

# Integrating Zoom with Face-to-Face Meetings

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It was the best of times,  
it was the worst of times.  
Charles Dickens

## Abstract

In early 2020 the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic forced the world to shut down. Humanity woke up to find that everyone who was deemed nonessential was ordered to stay at home in quarantine unless absolutely necessary. Businesses that were deemed nonessential were ordered to shut down, leaving only essential businesses open. Unfortunately, churches and 12 step meeting places were considered nonessential. Plunging Alcoholics into isolation can be deadly. The response from the 12 step community was swift and decisive. Virtual meetings sprang up all over the world using a variety of online tools; however, the overwhelming choice was an application called Zoom.

In this paper and presentation, we'll explore the history of the creation of virtual meetings and judge the pros and cons of virtual as they relate to face-to-face meetings. We will then examine possible ways that we can integrate virtual meetings with face-to-face meetings to allow us to keep the best of both worlds. We will touch on the topics of anonymity, 7th tradition self support, and attraction of the newcomer. Finally, we will look at some case studies of plans which are gradually unfolding in New Jersey. We'll discuss how Zoom is being integrated in individual meetings, 12-step clubs and Area offices.

## Introduction

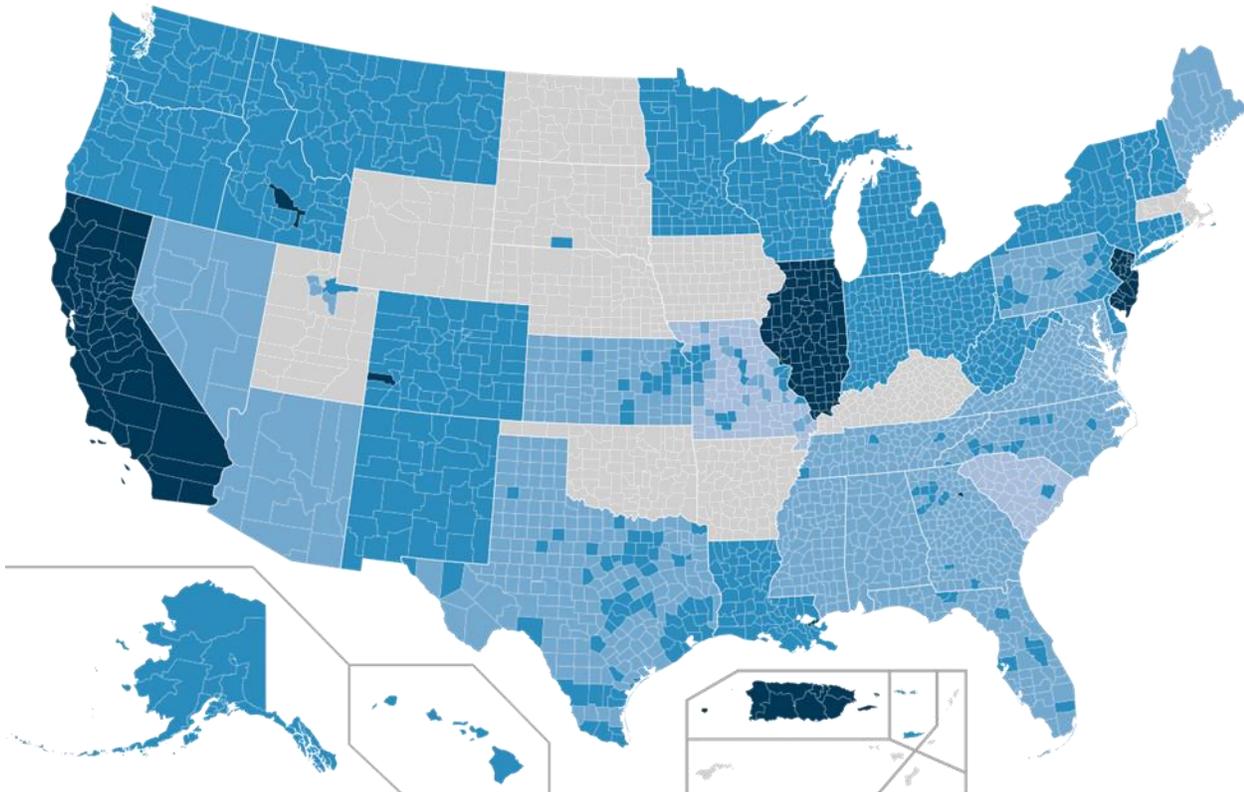
On December 31, 2019 The Chinese government issued a statement that they were investigating an "outbreak of respiratory illness in the central city of Wuhan". On January 6th through January 8th of 2020 the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued travel warnings for Americans wishing to go to China to take extra precautions. The CDC also began to closely monitor the virus, but at that time there were no known cases in the United States. On January 16th the CDC held a briefing to say that the US will start to screen passengers arriving from or connecting through Wuhan. On January 21st the first case of novel Coronavirus was confirmed in the United States from a traveler who had recently returned from China to Washington state. On January 31st president trump issued an executive order blocking entry to the US from anyone who had been in China in the last 14 days. This order became effective on February 2nd and at the same time members of the newly formed Coronavirus taskforce declared the virus a public health emergency.

