

Called to Zoom: Encountering Christ in a Remote Place

In March, days after Malaysia declared a national lockdown, I kicked off my first small group meeting in Zoom. There were nine of us but our group had never gathered in person before; most of us were acquaintances or strangers. We met for two hours to discuss the life and person of Jesus Christ. Everyone participated, but as time passed, I felt increasingly distanced from Christ and one another. By the time I clicked "Leave Meeting," I was pooped. How come?

More than 40 years ago, author and theologian Richard Foster wrote these memorable opening lines in *Celebration of Discipline*: "In contemporary society our Adversary majors in three things: noise, hurry and crowds." These days, the one place that has all three things is Zoom.



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gather in my name,
there am I with them,"
Jesus told his disciples who
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Does gathering in Zoom count?*

The verb "zoom" connotes hurry. And Zoom, the San Jose-based videotelephony company, is going places. Since the pandemic, hundreds of millions of people have crowded into Zoom (and Teams, Google Meet, Skype and WhatsApp video) to meet with colleagues, classmates, family members and long-lost friends. It can be noisy in Zoom. People speak out sync and greet each other with a loud "Can you hear me?" These meetings strain our eyes, confuse our ears, and exhaust our bodies – leaving us with Zoom fatigue.

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The 19th century British poet Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote these lines in a poem: "Christ plays in ten thousand places." We figure that Christ plays when we go to church on Sunday. But the pandemic has helped us see that Christ plays every day: online, through the week, at work and at home. And so it's possible that Christ plays in Zoom.

And yet for those of us who facilitate or participate in online meetings, it can feel like Zoom and gloom.

It's hard to be attentive to God when so many things clamor for our attention. To facilitate online, I use multiple screens and devices to keep track of Zoom gallery view, Zoom chat, Powerpoint, speaking notes, WhatsApp Web and online documents. As I glance at my face – am I properly framed in the box? – a dozen heads in square boxes stare back at me. It's uncanny. My brain

goes into hyper-drive as it decodes hundreds of facial gestures per second emanating from the mosaic of pixelated heads. At the same time, I'm staring at the glowing green dot on the laptop camera to establish eye contact. It's hard to relax. The "continuous partial attention" tire the eyes.

The ears get confused. Due to network lag, people speak up at the same time or there's too much silence. With non-speakers on mute, those who speak miss the back-channeling sounds ("uh huh," "hmmm," "yup," "aha!") made by people as they listen. Occasionally, while you are speaking, you see twitching mouths. Are they laughing at your joke or cringing in horror? You can't tell. And if participants turn off audio and video, you're talking at your laptop in an empty room.

So if you feel low online, it's to share how you feel. Plus, people usually don't ask. You might want to say – "Gosh, I'm feeling isolated and lonely right now" – but the thought of clicking the unmute button deters us. "Better not to interrupt the flow of conversation," we mutter to ourselves.

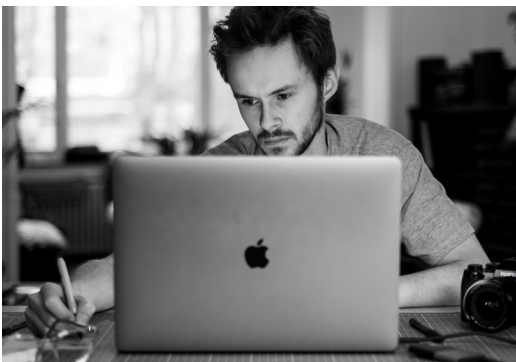
Sadly, when everyone behaves this way, Zoom becomes a tomb. The silence feels hostile. A 2014 study showed that someone who takes more than 1.2 seconds to respond during online meetings is perceived as less friendly or focused. So we try our best to speak up, filling the silence with noise. This in turn crowds out people who really want share their inner feelings.

In a physical meeting, you might open the door and shake hands with the people in the room and make small talk. "Milk or sugar?" you may ask, as you proffer a cup. But in Zoom, it's boom: you're in. Satya Nadella, Microsoft's CEO, has observed: "What I miss is when you walk into a physical meeting, you are talking to the person that is next to you, and you're able to connect with them for the two minutes before and after."

In Zoom, you don't walk. You sit. You're staring or speaking or preaching to an empty room or a blinking light. Your neck stiffens and the shoulders lock up. It's a pain in the butt.

And it's a royal pain to conduct certain church activities such as Holy Communion, intercessory prayer and congregational singing. To mute or not to mute, that is the question in Zoom. For online churchgoers, the other question is: "Which church should I visit?" With a few clicks or taps, you could be watching church services in London, Melbourne or New York City –clad in pajamas. A cottage industry of boosters, naysayers and tech experts have sprung up to advocate or bash online churches.

