

## Reflections on “Which Way Worship” Conversation

by Bill Mize, Live Oak Friends Meeting, Texas  
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Dear Friends,

Here is my summary and understanding of the hybrid meeting issue.

A group of us from all over the U.S. met under the leadership of Mary Klein to consider the following queries:

**Query One:** What seem to be the most intractable difficulties that hybrid worship has brought to your meeting?

**Query Two:** What creative solutions have helped resolve conflicts over the use of videoconferencing in your meeting?

I am sharing what I got from this experience and putting it in writing for the sake of greater clarity and future discussions. I recognize that not everyone may share my opinions or perspective – this is what worship and communication is for – seeking unity from the midst of our diversity.

I believe that the consensus in our discussion group is that there are trade-offs to having hybrid meetings, joining in-person worship to the zoom.

The “pros” are kind of obvious: people geographically disadvantaged can participate; people who are infirm can participate, people who got sick, etc. And all this is more inclusive and community oriented.

The “cons” that I recall are that it’s distracting, it interferes with the quality of worship for those present, it means someone has to manage the technology and this distracts from their experience, it simply does not allow for the same depth of connection between participants, that there are privacy concerns for some, that it pushes us further into the less personal “matrix” world of the future – some rather resignedly said, “we’re already there.” One voice said newcomers are more prone to not come back when the only experience they have is zoom – especially if they had technical difficulties. It was shared that “hurt feelings” in meetings over the hybrid issue and its compromises was a prime problem – more than technology. It was observed that many of the most concerned members were weighty friends, such as elders. Some of these felt that the technology violated the principles of simplicity and silence. Some members stopped attending because of the technology.

Various solutions were discussed; mostly technological in nature, such as:

1. Having bigger images of the online people so they seem more real and present and less “on a screen.”
2. Offering concerned attenders to sit in a corner of the room where they don’t see the screen and the camera doesn’t see them. But this is an illusion, some such people

may still feel the more impersonal situation, even off screen and this could interfere with their spiritual calm.

3. Let young people manage the technology, which is easier for them, and gives them a bigger role in meeting.

4. Use a dedicated laptop for the ease of the operator, and have big screens present to make the images seem more real.

5. People present could use the camera in their phones to give them participation in the zoom, while those wanting the traditional experience would not – this makes zoom participation by in-person attenders optional and traditional worship maintained for the others.

6. Hanging microphones of a high quality allowed attenders to stay in place, which is a benefit to the old or infirm.

7. Some meetings had both traditional worship days and hybrid days in various proportions. People in unusual geographies like Hawaii, with all the islands, were more accepting and didn't understand the concerns of the others.

8. Some meetings had separate worships – zoom vs in-person, but joined them at the end for the sharing of names and birthdays, etc.

My distillation/discernment of all this is:

1. There is no technological solution that addresses all the issues and none can address the lost quality of worship that is unique to in-person connection. In part, this is because technology IS a part of the problem – it stands in the way of closer, more personal connections. And at the risk of being proclaimed a Luddite, I would say that the personal connection and inter-responsiveness that in-person worship allows is at the core of the communal and traditional worship experience.

2. We live in a technological age; we are becoming less personal as a result; if anything, meetings should work to preserve the older, more personal mode of worship. All compromises involving technology do not acknowledge this fact.

3. Meetings can provide a platform/technology for people who cannot come in person, to have their own zoom worship and this does not have to interfere with in-person worship.

4. Meetings could still invite the zoomers in at the rise of meeting for name sharing, etc. However, big meetings need to be mindful of the time involved – some people treasure it, and some people resent it, even as is today – and deciding “who should go when” for the zoomers has no solution other than taking more time to direct them.

5. Use of cameras, screens, microphones, and zoom, IS complex and does violate the principles of simplicity and the quality of the silence, which is at the core of Quaker practice.

6. People are blurring the experiences we shared due to the extremity of the COVID experience – when zoom was a kind of necessary miracle allowing us to see one

another – with our present experience, which could be much more “normal.” We are no longer in COVID lockdown.

Now that COVID is over, we should encourage people to come back to meeting in person.

Regarding my own meeting, I believe that Live Oak Friends Meeting (LOFM) should consider having parallel but separate worship sessions for zoomers and in-person worshippers, so to preserve the sanctity and simplicity of worship in person. This way, we can be welcoming to people who have no alternative to zoom, improve the quality of worship for attenders, and avoid a great deal of distraction from microphones, etc., in the process. We don't need more complex lives; we need simpler ones (in my opinion). I recognize that every meeting must consider where the balance lies for it, including LOFM. But this is my discernment regarding LOFM. The allure of zoom from COVID is over for me.