It wasn't until February 26st that the first community spread case was documented. A person in California was confirmed to have Coronavirus without documented travel to hotspots or contact with another infected person. Several bills were passed in early March including a travel ban from Europe on March 11<sup>th</sup>. Also on March 11th the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Coronavirus a pandemic. The next day, during a news conference, President Trump asks "everyone to work at home, if possible, postpone unnecessary travel, and limit social gatherings to no more than 10 people".

On the state level stay-at-home orders were being issued between March 22nd and April 12<sup>th</sup>. In New Jersey, the state I reside in and am most familiar with, Governor Phil Murphy announced a statewide stay-

at-home order affective at 9:00 PM on March 21<sup>st</sup> of 2020. This order applied to all residents of the state who were working for industries considered non-essential. People in healthcare, employees of utility companies, grocery store employees, and ironically employees of liquor stores and marijuana dispensaries were all considered essential. Restaurants, beauty salons, the bulk of small businesses in the United States, were all shut down.

Depending on where you were in the United States this happened at different times as illustrated by the following graphic:



States, territories, and counties that issued a stay-at-home order:

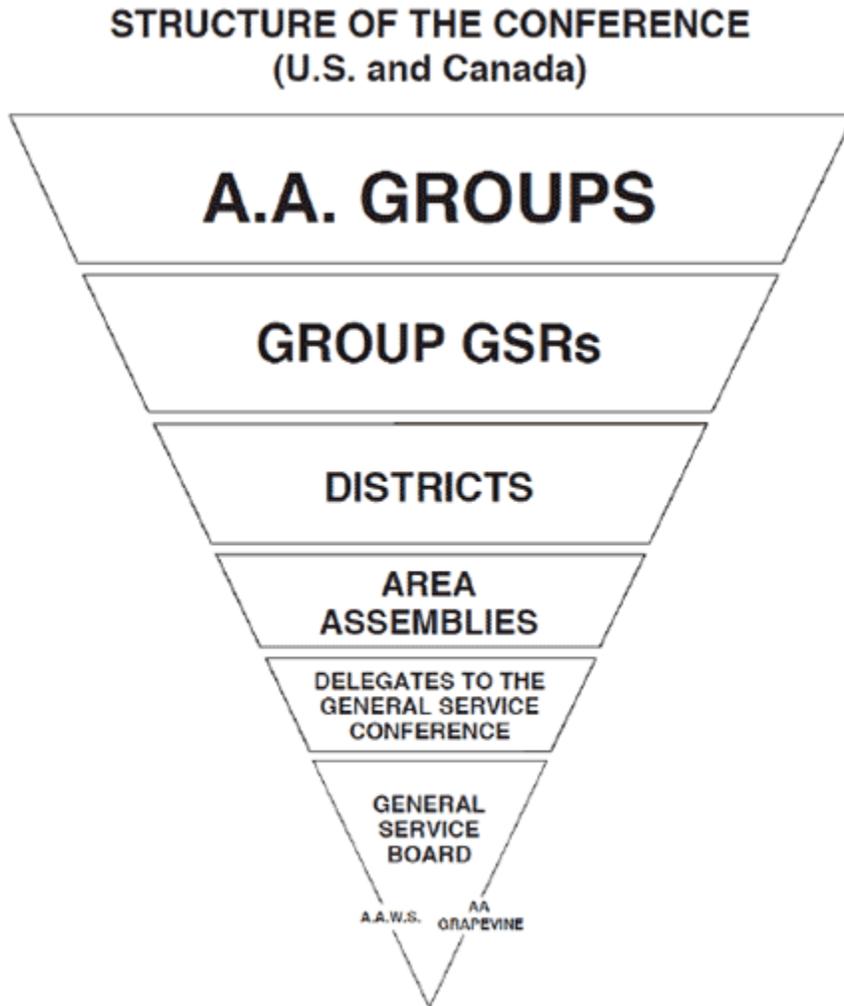
- Came into effect before 22 March
- Came into effect before 29 March
- Came into effect before 5 April
- Came into effect before 12 April

