

FWCC Online Virtual Yearly Meeting Sessions

Logistics & Technology Breakout Group – May 11, 2020

Twenty-five persons participated in the conversation on logistics and technology, with resource assistance provided by Kody Hersh, the coordinator of the Virtual-Mini Gathering of Southeastern Yearly Meeting (SEYM).

We heard of the efforts made by the SEYM staff, prior to its Virtual-Mini Gathering in the spring of 2020, to help yearly meeting participants learn how to download and use ZOOM. The staff had to help those using both tablets and computers, in that the process of navigation differs. Staff held one-on-one coaching calls with those asking for extra help. As part of the preparation and training, we need to be reminded that some persons can only join by phone so that video participants need to remember to say their names before speaking. They should also allow time for phone-only participants to be able to enter the conversation.

A concern was raised about support during actual virtual yearly meeting sessions for those who feel intimidated by the technology, similar to having a “pastoral care committee.” It was suggested that participants needing extra help could be moved to a special virtual breakout room with a resource person to provide help. The use of breakout rooms would also allow having concurrent interest groups. However, two people in one household using the same computer would have to attend the same interest group, which would be a complication.

We discussed the question of security versus openness. It was suggested that a person interested in these virtual yearly meeting sessions, although not a member or regular attendee of a constituent monthly meeting, should be welcome to attend. We need to be aware of “intruders.” How can participants, who had not registered beforehand, be able to “drop in” in order to take part in worship and activities? It was suggested that the host could greet persons wishing to enter in a “virtual hallway.” If the name were not recognized, then that person could be “sent” to a separate breakout room to have a “chat” with a “greeter.” This process would be similar to the use of a “greeter” prior to meeting for worship at a meetinghouse.

We addressed the question of the various levels of the ZOOM platform and considered which would be suitable for small and for large yearly meetings. The “free” version of ZOOM allows for only 40 minutes at a time and would not be viable. Other versions allow for up to 100 participants or more than 100, and charge per month and per host. Some groups would only need to subscribe for a couple of months and for a limited number of hosts – but definitely more than one host. The more expensive subscriptions allow for more features, but even the less expensive versions have “features buried.” Perhaps, information and advice from those who already use the professional levels of ZOOM could be gathered and shared with others.

We were asked to consider a combination of online and offline efforts in planning such gatherings. One person suggested taking a one-day break for worship and meditation at home, at appointed hours. Another asked whether a small group of yearly meeting members, consistent with safety “guidelines,” could gather at a meetinghouse to carry on the activities of a yearly meeting while others participated electronically (streaming or ZOOM or a similar platform)? We were encouraged to consider such a blended process.

Submitted by Ray Treadway