be used in other rooms too. A wide-angle webcam enables most people to be seen. The hearing loop’s mic passes its signal to a laptop - or several mics are used around the room. A large LCD TV screen shows the online worshippers on a side wall. The facilitator quietly uses a touchscreen device from the side of the meeting room. Hirers bring their own laptop and plug it into the TV screen very easily.

A meeting renting a room in a community building

The community centre has its own wi-fi. The meeting buys a refurbished laptop with a large screen, a small plug-in speaker, a plug-in room mic, and a tablet. These are

kept in a box at a nearby member's home. The laptop sits on a small table as part of the circle, while the host uses the tablet to quietly monitor the meeting.

Interim solutions

The meeting starts with equipment someone already has available. They use a laptop and an ordinary plug-in microphone on a stand or fastened at head height, which people walk up to when ministering in person. A speaker is added as the laptop's speaker is insufficient. A digital projector shows the image of people worshipping online onto a wall – though the quality is not great as the room is quite bright. They use a mobile phone's broadband connection, or buy a 'mi-fi' device which gives a mobile broadband signal. After some time experimenting, the meeting decides to invest in permanent equipment, helped by funds from area meeting.

Meeting outdoors

The meeting uses the 'interim solutions' above, with a long extension cable and safety cut-out. A speaker is used so that ministry can be heard above sounds outdoors. A standard mic is used, and people walk up to it to minister, to avoid too much background sound outdoors.

The worship overall

- How will you ensure that the blended meeting for worship is made up of everyone equally?
- How can you avoid the idea of a "real" meeting being in person and others "joining in" or "listening/looking in" online?
- Or, if most people are online, how can you help the few people in the meeting room to feel equally included?
- How will you balance the needs of children and young people and the needs of adults?

Before the meeting

- How will you enable conversation before the worship starts, if that is what you want, and how will you bring it to a close?
- Will the meeting for worship start once the first person is present? Online, in the room, or both?

During the meeting

- Will everyone be able to minister and receive ministry in both places equally?
- How will elders and the online facilitator work together to ensure that everyone ministering can be heard?
- Would it help to have someone responsible for eldership of the online part of the worship (which could be the facilitator/host or an elder), or is it better to have combined eldership of the whole meeting?

- What will the meeting choose about typed ministry, which some online meetings use, which can enable some people to minister? Will typed ministry be read aloud (e.g. by the facilitator, or an elder, or anyone)?

After worship comes to a close

- If the person giving notices is in the physical meeting room, can they stand where they can be most clearly seen and heard?
- Are you including the children equally?
- Will there be ways for people online to socialise with those in person?

For example:

- *Facilitate a large conversation to share news, joys and concerns.*
- *Take a laptop into an adjacent room, and some people join physically in chat with those online, perhaps in rotation.*
- *Have several devices in different rooms (mobile phones?), so several people online in a breakout room can have a conversation with several people in the meeting place. Rotate people around.*

Facilitating / Hosting

- Who will facilitate the meeting?
- What equipment will they have?
- Where will they sit?

Online meetings need a facilitator or technical host, who can help people join, help mute and unmute microphones, and respond to inappropriate or unwelcome intrusions. This role can be purely technical, or the role can be combined with eldership. There is guidance for facilitators and elders in the Guide to Online Worship and Meetings available [here](#). Where they sit, and how they operate their device can minimise disturbance.

- A simple way is to have the host and one device in the meeting room. However, some laptop keys, mouse clicks and fans may be a distraction. A degree of sound could be tolerated, or perhaps for an initial trial period. Alternatively, the host might use a silent mouse-pad, or a silent touch-screen device like a tablet or ipad, or a touch-screen laptop.
- Another combination is to have two devices. For example: one large screen and laptop in the meeting room (with its speaker muted till the appointed time), and one used by the host (ideally a silent touch-screen one). With this combination, the host could initially be outside the meeting room, verbally welcoming those arriving online. Then they could come into the meeting room (with their device) at the designated start of the meeting, or come in with the doorkeeper after 5 or 10 minutes.
- A third option is to have the online part hosted by someone remotely, provided someone on-site sets up beforehand, and takes down at the end. This probably needs a connection between that person and the host – perhaps by phone beforehand, or with a mobile phone earpiece.