The other non-essential organizations included religious gathering places (churches, synagogues, mosques, etc.) and 12-step meeting places including clubhouses, Intergroup and Central offices, and District and Area meeting spaces. Even AA’s General Service Organization was considered non-essential. While some work could be done from home, AA was crippled in their ability to support member’s recovery. It goes without saying that other 12-step fellowships, many of whom are less organized and staffed than AA were dealt an even more severe blow.

In these early days of the shutdown members even had difficulty meeting outdoors because of the lockdown. Depending on where you were police would break up groups of more than 10 individuals

meeting outdoors. This was a very perilous time for people trying to protect their sobriety. It was even worse for those looking to begin a journey in sobriety.

AA is organized as an inverted pyramid as shown in this graphic supplied by AA world services:



Because the groups are at the top, they get to call the shots. In fact, our 4th tradition states that every group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole. This guarantees a group the right to act even if it's something that later turns out to be wrong. Put succinctly, every AA group has the right to make the wrong decision. We have faith that groups will find their way to the right solution over time. Those groups that continue to do the wrong thing eventually disband and are replaced by new groups. This happens in God's time.

Shortly after face-to-face meetings were discontinued groups and members of AA began to look for ways to organize virtual meetings. Probably the best known meeting software prior to 2020 was Cisco Webex Meetings and Google Hangouts Meet. Other software that had carved niches for themselves were TeamViewer and GoToMeeting. Microsoft Teams and Skype were also worthy of consideration.

By and far the 12-step community found their home on a platform called Zoom. As a company, Zoom launched in 2011 when Eric Yuan, a founding engineer on Cisco's Webex video platform, left to start his own company. Despite having a successful Initial Public Offering (IPO) on NASDAQ, Zoom grew slowly until 2020. To put it in perspective, on March 23<sup>rd</sup> the Zoom application was downloaded 2.13 million times worldwide. Two months prior to this, the Zoom app had just under 56,000 global downloads in a day. It wasn't just the 12-step community that adopted Zoom, church groups, stamp clubs, teachers and students, the entire world adopted Zoom.

Later we'll look at some of the pros and cons that made Zoom the preferred choice of so many AA virtual meetings. We'll also examine the future of virtual meetings as face-to-face meetings re-open.

## Zoom Versus Other Applications

I'm not going to go into an exhausting look at the various features of other software applications. This paper and my discussion are about Zoom which I have hands-on experience with. I've also used some other platforms and I'll briefly tell you why I favor Zoom for an online AA meeting.

Area 44 because of their donation from Microsoft Corporation has access to Microsoft Teams. Microsoft Teams is excellent for internal collaboration. As long as you know who is coming to the meeting and can set them up as a user Teams is a wonderful choice. Of course, that doesn't often match the reality of an AA meeting be it face-to-face or virtual. We encourage newcomers. Being able to share a meeting ID and password and have people simply show up makes Zoom the winner against Microsoft Teams for this specific purpose.

