



# HOSTING ONLINE COMMUNITIES

## BRIEF TUTORIAL & BEST PRACTICES



New to hosting a group online? An online community is a great tool to help people connect when an in-person group may not be possible. Despite the lack of face-to-face interaction, online communities are perfectly capable of allowing you to authentically share life, encourage one another, study together, and watch God work in ways you may not have dreamed possible.

Your first few meetings will take some adjusting as everyone gets acquainted with the technology, comfortable with the online format, and works out all of the kinks. So, don't give up too quickly if your first few meetings are a bit of a challenge. Remember to have fun and laugh.

As you launch an online community, or work to move your existing group online, this resource guide is designed to help you understand some commonly-available technology platforms, best practices for a good online experience, and what a typical online group meeting may look like.

*"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." – Hebrews 10:23-25 (NIV)*

## AVAILABLE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORMS

Note: This document includes interactive links that can be accessed by clicking on them.

When it comes to online communities, we do not mandate any certain platform for connecting. Instead, we encourage groups to find a platform for connecting that works best – both from an ease-of-use standard and a sustainability standard – for your respective group.

### 1. Zoom / [Click to access Zoom](#)

**Pros:** Free. Only hosts are required to have a Zoom account. There is a phone-in option.

**Cons:** Meeting time is limited to 40 minutes unless you have a paid account (\$14.99/month).

Have to download the Zoom application to phone or computer.

**Capacity:** 100 participants/devices

**How to create an account with Zoom:**

- Go to [www.zoom.us](http://www.zoom.us)
- Click the blue “Sign up, it’s free” button in upper right-hand corner.
- Enter your email address. You will then be sent a link to your email.
- Open the email and complete the sign-up process.

**How to use Zoom:**

- Open Zoom in a [web browser](#) or [mobile app](#) ([apple device](#), [android device](#), [chrome web browser extension](#))

- Login
- Click “Host a meeting with video on” in upper right-hand corner
- Click “Invite participations”
- Select how you’d like to send an invite:  
Default Email, Gmail, Yahoo to send email invite, or “copy URL”, “Copy Invitation” to copy a link and send it via a text message, email, Facebook message, etc.
- You can also schedule a meeting on the zoom website and send an invite to join you at a specific time, including a link to your online meeting. ([See Zoom Instructional Video](#))

[Watch Tutorial Videos in Zoom Video Library](#)

[Watch How to Use Zoom with your Small Group](#) (Saddleback Church Resource)

### 2. Google Hangouts / [Click to access Google Hangouts](#)

**Pros:** Free. Unlimited time. Closed Captioning. Accessible via web browser on computer.

**Cons:** Requires a Google account for all participants. (Can sign up for one [HERE](#)). Phone-in option not available unless you have a business account. (If you have a [G Suite business account](#), you can also share a phone number for people to call into the meeting if they don’t have access to a computer or smartphone.

**Capacity:** 25 participants/devices

## How to use Google Hangouts:

- Open Google Hangouts in [web browser](#) or mobile app ([apple device](#), [android device](#), [chrome web browser extension](#))
- Login
- Click “Video Call” button
- Click “Invite People” and type in their email address (If they don’t have a Google account it will send them an invite to setup an account)
- You can also schedule a meeting on your Google calendar and send an invite to join you at a specific time, including a link to your online meeting. ([See Instructions](#))

## Before you start your first video call with Google Hangouts:

- [Check the system requirements](#) for Google Hangouts.
- If needed, connect a camera, microphone, and speakers to your computer. Make sure they have the latest software.
- When asked to use your computer’s camera and microphone, click Allow.
- [Download](#) and install the latest version of the Hangouts plugin for Internet Explorer and Safari browsers.
- Important: You might need to turn on permissions for your camera and microphone in your computer’s system settings.
- [Additional resources for starting a video call](#)

[Watch this YouTube Tutorial on Google Hangouts](#)

## 3. Facebook Messenger Groups

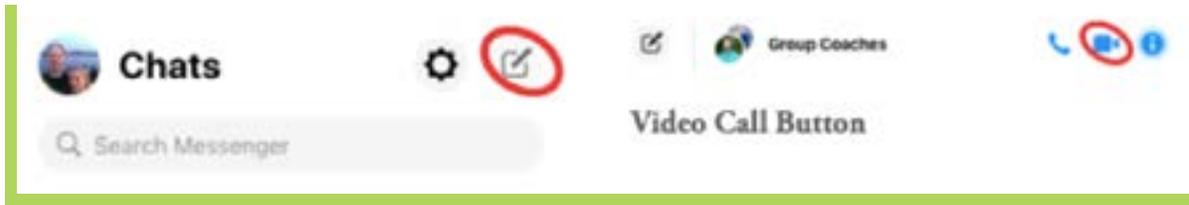
**Pros:** Free. Accessible via web browser on computer. Can access without a Facebook account. If you don’t have a Facebook account, then you’ll need to [download the Messenger app](#) to your phone and use your phone number.