Communicating what is happening

- Who should be able to join the online part of the meeting?
- Is this worship public, as local Quaker meetings normally are?
- Is this only for established people within the meeting community?
- How will people new to Quakerism or your community learn about and join your blended worship?
- Have you considered the guidance in section 4.5 of the Guide to Online Worship and Meetings (available [here](#))?
- Would Friends and newcomers like to know when it is a blended meeting? Could this be communicated in advance and on arrival? Would it be helpful to have an explanatory sign beside the equipment?

Including those unable to participate in person or online

- Are you also taking steps to involve Friends who are unable to join in person or online?
- Are you using phone calls, emails, whatsapp groups or other apps?
- Are you mentioning people who are joining in spirit, independently at home?
- Have you tried connecting them to blended worship on the phone – including ringing them up, as described in an appendix of the Guide to Online Worship and Meetings available [here](#).
- Can someone visit, bringing their own laptop or mobile, so they can join in?

Equipment overall

- How important is this approach to building and maintaining your worshipping community through the pandemic and beyond?
- Can you borrow equipment to get started? *Using equipment someone is familiar with can make things much simpler to start with, and cheaper, while you experiment.*
- How good is 'good enough'? *We don't need perfection.*
- Do you want to use more than one room for the physical meeting, each connected with the online worship space? *This can enable more people to meet physically while socially distanced.*
- Do you need to provide computer equipment for a blended children's meeting, as an equal priority with the adult meeting for worship? *This is more inclusive for your children's group and could enable you to include children from other meetings, now or in future.*
- If you rent your worship space, can your equipment be easily carried there?
- What will hirers find useful? Will it attract more bookings and income? *Many community groups and businesses will be in the same situation as Quakers, with some people unable or unwilling to come in person.*
- Can the equipment be easily moved and put away again? Or will it help to have it permanently available?
- Can fixed equipment be sited so it fits within the aesthetics of a historic building, or within listed building constraints? Or will it need to be mobile?

Choosing equipment for the meeting room(s)

- Are there people in the meeting who have expertise you could draw on? *You may find hidden talent, and involve someone more than usual.*
- Could someone in another meeting help? *People can be delighted to help.*
- For a significant investment, will you get professional advice, and from more than one source? *Experience is showing you can be offered very different equipment, at very different costs.*
- How does spending money on equipment for worship compare with the money you spend on other aspects of your building? *Is worship central?*
- Quaker email groups may be good places to ask about and share advice on technical specifications:

You can join the Property Advice e-group [here](#).

You can join the Wardens e-group, by scrolling down to Support [here](#).

- Look out for a collection of experiences and details of equipment some meetings are using. This will be publicised in these groups.

Connecting to the internet

- Will you need to install a broadband connection?
- Will you need to upgrade your wi-fi strength by upgrading your contract? *This can depend on your contract, but also on obstacles between your wifi router and computer. You may need to accommodate several computers being connected at the same time.*
- Can you do a live test of whether the speed (in Mbps) is sufficient for a video meeting? *10Mps is too low. 35Mps is reliable. Test yours and see.*
- Might you need a wi-fi extender to reach the meeting space(s) with sufficient speed? *A wired connection will provide a stronger and more reliable signal. Think where you want the socket, and have a long cable available.*
- Could you use a satellite dish to get internet in a rural area?
- Could you connect without a broadband cable, by tethering your device to a mobile phone's broadband signal? Or use a 'mi-fi' device (which just provides the mobile broadband signal, without having a phone)?
- Could you use an existing wi-fi signal, for example by negotiating with a neighbour whose wi-fi reaches your meeting place?