Cisco Webex is another excellent choice for meetings. At 100 participants a meeting Webex costs the same as Zoom and provides a level of stability that Zoom is currently growing into. the problem with Webex in my opinion is that growing becomes very costly. For example, Webex offers a business plan which allows you to host up to 200 participants for \$29.95 per month. Perhaps that seems like a viable option to you. Be careful, the fine print to this plan is that you must purchase 5 licenses per month minimum. Most home groups have no interest in hosting 5 meetings simultaneously. So while Cisco will tell you that they are price competitive with Zoom, there are some serious caveats.

TeamViewer is an excellent application for remote desktop access. while it does support online meetings that's not its main thrust. A single user business license runs \$49.00 per month and makes this a very expensive alternative to Zoom.

GoToMeeting is quite competitive to Zoom. Their professional offering starts at \$12.00 per month and offers up to 150 participants. their business plan is only \$16.00 a month and for that you get 250 participants. As I've mentioned before 100 participants sounds like a lot if you're comparing it to a face-to-face meeting but properly shared with members of the community the room can quickly fill up. A 250 participant plan would certainly give some elbow room. Zoom does offer more robust and easy-to-use screen sharing functionality. In this author's opinion the user interface on Zoom is a lot cleaner and more intuitive. One place that GoToMeeting excels at is in very large meetings. Even with the large meeting option Zoom is capped at 1000 participants. GoToMeeting can be configured to support 3000 participants. this might be important to groups like the Pacific Group in Los Angeles where their face-to-face meetings often have 1000 participants.

Apple Facetime is not made for casual video calling between friends. FaceTime calls are limited to 32 participants. People are added using their name, phone number, or email none of which a newcomer might be comfortable giving out. Screen sharing is nonexistent within FaceTime, so putting up a slide of How it Works just wouldn't be possible. Perhaps the biggest limit is that FaceTime only works on Apple products excluding a huge chunk of your potential audience. FaceTime is good for what it's intended but it's not intended to be a professional tool for video conferencing.

Skype has been used successfully for conference calls for a long time. Their free version only supports up to 50 participants but it does allow individual video calls of up to four hours. The free version of Skype does have other restrictions on their usage. For instance, you're only allowed up to 10 hours a day of usage. This may not be a problem it would allow a group to host approximately 6 meetings a day. There is also a limit of 100 hours per month. This limit would certainly affect groups running more than two meetings a day and might even affect groups that have longer meetings then the standard one hour with a little time before and a little time after. Perhaps the most annoying part of Skype is that when you start to look into paid options they push you to use Microsoft Teams. Yes, Skype used to be a standalone company but has since been bought by Microsoft and they are still looking for the most advantageous way to integrate Skype with their other products.

Google Meet, formerly Google Hangouts Meet, is an interesting alternative to Zoom mostly because Google is trying to build their business by undercutting Zoom's prices. So right now all of their plans are free until October 1st of this year. After that their free version will support meetings of one hour in length with up to 100 participants. This plan may not be suitable for AA groups. Members like to show up early, sometimes only by 10 minutes and they like to fellowship after the meeting. Probably a 1 1/2 hour time frame would be more workable, with 10 minutes before the meeting starts and 20 minutes after it ends. There is currently some confusion as to what Google Meet will actually cost after October 1<sup>st</sup>. It looks like the host of the meeting will have to have a G Suite Enterprise license at \$25 per month. This will allow the host to have a meeting with up to 100 people at once. My main hesitation with exploring this further is the Google appears to change their offerings on a frequent basis. Lots of things come for free other things become expensive depending on the competition. For groups that actively use Google tools for cloud storage of important data, creation of flyers, and other purposes, this may be an option worth carefully exploring.

