A Report from the Fetzer Institute

Holding virtual meetings has become commonplace in 2020. Spurred by the need for physical distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, Zoom, Google Meet, Facebook Live, and other platforms are now in daily use by remote workers in a wide array of sectors. Online gatherings also reduce environmental impact while making prudent use of time, money, and other resources.

But what is lost when we can’t meet face to face? How does physical space affect what happens in a meeting? How does the energy of group interaction change when a gathering is virtual? In the summer of 2020, we gathered several dozen facilitators and practitioners to share their experience and insights in a series of conversations on creating sacred space virtually. While we are sure there is more to learn along the way, we have been able to identify a set of five best practices thanks to this group’s wisdom.

This project is informed by the Institute’s 25 years of experience extending sacred hospitality to thousands of guests at Seasons: A Center for Renewal on our campus in Kalamazoo, Michigan. During this time, we have collaborated with and learned alongside partners and facilitators who have worked with us around the world to host retreats, conferences, learning summits, and other gatherings in support of creating shared sacred space that fosters individual and societal transformation.

Translating the concepts of sacred hospitality into the virtual space offers challenges and opportunities. This inquiry examines both through peer discussion and learning about tools, methods, and practices for holding space in online gatherings. We are exploring ways to extend sacred hospitality, create an environment of trust and sharing, engage with contemplative practice, and foster relationship building in online gatherings. Rather than a general focus on virtual facilitation, this report outlines specific methodologies for creating and holding sacred space.

Four online conversations in summer 2020 included about a dozen participants in each session. We sought to convene people with varied backgrounds—a diversity of race and ethnicity, faith tradition, gender, discipline, and ways of working—to assure that many different perspectives were included. The response to this invitation was enthusiastic: more than 40 people were invited, and all expressed an interest in joining the conversation. Participants included scholars, religious leaders, academics, nonprofit leaders, retreat facilitators, teachers, social movement leaders, and others. With the overwhelmingly positive response to the invitation, we knew the theme of online sacred space was emerging as a critical topic for these times.

Let’s reimagine what space together even means. . . . How can contemplative practice help us get over some of the feelings of artificiality or limitations of the space? It can ground us in such a way that the flatness of the screen I am looking at you all through doesn’t have to be as much of an impediment.

—Greg Hansell
Our discussions were guided by the following questions.

- What tools, methods, and practices help nurture sacred space in virtual gatherings?
- What is the role of spiritual and contemplative practice in creating sacred space virtually?
- What strategies foster relationship building in an online environment?

Artist Ronna Alexander brought our main ideas to life through the graphics that appear in this report.

There’s a real opportunity here for us to be ok with being imperfect and to find that as a part of, actually the gift of, spiritual offering that we can give to people.

—Marcia Lee

I’m really leaning into the practice of vulnerability, of reciprocity. It’s okay to come as my full self—not as this perfectly together facilitator, but as someone who is also really struggling and really missing people.

—Micky ScottBey Jones

Participants in Conversations on Virtual Sacred Space
Summer 2020

Beeta Ansari, Ashoka U
Mary Ann Brussat, Spirituality & Practice
Wendy Cadge, Brandeis University
Kristin Cambell, PACE
Heidi Campbell, Texas A&M University
Rebecca Colwell, Ten Directions
Melissa Durda, Synergos
Caren Dybek, Courage & Renewal Facilitator
Rako Fabionar, Consultant
Melinda Gilmore, Kettering Foundation
Gillian Gonda, Fetzer Institute
Eddie Gonzalez, OnBeing
Angela Graham, Fetzer Institute
Greg Hansell, Omega Center
Dennis Jennings, Technology of Participation
Milicent Johnson, Nuns & Nones
Micky ScottBey Jones, Faith Matters Network
Rabbi Irwin Keller, Taproot Gathering
Linda Lantieri, Transformative Educational Ldrshp.
Marcia Lee, Taproot Sanctuary
Sholanna Lewis, Kalamazoo Community Foundation
Xiaoan Li, Fetzer Institute

Uvinie Lubecki, Leading Through Connection
Rabbi Sara Luria, Beloved Brooklyn
Sarah Mansberger, Southwest Michigan First
Mohammed Mohammed, Fetzer Institute
Judi Neal, Management, Spirituality, & Religion
Adrian Ogle, Echoing Green
Deepa Patel, Inayatiyya
SaraJoy Pond, Conveners.org
Zeenat Rahman, Aspen Institute
Jean Richardson, Kirkridge Retreat & Study Center
Victoria Santos
Heather Sarantis, Facilitator
Diana Scearce, Consultant
Michelle Scheidt, Fetzer Institute
Gerard Senehi, Open Future Institute
Anil Singh-Morales, Spiritual Directors Intl.
Oren Slozberg, Commonweal
Shakiyla Smith, Fetzer Institute
Jeff Snipes, Millennial School
Margarita Solis-Deal, Dominican Center
Angie Thurston, Sacred Design Lab
Kathryn Uhl, Synergos
Best Practices

Creating and holding sacred space is an art practiced by facilitators who seek to integrate a contemplative approach, create containers for deeper work, build trusting relationships, and offer spiritually grounded ways of working together in a group setting. While difficult to define, sacred space is more easily felt or experienced as a quality of soulful depth and meaningful connection that can be intentionally cultivated through specific practices and methodologies. A group is more than just a collection of individuals, and a skilled facilitator helps a group create a sense of energy, connection, and spirit that brings a sacred quality to the time together.