"I don't like it when technology gets between me and the church," wrote David Peters, a vicar known as the TikTok priest, in Christianity Today. "Even clergy who prided themselves on their luddite status are learning how to minister in this purely digital world. Honestly, I hate it."



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And yet. If you've read up to this point: I want to tell you that it's not all Zoom and gloom. We worship a creator God who redeems and restores all things in a fallen world. And there's much that's redemptive about Zoom.

Let's begin doing so by not blaming Zoom (or any other online platform) for why we hate online meetings. Caroline Ong, the CEO of Leaderonomics Malaysia told me, "What's true in-person is largely true online." I think she's right. If I chaired meetings or led cell groups where only two or three people speak up (and the rest stay silent), I have no right to blame Zoom when there's low online participation. If I speak too much or too little in a physical gathering, I'll do the same thing online. Zoom's not perfect. Neither are we.

Perhaps the apostle Paul could serve as our biblical guide for navigating Zoom. He zoomed about in Asia Minor in a slow boat but he didn't blame the boat when it sank and nearly killed everyone. He used the things at hand for the sake of the gospel: tents for work, baskets for escape, garments for healing, homes for preaching. The biggest detriment to Paul's ministry would have been prison because physical confinement kept him speaking and worship with his beloved churches. Stuck in his prison home, Paul harnessed the latest technology of his time (ink and vellum) to connect with the saints scattered in remote places. If Paul can do this, so can we.

Paul was following in the footsteps of Jesus who had a way of turning ordinary things into Gospel work. In Cana, Jesus turned ceremonial jars of stagnant water into casks of fine wine for celebration. Surely he can transform an online meeting into an arena for spiritual formation. And he can transform you and me. He told Peter: "You used to fish for fish. And now you fish for people." Jesus might now say to us: "You used to run Zoom meetings. And now you zoom with me."

And so we pray: Lord, how might we keep company with you in Zoom?

1. Slow down before you Zoom

John Cassian, a fourth century theologian and guide to spiritual life, once said that what we do to prepare for prayer is also prayer. "For whatever our soul was thinking about before the time of prayer inevitably occurs to us when we pray. Hence we must prepare ourselves before the time of prayer to be the prayerful persons that we wish to be," he writes in his classic work, *Conferences*.

In the spirit of John Cassian, we could take five minutes to breath deeply, thank God for life, and become aware that the Lord is present as we prepare to Zoom. And then we can imitate the young prophet Samuel who said: "Lord, here I am."

I find that the short time of preparation *before* the meeting could shape us into prayerful persons *during* meetings. We will be more prepared to listen to God, our self and others. That pause before we Zoom could also make all the difference between feeling fresh or fatigued at the end of a Zoom session.

"Can you hear me?" That's the first question people often ask in a zoom meeting. Behind this question is a desire to connect and listen to one another. That's the question we might ask of God. That's the question God would definitely ask of us. In the middle and in between Zoom meetings, are we taking time to listen to the voice of the Lord?

Brother Lawrence, a 16th century Carmelite monk, used to spend most of his time in the kitchen. While the other monks prayed in the chapel upstairs, his daily job downstairs required him to scrub things clean. So he prayed, "Lord of all pots and pans and things... make me a saint of getting meals and washing up the plates." In the spirit of Brother Lawrence, we too can ask the Lord for the grace of becoming a saint as we enter Zoom.

In this time of the pandemic, we would also do well to start every zoom meeting by praying Psalm 86: "Hear my prayer, Lord; listen to my cry for mercy" or "Teach me your way, Lord, that I may rely on your faithfulness."



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~ John Cassian

2. Play in God's presence in Zoom

Why did I feel so zonked out after leading my first online cell group meeting in March? Puzzled, I reached out to a friend in Hong Kong who has spent the past six months running weekly Zoom meetings involving 80 young adults and a dozen mentors. He was a pastor and a professor in robotics.

"Why do you find Zoom so enjoyable and energizing?" I asked him as we spoke on Zoom. For an hour, he told me everything he knew. I marveled at his know-how. And then he suggested, "Why don't we explore one feature in Zoom to see how we might experience God?"

"Any feature?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Any feature."

First, we tried the virtual background function in Zoom that projects a background image behind your image (It's handy if you have a messy or cluttered room). As we flitted from tropical beach to the Golden Gate bridge, we prayed in silence and praised with thanksgiving. Verdict: it felt awkward.