There are many other options which can be used in a given scenario in place of Zoom. One thing that zoom has at this point in time is that they are the de facto standard for the 12 step community. If you go to one zoom meeting on a usual basis you have the software loaded and you know what to expect when you sign on to a Zoom meeting. This comfort with using Zoom allows people to rapidly try out new meetings and find the set of meetings that they're comfortable with. This may change in the future but for now it's a good reason to stick with Zoom.

## Self-Support

How do you pass the basket in a virtual meeting? More importantly if you figure out a way to pass the basket, will people contribute? Like face-to-face meetings, self-support is something that must be taught to the newcomer. In the case of virtual meetings, we are essentially all newcomers. Because there's no coffee to buy, no church to support, no clubhouse bills to pay for water, natural gas and electricity, even seasoned AA's may tend to think that there are no expenses. It is up to the Chairpeople of the meeting to make sure that the attendees are aware of the expenses that we have.

When we look at expenses the first thing that we have to look at is the fees that Zoom charges us. While Zoom does offer a free meeting package, meetings can only last 40 minutes or less. In theory you could use the free platform and run back to back 40 minute meetings. The problem with doing this is everybody gets kicked out of the room when the first 40 minute meeting concludes. This is really no way to run an effective 12 step meeting. The next level allows meetings of up to 24 hours in length, which is more than enough for our purposes. The downside to this level is that attendance is capped at 100 participants. If you're a member of a small homegroup 100 attendees may seem like more than enough and it may well be. On the other hand you have to keep in mind your meeting can attract attendees from virtually every corner of the world. I've been to meetings in Great Britain, Ireland, Africa and Japan all English speaking and all with participants from virtually every continent. In the beginning the availability of meetings surprised me. I've also hopped on 24 hour marathon meetings at 2:00 in the morning expecting to find a small group and being in a room with 125 other people.

So, what exactly does Zoom charge for their services. ignoring the free level, which is not useful for our purposes, there are three different fees that they charge.

#### Zoom Pro

| Pay Monthly Charge             | Pay Annual Charge          | Maximum Attendees |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------|
| \$14.99                        | \$149.90 (\$12.49 a month) | 100               |
| Add-on Charges (large meeting) |                            |                   |
| \$50.00                        | \$600.00 (\$50.00 a month) | 500               |
| \$90.00                        | \$1,080 (\$90.00 a month)  | 1000              |

Remember, regardless of the plan you choose there's an additional tax to be paid. I've also restricted this report to one meeting with none of the many added features. There are options to run simultaneous meetings, to provide extra capacity to store recordings of meetings, and other possibilities.

In addition to the cost of Zoom service, there may be a cost for Internet service. If you're lucky you can piggyback off of an existing plan purchased by the place you hold your meeting. Most churches now have some wi-fi for staff members to use. If not you can obtain a mobile hotspot from Mobile Beacon through TechSoup. The cost will be \$15 administrative fee to TechSoup, \$9 shipping and handling for the hotspot and \$120 for 12 months of unlimited 4G LTE Internet Service. So, for a grand total of \$144.00 you get unlimited Internet with average download speeds of 6 to 8 megabits per second, and peak speeds of 25 megabits per second, more than enough to run a Zoom meeting.

What we've just discussed only covers your groups "rent" in cyberspace. Has your group made the decision to distribute literature to newcomers? Our face-to-face meetings give all newcomers a beginner's packet consisting of a copy of Living Sober and five conference approved pamphlets. Included in the packet is also a meeting list of all the meetings in our District. By substituting a Zoom meeting list, this packet can be mailed to newcomers to give them a foundation in our program. In addition, if your group has started face-to-face meetings again supplying a meeting list of those in your District certainly help the newcomer get connected if they took advantage of it.

These packets come in at less than \$5.00 a piece if supplies are purchased from World Service at quantity 200. The least expensive way to ship your package in the United States is by using the Post Office Media Mail service. Packages 1 pound or less cost \$2.80 and are delivered in 2-8 days. While certainly this is

something that can be done, your attendees need to know the group's commitment to the newcomer and the price tag that's associated with it.

