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Thoughts on blending physical and online worship

Introduction

This paper begins to explore some practical issues about enabling friends to join meeting for worship in person linked with people online.

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 and practice, introduction.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged how Quakers worship, come together as a 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 particularly to respond 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 worshiping 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.

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, 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, and government guidance is awaited on places of worship – so we are not trying to address here the issues about safely holding the physical part of the worship.

We offer a series of questions for consideration, as local circumstances will vary.

Equipment overall

Can you borrow equipment to get started?

How good is 'good enough'?

Do you want to use two or more rooms for the physical meeting, each connected to the online worship space, to enable more people to meet physically while socially distancing?

Will you be providing equipment for a children's meeting, as well as the main meeting for worship?

Can the equipment be easily carried into a rented space?

Can the equipment be easily moved, and put away again?

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?

How will any installation be done safely?

Connecting up the meeting place online

Will you need to install a broadband connection?

Will you need to upgrade your wi-fi? Can you do a live test of whether the speed (in Mbps) is sufficient for a video meeting? Might you need a wi-fi extender to reach the meeting space(s) with sufficient speed? Or will you use a wired connection (where siting of the socket is important)?

Could you connect without a broadband cable, by tethering your device to a mobile phone's broadband signal? Or could you 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

Will you need to add a speaker to the device to improve the volume and sound quality?

Would plug-in speakers may be simpler? Or would wireless bluetooth speakers be more flexible and avoid trailing wires?

Does it matter whether the sound comes from the place where the people online are seen?

Sound – microphone

Will the audio input 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 an extra microphone be needed?

Do you want a mic, on a stand, that people walk to? That can help people focus on projecting their voice, but can take some getting used to, and could be problematic for those with limited mobility.

Would a circular 'room mic' be better, as it can pick up sound from different directions? Could you have two or more of these around a room? Would you want wireless mics, to avoid trailing wires?

Can the mic of an existing hearing loop system be used? You may already have an excellent mic that picks up speech well, which could be connected via the amp to the device? Could an upgrade achieve this?

Sound – unwanted

Can you find equipment with low levels of noise from the fan?

Could the host have a tablet or a laptop with a touch-screen, that is silent?

How much unwanted noise is tolerable, (or indeed is usually tolerated), for the sake of achieving the blended worship you want?

Camera

What is good enough?

Is a separate webcam needed?

Would a wide angle camera be better?

Do you really need to be able to see everyone? Aren't there usually some people you cannot see in a physical meeting?

Will some people wish to not be seen on camera?

Displaying the image of those online:

How is your choice affected by your budget, room size and layout, portability needs, and ease of use?

There are a wide range of options:

- Ipad/tablet on a stand
- Large screen laptop
- Large PC screen attached to a laptop
- Digital projector
- More expensive digital projector
- Digital projector fixed in the ceiling, or on a wall projecting downwards
- Digital TV, fixed
- Digital TV on a trolley that can be stored elsewhere
- Digital TV in a slim cupboard that closes away (perhaps with a noticeboard on the inner doors)

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?

What about a large room having more than one screen, bearing in mind we sit in a circle?

Choosing equipment

Are there people in the meeting who have expertise you could draw on? Or is there someone in another meeting who could help?

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](#).

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. 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 minimize 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.

During the meeting

Will people be able to minister and receive ministry in both places?

How will elders and the 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, 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, and which can enable some people to minister? Will typed ministry be read aloud (e.g. by the facilitator)?

After worship comes to a close

Would it help to re-direct the camera to face whoever gives notices? Or could they stand in a position that works for the camera?

Will there be ways for people online to socialise with those in the room? For example, could a laptop be taken into an adjacent room, and a few people join physically in chat with those online?

Could there be more than one device in the building, in different rooms, so that several conversations can take place, with people online in breakout rooms?

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 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?

Some possible scenarios for blended worship

Here are a few ways that a blended meeting might be imagined:

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 room 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 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 two room mics are used. A projector fixed in the ceiling shows the image on a side wall or screen. The facilitator uses a touchscreen device from the side of the meeting room.

A meeting renting a room in a community building

One which 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 table as part of the circle, while the host uses the tablet to monitor the meeting.

Interim solutions

The meeting starts with equipment someone already has available. They use an ordinary plug-in mic, on a stand or fastened at head height, which people walk to when ministering in person. A speaker is added if the laptop's speaker is insufficient. They use a mobile phone's broadband connection, or buy a 'mi-fi' device.

Meeting outdoors

The meeting uses the 'Interim solutions' above. It is more important to have a speaker so that ministry can be heard above sounds outdoors. The meeting probably avoids using a 'room mic' which would pick up lots of environmental sounds.

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