
Best Practices for
**CREATING VIRTUAL
SACRED SPACE**

Fetzer
Institute 



A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

This report is the result of a series of dialogues in 2020 and 2021 as people around the world shifted from in-person meetings to working primarily online. We invited 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: everyone who was invited to participate expressed an interest in joining the conversation. Participants included scholars, religious leaders, academics, nonprofit leaders, retreat facilitators, teachers, social movement leaders, and others across sectors.

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?

From the rich conversations that ensued, we know virtual sacred space is an enriching and essential element of transformational work. We look forward to learning more alongside generous facilitators, practitioners, and changemakers as we continue to create sacred spaces together online, in person, and in hybrid settings.

—Michelle Scheidt, Senior Program Officer, Fetzer Institute

—Xiaoan Li, Senior Program Officer, Fetzer Institute

SACRED SPACE is experienced as a quality of soulful depth and meaningful connection that can be intentionally cultivated through specific practices and methodologies.



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 Before and After Details**
- 4 **Hold Space**
- 5 **Invite Creative Engagement Opportunities**

“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.”

– Micky ScottBey Jones



CONNECT THROUGH PHYSICAL SPACES

1

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 to in-person gatherings at the Fetzer Institute's retreat center Seasons, responding to a photo of empty chairs and the green of the woods there with feelings of connection and grounding that spurred conversation about the power of place. Several people suggested 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 then 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.

“

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

”



Deliberately tending your background setting might include reducing clutter in the surroundings, adding beauty through images or nature, or selecting a virtual background that supports the intention of the gathering. Setting your own space can bring a sense of energy or peacefulness, help participants focus, or create a sense of sacredness or connection for those joining the gathering.

1

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

- Asking participants to share their physical location when introducing themselves;
- Welcoming people to mention their family members, pets, or co-workers who are sharing their space and may make an appearance on screen;
- 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 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.

“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



BRING IN THE REAL

2

Virtual meetings allow us to connect with others, yet most people find 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 gathering;
- 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 incorporate a candle, a plant, or a live natural setting as part of the gathering.

Have a shared meal, tea, coffee, or social hour at some point in the gathering.



ATTEND TO BEFORE AND AFTER DETAILS

3

Because virtual meeting time is more limited, leaders can expand the boundaries by effectively using 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 symbolic items, 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.

“Centering our humanity is really important, and it starts with how we make the invitation.”

– Milicent Johnson



After the meeting, follow-up is equally important if the virtual gathering is to be more than a single 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.

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.



3

Further growth and development take place following the virtual meeting.



HOLD SPACE

4

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);

Offer an opening practice (contemplative, mindful, or spiritual) and invite participants to show up authentically.



4

- 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.

“ Our way of being in the group becomes more important than the methodology. ”
– Caren Dybeck



INVITE CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

5

Because screens 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;
- Forming 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 a platform’s array of interactive features such as polling, stamping, breakouts, interactive white boards, and more;
- Incorporating activities within other platforms, such as Mural, Jamboard, Slido, Miro, and other interactive tools for collaboration;
- 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.

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

—Sara Luria



THE ROOTS AND FUTURE OF THIS WORK

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 create when we can be together in person. We are confident that working in the virtual environment doesn't preclude connecting at a deeper level.

This conversation on virtual sacred space is ongoing. We are all continuing to learn about 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.

Use – and share – these tips to make your online and hybrid gatherings opportunities for greater depth and connection.



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