Next, we tried the chat function on Zoom. Verdict: No big deal. It was just like using WhatsApp.

Then my friend suggested that we "chat" in silence by clicking on the mute button while keeping the video on. Without the use of speech, I became more aware that God is present.

"Why don't we pray using the chat function?" I suggested. "You write your prayer and then I'll respond. We'll go back and forth, slowly." We prayed this way for the next twenty minutes. With the video on but the audio off, I felt delight and refreshed as we wrote our prayers in the company of Christ. We had turned Zoom's "chat" function into a pathway for prayer. It was actually possible to go slow in Zoom. (This is no oxymoron.)

Every feature and function in Zoom - the waiting room, the breakout room, the reaction buttons, whatever - can become a tool for prayer. It's hard to do this alone. That zoom session with my friend led me to conduct many more meetings with church members and clients to explore the interplay between the digital, physical and spiritual spaces.

3. Cultivate rhythms of grace during Zoom

We all know that each meeting or gathering has its unique purpose. There are different reasons for why we gather for a keynote speech, a management meeting, brainstorm sessions, preaching, worship services and cell groups. In physical meetings, you would change the place and format to suit the purpose. Board meetings look official because of the leather chairs and long table while cell group meetings convey informality as people sit in a living room.

But in Zoom, everything looks the same in speaker view or gallery view. We end up not thinking about how to change the format and setting to suit the purpose of the gathering. But there's actually a lot we can do. Furthermore, as Christians, we can design a rhythm of engagement and silence so that we are better able to be attentive to God's presence. Here are some experiments I tried in Zoom.

Reading Scripture aloud, line by line, with one-minute pauses in between:

What happened: I did this with my wife. We logged onto Zoom using different computers in the same room. At that time, due to the lockdown, my wife and I had been in the same space for months. Why not consider coming together in an online space to read Scripture?

Verdict: The change of pace gave us the vigilance and attentiveness to relate with God and each other differently than how we'd normally pray in person during meals or bedtime. We were able to listen to Scripture with fresh ears.

Writing prayers in Zoom chat:

What happened: A Christian organisation in Indonesia invited me to speak in Zoom Webinar. 250 people attended. Everyone turned off their video due to broadband problems in remote parts of the islands. So I couldn't see any faces. but I created activities and discussion questions as I spoke. Hundreds of text messages flew by as I prompted people to share their struggles, hopes and prayers using the chat function.

Verdict: Strangers from far-flung islands felt deeply ministered and connected to each other as we shared heartfelt prayers in the space of two hours.

Facilitating Church Family Time during online church:

What happened: Before the pandemic, after the worship and sermon on Sunday, dozens of families in my church would usually stay back for fellowship until lunch. We continued this tradition on Zoom. In breakout rooms, we discussed what we learned and prayed for each other. After the breakouts, we gathered in Zoom's "gallery view" to talk to children, youths and families. We got

children and adults to interact with their physical world by showing us what they drew with their crayons and colour pencils. Church members would take us for a walk in their garden, kitchen or home to share about what God is doing in their lives. Kids interviewed kids. Parents interviewed parents. Youths interviewed youths. Families hugged each other.

Verdict: a game changer! It's amazing how many things we were able to do while we were in Zoom. During in-person Sunday services, we might hear only a few voices (e.g. worship leader/team, announcements, preacher). On Zoom, people interacted with the preacher on chat, discussed what they learned in breakout rooms, and children and youths found it so much easier to share and pray online.

Tutoring my son using Zoom and Google docs:

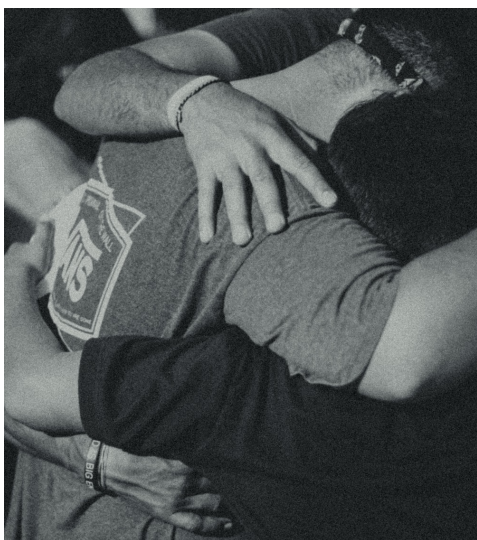
What happened: During the lock-in, I decided to teach my son how to write twice a week. Because I had learned writing in graduate school under the great novelist Chaim Potok, I imagined doing the same thing with my son, using pen and paper. But Andrew wanted to Zoom. So we logged on to separate laptops in different rooms. Then we used google docs to write and edit simultaneously. At the end of class, we would debrief about what we learned in person, seated face to face.