In our conversations with experienced facilitators, five best practices emerged as central to the work of creating sacred space virtually.

1. Connect through Physical Spaces
2. Bring in the Real
3. Attend to Details Before and After the Virtual Gathering
4. Hold Space
5. Invite Creative Engagement Opportunities

1. Connect through Physical Spaces

In environments that are not virtual, sacred space is often connected to physical places such as a worship space, natural setting, or retreat center. Facilitators, religious leaders, and others hold space in these settings for people to reflect, enter into silence, meditate or pray, connect with others in the group, or do their own inner work. What happens in those same groups when the participants are not physically together in the same space?

Many of the conversation participants had been a part of prior in-person gatherings at the Institute. A photo of Seasons spurred conversation about the power of that particular place, with participants expressing a nostalgic longing to be at the retreat center. Seeing the empty chairs and the green of the woods reminded people of past convenings and evoked feelings of connection and grounding. Several participants suggested that they would like to see the Fetzer team facilitating online while at Seasons, that bringing in the physical space would lend a different quality to the conversation. The group explored the role of space in the virtual environment, noting examples such as online worship having a different feel whether the minister was leading the service from home or from the church sanctuary.

Our physical locations during virtual meetings affect what happens in the gathering. Facilitators and participants alike have an opportunity to integrate their physical locale with the virtual by attending to details of the setting. This is about what others see in your surroundings, be it a virtual background or an actual physical place.

Being present in the physical space makes a big difference—the importance of that space and the effect that space has on all of us.

—Wendy Cadge
Connecting through physical space can also be cultivated through particular practices such as:

- Asking participants to share their physical location when introducing themselves;
- Inviting people to show others an item from their surroundings;
- Doing a verbal land acknowledgment to recognize the native people who were the original inhabitants of your locale;
- Leading physical practices for grounding, such as breath work, recognizing the five senses, or stepping outside to connect with the earth; and
- Allowing a few minutes for people to go for a short walk, indoors or outdoors, and reflect or share something about their location.

Place matters. Even when we are not physically together, facilitators can create shared space in a group through practices such as these that foster authenticity and give people permission to bring more of their full selves into the online gathering.

2. Bring in the Real

Virtual meetings allow us to connect with others, yet most people feel it is not the same as being together in person. How can we help participants feel a true connection to one another and to the conversation at hand when meeting online? Inviting in more of “the real” offers another opportunity to integrate the physical world into the virtual experience.

Using physical objects can help break down the unnecessary barriers we tend to create between what is perceived as physical versus virtual. By changing our perception and expanding our field of awareness, we can feel closer to others even when separated by distance.

Some ways to bring in the real include:

- Inviting people to engage all five senses in the experience and in the conversation;
- Paying attention to non-verbal cues such as eye contact, body language, and facial expressions;
- Using objects, e.g. everyone having the same touchstone, such as a stone, a ribbon, or other artifact;
- Having a shared meal, tea, coffee, or social hour at some point in the process;
- Inviting each participant to light a candle at the beginning of a session; and
- Logging in with an extra device such as a phone to have a candle, a plant, or a scene of a live natural setting be a part of the gathering.

There’s a huge desire for connection and contemplation in the midst of isolation.

—Dennis Jennings
3. **Attend to Details Before and After the Virtual Gathering**

Because virtual meeting time is more limited, leaders can expand the boundaries by effectively utilizing time outside the session itself. Facilitators agree that focused and deliberate engagement with participants both before and after the session helps develop early connections, build relationships, deepen the purpose for meeting, and maintain momentum after the virtual gathering ends.

For facilitators, this means more homework, preparing and sharing materials ahead of time and creating meaningful and engaging follow-up.

Before the virtual meeting, best practices for helping cultivate the space might include the following:

- Setting intention and context through written communications before the virtual meeting;
- Notifying the group of the intent to create space for deeper work together;
- Welcoming participants to bring their full selves, including their physical space and loved ones;
- Inviting participants to get to know each other by sharing bios and links ahead of time;
- Sharing physical items with the group in packages mailed to each person ahead of time, which might include artifacts or symbols, snacks, a small gift, or printed meeting materials;
- Inviting people to submit a song for a music playlist to get to know each other in different ways; and
- Conducting individual interviews before the larger gathering to engage each person.