Sound - speakers

- Is the speaker on your laptop in the physical meeting room really loud enough and sufficient quality to be heard clearly all around the room? *Adding a speaker can help a lot.*
- Will you use plug-in speakers? *Simpler to use, and higher quality.*
- Or wireless bluetooth speakers? *More flexible, no trailing wires, poorer quality.*
- Will the sound come from the direction where the people online are seen? *It be confusing otherwise.*
- *If using a TV, you may find the speakers on a TV are sufficient.*

Sound – microphone

- Will the audio input in the physical meeting room be good enough to be heard clearly online?
- Will a built-in mic in a tablet or laptop really pick up ministry that is softly spoken, or will you need an extra microphone? *This may depend on how many people you have, and the room. Give it a try.*
- Can you manage with a mic on a stand, that people walk up to? *That is simple and low-tech, and it can help people focus on projecting their voice. It can take some getting used to, and could be problematic for those with limited mobility. And avoid people holding the mic during the pandemic.*
- Would a circular ‘multi-directional conference microphone’ be better? *These sit on a table and pick up sound from different directions. Check its range covers the distance. For example:*



- Could you have two or more of these around a room?
- Would you want wireless mics, to avoid trailing wires, or wired ones for simplicity and quality?
- For a larger space, will you need fixed mics, with a higher specification? *Sometimes one high-spec mic is sufficient, other times several.*
- Can the mic of an existing hearing loop system be used? *You may already have an excellent mic that discretely picks up speech well. It could be connected via the pre-amp to the computer. Or an upgrade to your pre-amp may achieve this.*

Sound – unwanted

- Can you find equipment with low levels of noise from the fan?
- How much unwanted noise is acceptable to manage worshipping together? *You could start with existing equipment, and improve once you have experimented for a while. In practice, most meetings actually have some background noise anyway.*
- Could the host have a tablet or a laptop with a touch-screen which is silent?

Camera

- What is good enough? *We don't need to seek perfection.*
- Is a separate webcam needed? *This can improve the quality.*
- Would a wide-angle camera be better?
- Do you really need to be able to see everyone? *There are usually some people you cannot see during a physical meeting, behind you or to the side.*
- Will some people wish to not be seen on camera? *You can leave part of the room out of shot.*

Displaying the pictures of those online in the physical space

Your choice will be affected by your budget, the room size and layout, portability, and simplicity of use. There are a wide range of options:

- Ipad/tablet on a stand *Simple, very small screen, 6 or 9 people visible.*
- Large screen laptop *Simple, may be sufficient for a small group.*
- Large PC screen attached to a laptop *Simple, larger.*
- Digital projector *Fairly simple, large, may already have one. Fan noise and location may intrude a little. Effective in bright room?*
- More expensive digital projector *Quieter, brighter.*
- Digital projector fixed in the ceiling, or on a wall projecting downwards
Quiet, less intrusive, more expensive, straightforward for hirers.
- Digital TV, fixed on wall
Probably best quality image, simple to plug in laptop and go, straightforward for hirers, likely more expensive.
- Digital TV on a trolley that can be stored elsewhere *Flexible, damage?*
- Digital TV in a slim cupboard that closes away *Discrete*

Also consider:

- Can you place the image where it will feel part of the circle, rather than dominating or away from everyone?
- Will your screen work well being viewed from a side angle?
- In a large room, how about having more than one screen, bearing in mind we sit in a circle?

Laptop / PC

- Having quiet keys or a touch-screen will be best in a worship room.
- How long do you want to keep relying on borrowing someone's laptop, and relying on them?
- Will your laptop/PC have a high quality graphics card that enables more than 25 people to be seen on the screen?
- Will a fixed tower-style PC be more convenient, reliable, and less likely to be stolen?
 - Do you want to offer hirers the whole set-up, including PC, which implies maintenance, or say "bring your own laptop", which can be simpler?

Experimenting and learning

Be prepared to give things a good trial period, and work on making changes to improve the experience. Do be ready to accept some technical hitches, and to get used to a different feel in the meeting.

Keep foremost in our minds that this is about inclusion – living our testimony to equality – so that more people can take part in Quaker worship together as a community.

Live adventurously!

Our life is love, and peace, and tenderness; and bearing one with another, and forgiving one another, and not laying accusations one against another; but praying one for another, and helping one another up with a tender hand.
Isaac Penington, 1667

Quaker faith and Practice 10:01. 'Belonging to a Quaker Meeting'.