**Cons:** Phone-in option not available.

**Capacity:** 50 participants/devices: 6 video, 44 audio. For the first six participants, the Facebook Messenger app will stream everyone’s camera feed to one another in a grid-like view. After six, Messenger will display only the dominant speaker’s feed.

### How to use Facebook Messenger Groups:

- Open Facebook Messenger on [web browser](#) or [mobile app](#).
- Login (with Facebook account or phone number).
- Click “New Message” button to add Facebook friends to group chat (see image on the following page).
- After adding contacts, click “Video Call” button to start video chat (see image on the following page).



[Watch this YouTube Tutorial on Creating Facebook Messenger Groups](#)  
[Facebook Messenger Video Call Walkthrough](#)

#### 4. Skype / [Click to access Skype](#)

**Pros:** Free. Only hosts are required to have a Skype account. Available on just about any mobile device, tablet, or computer. Ability to blur backgrounds while on video call.

**Cons:** While not required to have a Skype account, invitees (i.e. non hosts) do have to download the Skype application to their phone or computer.

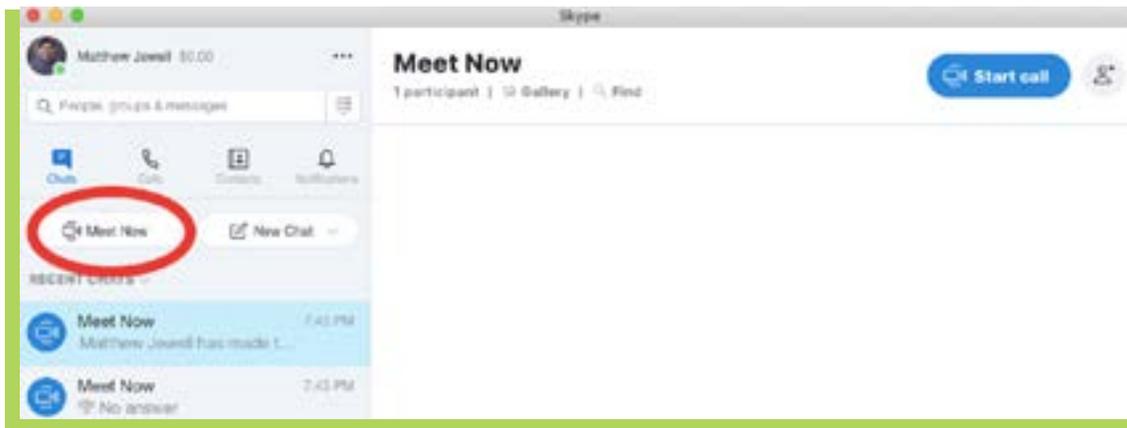
**Capacity:** 50 participants/devices

**How to create an account with Skype:**

- Go to <https://www.skype.com/en/>
- Download the Skype application. Available for both Mac and Windows.
- Enter your email address. You will then be sent a link to your email.
- Open the email and complete the sign-up process (using a verification code).

**How to use Skype:**

- Open Skype application on either your computer or mobile device.
- Login
- Click “Meet Now” button (see image below)
- Click “Share invite” and select your preferred invite method. You also have the option to copy and share the Skype call link that is automatically generated.
- Once invitations have been shared, click “Start call” to begin video chat.



[Watch this YouTube Tutorial on Skype Video Call](#)

## NOTES REGARDING DEVICES AND TECHNOLOGY

- While mobile phones can be used, laptops and/or desktop computers are recommended as they offer a larger screen size.
- Only use one device per household. Multiple devices can cause audio feedback and internet bandwidth issues.
- Your device will ask for permission to access your audio and video. Approve all of this ahead of time, since it may require a reboot.
- Place your device on a table or stable mount, not on your lap or in your hand. Having your hands free allows you to reference your Bible or additional study materials.
- Make sure your device is plugged in or at full battery level.
- Use landscape mode [sideways] instead of portrait [up and down].