**Starting by centering our humanity is really important, and it starts with how we make the invitation.**

—Milicent Johnson

Best practices to help deepen connection after the online gathering include:

- Sending notes, a summary, a photo, or other materials to remind the group of the gathering;
- Assuring that group members have complete contact information for each other;
- Sharing a written follow-up list identifying specific tasks, assignments, and next steps;
- Continuing to discuss the meeting goals and delve into substantive questions through email, blog posts, and other formats for sharing stories;
- Scheduling follow-up meetings promptly to help manage conflicting calendars;
- Creating regular social time or virtual happy hours with creative discussion questions to help people to stay connected more personally if the group will be ongoing;
- Inviting people to use WhatsApp, a Facebook group, or other form of digital messaging to promote informal connection among the group; and
- Following up with people individually to see how things are going since you last met.

After the meeting, follow-up is equally important if the virtual gathering is to be more than an isolated experience. The online convening “plants the seeds,” but further growth and development—both for the meeting’s purpose and for the relationships—take place following the virtual meeting.
4. Hold Space

Knowing how to hold space is a critical skill for all facilitators, whether online or in person. When we hold space for other people, we open our hearts, offer support, set a welcoming tone, and let go of judgment and control. It may also mean that we try to create an open space for complex emotions, trust building, vulnerability, trauma, or even fear.

Holding virtual space can be more difficult than in face-to-face gatherings. At the same time, it does open many new possibilities and opportunities with the right intention and preparation, and if we attend to small details such as:

- Offering an opening contemplative, mindful, or spiritual practice and inviting participants to show up authentically
- Discussing group norms or touchstones for consensus on expectations for interacting;
- Using the power of rituals, music, or silence to create the mood and tone you are seeking for the group (e.g. energized, reflective, collaborative);
- Welcoming different forms of presence and participation, including silent listening;
- Being aware of group size and time, allowing for the limitations of the online format, the reality of virtual fatigue, and the difficulties posed by time of day and time zone differences;
- Encouraging conversation in the chat function to promote informal connection among members;
- Allowing for periods of silence so more introverted participants can integrate, reflect, and learn;
- Inviting participants to attend to personal or family needs as they arise;
- Remembering the “four healing salves” of silence, storytelling, music, and dance that help beloved communities balance (see Angeles Arrien’s *The Four-Fold Way*) and giving permission to be playful;
- Identifying someone who can provide individuals with emotional or spiritual support they might need, even offering a separate virtual room where someone is ready to receive people; and
- Listening with awareness; noticing with empathy; asking with curiosity; shifting with intention.

Being able to create space to come into that level of awareness with others is something that I hold dear and love and am trying my darnedest to do on Zoom.

—Sarah Mansberger

Our way of being in the group becomes more important than the methodology.

—Caren Dybek
5. **Invite Creative Engagement Opportunities**

Because the screen can feel artificial, some people find it hard to engage deeply in a virtual meeting. Distractions include growing fatigue, competing commitments for time and attention, and noise or other interruptions. With virtual attention often splintered, one of the key goals is to ensure participants—regardless of their background, circumstances, and location—have ways to feel more engaged. Some suggestions for fostering deeper engagement:

- Acknowledging the limitations of the virtual environment;
- Inviting various practices with frequent breaks from screen time;
- Delivering brief modules rather than longer didactic presentations;
- Integrating non-screen elements such as print materials and journaling;
- Utilizing small groups or breakout rooms to increase intimacy, build trust, and collaborate;
- Appointing a person who is not the primary facilitator to manage logistics and technology;
- Learning to fully utilize a platform’s interactive features such as polling, stamping, breakouts, and more;
- Incorporating activities within other platforms, such as Mural, to share “sticky notes;”
- Promoting nonverbal communication;
- Being playful with the technology, such as inviting participants to change their printed names during the session to call attention to something going on in the group;
- Encouraging people to feel empowered to opt in—giving people framing and the option; and
- Using embodied practices and kinesthetic activities, such as movement, stretching, skits, or walking meetings with a partner, as a break from the screen.

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**Conclusion and Next Steps**

Creating and holding sacred space is possible in the virtual environment and can be fostered through deliberate facilitation. Techniques include connecting with the physical space; bringing in the real; attending to details before and after the gathering; specific ways of holding space; and creative engagement methods.

The Fetzer Institute and our companions in this conversation have a long history of extending sacred hospitality, building community and connections, convening meaningful conversations, and creating spaces for deeper work. In the online environment, we seek to foster the type of space we offer at Seasons and in other settings. We are confident that working in the virtual environment doesn’t preclude connecting at a deeper level.

This conversation on virtual sacred space is in its infancy. We are all continuing to learn to better utilize the tools that are available to us and to develop innovative approaches to the sacred work of bringing people together in meaningful ways. We look forward to deepening this conversation on ways to create sacred space and do soul-level work even when we cannot physically be together in the same space. We welcome your insights and experiences as we continue the exploration together.

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Honor that trust takes time anyway, and on Zoom let’s just say let’s double the amount of time it takes.

—Sara Luria