Verdict: Incredible. The writing and editing process was efficient. Andrew focused well. And as we alternated between zooming and writing, we could incorporate a rhythm of praying and writing. It became a habit for father and son to pray before, during and after each writing session.

Bringing people near and far to integrate the strategic and spiritual:

There are many other things I have done in private settings with clients, churches, students and friends. Whether they are residing in the tropical islands of Southeast Asia, or the mountains of the Himalayas, or the cities of Africa and America, we can bring these geographically fragmented groups into one room called Zoom. And more and more, we are able to integrate the spiritual and the strategic to address the challenges posed by the pandemic.

The pandemic has deepened our desire to gather in person. We long to hug, shake hands and share meals without worrying about masks and social distancing. And there may come a time when we can gather to worship and break bread. But meanwhile we have unique opportunities to encounter God in the smaller and ordinary spaces and rhythms of daily life. There are new ways for us to worship, work and serve (the three words share the same Hebrew root words). Zoom helps us do that.



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4. Zoom as a place to connect farther and grow deeper

In March, a few billion people in the world went into lockdown. As borders slammed shut, countries and cities and companies and families became like a hermit kingdom. We were yanked from connection to isolation. And with countries and governments mitigating risks while attempting to reopen sagging economies, the confusion and pain will continue. The last time there was an upheaval at such scale occurred during the bubonic plague. The seemingly unending horrors of the Black Death - that killed one out of three Europeans - led to social, economic, political and religious upheaval. Over time, the pandemic ushered in the age of the Enlightenment (with all its good and ills) and the age of the Reformers (with huge repercussions for the Church).

Only time will reveal the deep adaptation that will result from this pandemic. I've had to adapt in small ways. I used to think that I knew a lot about running small groups. But the pandemic threw me off-kilter. Bewildered by how drained I was by running my first small group on Zoom, I started adapting the format, frequency and feel of the small group sessions.

Three months later, I asked the nine people for feedback. They said they had:

- a) gained new friends
- b) deepened their existing relationships
- c) found greater healing or a sense of purpose.

Wow. As an experienced small group and retreat facilitator, I knew this could be done during in-person meetings. But it surprised me that we could do these things just as well online. I have continued to lead many other groups guided by these design concepts:

+ turn your nine-course banquet into daily meals. Don't cram everything into a two-hour synchronous session but spread out the good stuff -- be it scripture, reflections and lessons -- that can be done asynchronously throughout the week

+ oscillate between collaboration and contemplation (the mute button and the chat function are incredibly effective in managing those transitions)

+ explore the interaction between the physical and digital to facilitate prayer and conversation. What can you get people to do physically during Zoom? What are the digital tools you can use when people meet physically?

+ what happens asynchronously in between sessions is as important as what happens synchronously during Zoom sessions. For example, while our CG continues to meet synchronously on Zoom, we engage with one another daily by praying and learning on WhatsApp and google docs.



Increasingly we realize that we don't just go to church on Sunday. Rather, we are the church everyday: gathered and scattered, online and onsite, virtual and in person.

As more companies allow staff to work from home and as more churches explore hybrid models of online-and-onsite church, we've only begun to explore how the remarkable ways on how we can connect and grow deep in God and with each other. Increasingly we realize that we don't just go to church on Sunday. Rather, we are the church everyday: gathered and scattered, online and onsite, virtual and in person.

A long time ago, the Lord Jesus and his disciples experienced an crazy week of work: Jesus faced resistance while he preached, the disciples performed miracles as they traveled, and John the Baptist was beheaded. When the disciples met Jesus, he said to them, "Come away by yourself to a remote place and rest for a while" (Mark 6:31).

So they traveled to a remote place seeking silence and solitude. But when they arrived, it turned out that there were thousands of people awaiting them. Jesus was once again plunged into the vortex of noise, hurry and crowds. He continued to teach – and even feed – the thousands of hungry men, women and children.

This vignette speaks to me in the time of the pandemic. Like our Lord, we yearn for rest. After the prolonged and unrelenting uncertainties of working from home or coping with daily changes, we long to go away to recover our lives. But as our Lord discovered, there were greater needs he had to attend to in that remote place.

The same also goes for us. We have many needs to meet where we are. But perhaps we can still learn to keep company with Christ amid the noise, hurry and crowds. And sometimes, that remote place he calls us to might be a place called Zoom.



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