## BEST PRACTICES FOR VIDEO CALLING / ONLINE ETIQUETTE

- 1. Recommend that group members download any meeting software prior to meeting.**  
See previous section on technology platforms available for online groups.
- 2. Be aware of how you look on camera.**
  - Make sure your face has sufficient lighting. In general, lighting works best in front of your face, not behind. Brighter light is preferred to yellow/'warm' light.
  - Make sure your face is centered in the video camera. It's best to position the camera to eye level or slightly above.
  - Speaking tip: When talking, look directly into the camera. When not talking, look at the computer screen to watch others.
- 3. Select the quietest room/location you can find.**
  - Turn off anything making noise in the background (TV, radio, appliances).
  - Put pets in a different room or have them in a place where they will be most quiet.
  - If you're at home, have a plan for childcare so as to minimize interruptions.
  - Places like a coffee shop or restaurant can work but sometimes background noise can be an issue. Noise canceling headphones can help with this.
- 4. Mute your computer unless you're the person talking.**
  - Whichever platform you're using, know how to turn off and on your mute button.
  - If everyone's microphone is turned on at the same time, the sound quality can be an issue and it can be hard to hear the person who is talking.
  - If you are muted, make sure to nod your head and listen well so people can recognize you are following them. Find creative ways to practice non-verbal communication.
  - Recognize that the moderator has the ability to mute individual participants if needed.

## 5. Be both positive and assertive as a moderator/host.

- Your demeanor will set the stage for the attitude of everyone else in the group.
- The moderator/host of the group will need to be welcoming and in charge. Make sure (if you are the host) to jump on a few minutes early to welcome everyone.
- Redirect the conversation or mute participants as necessary. This may feel rude, but it is sometimes necessary to manage a good online experience.
- As a rule of thumb, the host should talk 20% of the time and listen 80% of the time.

## 6. Create a plan for participants to indicate that they'd like to talk.

- You may try things like raising a hand, answering in a specific order, or another signal.
- Since participants will often be muted, having a plan will help you know when to mute and unmute.

## 7. Encourage group participants to give their full attention (i.e. don't multitask).

When participants are not giving their full attention, it can be as big a distraction with an online group as it can with an in-person group.

## 8. Have a plan to stay in touch outside of your scheduled meeting time.

- Leverage resources and platforms like calling, texting, emailing, GroupMe, Facebook Groups and Messenger, WhatsApp, etc. as a place to stay connected and keep the conversation going throughout the week.
- Assign group members to follow up with one another and engage in prayer requests.

## ONLINE GROUP FORMAT / TYPICAL SCHEDULE

### Practice Session/First Meeting (30-45 minutes)

- It can be helpful to have a 30-45 minute practice session together, or take the first half of your first online group get everyone acquainted with how an online format will work.
- Review the best practices/online etiquette (listed above). You may want to review these practices the first several meetings until they become more natural to people.
- Help people learn how to use the technology and answer any questions.
- If you are a new group, make sure to introduce yourself, share you name, and share how you got connected with Hope Fellowship and the online group.
- End your group time by sharing prayer requests; have one person pray.

### Typical Meeting (45 minutes)

#### 1. Moderator/Host welcomes everyone to the online group (5 minutes)

- Buffer time is important, as people tend to arrive late online (as with in-person groups).
- Allow for people, if necessary, to adjust their lighting, camera, and microphone settings.

**2. Warm Up/Connection Time (5 minutes)**

The key here is to get everyone talking. This also allows the group members to get comfortable learning how to mute/unmute themselves when talking and listening.

**3. Optional: Watch study/curriculum (6-10 minutes)**

This can be watched at this point in time, or before the group meets.

**4. Discussion Time (20 minutes)**

- Discuss the corresponding questions that apply to each group type (ex: Home Groups are provided sermon-based discussion questions).
- Remember that the objective of group isn't to get through all the questions - rather it's to hear from everyone in the group.
- Listen well and ask great follow up questions. Let the conversation flow among your group members and redirect/keep-on-track as needed.

**5. Take Prayer Requests and Close in Prayer (5-10 minutes)**

- Have a designated person to write down/record these prayer requests.
- Have one person pray for the group, or assign prayer requests to different people.