In addition, if your group supports their District, Area, Intergroup, Central Office and/or World Services people need to be reminded that it's a difficult time for these entities since contributions are down across the board. Prudent reserves only last so long before the services that these entities provide must be scaled back. It's completely appropriate to ask if the members of your virtual group are willing to have AA's goals eliminated or postponed or are they able and willing to provide donations to keep the work in progress.

By sharing this information with your attendees, they can realize that online meetings also need support. We simply can't go on the assumption that our attendees automatically see the need for support as opposed to seeing a platform and not realizing it's a paid service.

Now suppose that you have a community fully committed to supporting your virtual meeting. What are you doing to support their ability to send you money? Many meetings I attend use either PayPal or Venmo to pass the basket. Usually they only accept one or the other. Since I don't have a Venmo account, and have no desire to establish one, the meetings that only use Venmo don't receive a contribution from me. Instead, I'll go onto the World Service website and donate there listing the virtual groups name. If you run a virtual group and find your support is lacking it might be worth asking your audience why, before or after the meeting. Once you know why you are missing out on donations you can decide if it's worth adjusting your options for support.

## Discount Zoom Pricing

Since we discussed the pricing of Zoom in the previous section, perhaps this would be a good time to explore software donation from Zoom Corporation. Since Zoom is service as opposed to an installable, stand-alone application what we'd be looking at is a discount on the monthly charge as opposed to an outright donation of software. Of course, it would be nice if we could get the monthly charge down to zero, but as Mick Jagger reminds me, "you can't always get what you want." He hastens to add, "but if you try sometimes, well, you might find, you get what you need."

Zoom offers discounted pricing to registered nonprofit organizations. This means that your group must be incorporated and registered as a nonprofit. Let's look at a couple of scenarios to show how this has been done. Area 44 covers the northern half of New Jersey. It is one of the 93 Areas in AA that cover the United States and Canada. The trusted servants of Area 44 created a Corporation called RUS Service Corp. This corporation was formed as a New Jersey Corporation and then registered as a nonprofit. Finally, a tax exempt certificate was requested from the State of New Jersey. This allows us to purchase equipment and supplies for use by the area without having to pay sales tax. Just remember this is an actual Corporation and must act as one. Our area delegate, upon being elected, becomes the President of RUS Service Corp. Our Area Alternate Delegate becomes the Vice President, Area Secretary becomes the Secretary and Area Treasurer becomes the Treasurer. Regular meetings of the board of this Corporation must be held and documented by meeting minutes which will be made available in case of an audit.

Now you may be thinking this is a lot of work for an AA group. While you're probably right, there's an excellent reason to proceed with it. In the old days if I walked into a bank and wanted to open a checking account for my stamp collecting club, I would have no problem. These are not the old days and as Stephen King's gunslinger says, "the world has moved on." About two years ago we moved the bank account of my

clubhouse from one bank to one closer to our facility. I had to provide the new bank with copies of our incorporation papers, tax exempt paperwork, and copies of recent minutes of our board of trustees. In addition, they wanted written statements as to where we got our money, and what we spent that money on. I had to sign a separate statement that nothing we did involved income from marijuana sales. If my clubhouse hadn't been incorporated they simply wouldn't have opened a checking account for me, because it would make them complicit if we were doing something wrong. Banks must be able to open their records to audit and so they can't cut corners even if they want to.

Let's say you've made the decision to go ahead and incorporate as a nonprofit, now you can get software donations from several corporations through a clearinghouse known as TechSoup. For example, Microsoft donated an Office 365 Enterprise E1 Subscription at no cost which provided us with the web versions of Microsoft Office and SharePoint, a tool we use to store all our digital assets in the cloud.

When it comes to Zoom you can get a 50% off discount on their annual rates. This may or may not be a good deal. First of all, you must pay a \$65 administrative fee to TechSoup. This allows you to purchase up to 9 host subscriptions. So far, we've assumed that a group will only need to host one meeting at a time. We'll continue with that assumption to keep things simple. Let's compare numbers:

| Discount price  | Full Price |
|---|------------|
| \$65 admin fee + \$74.95 per host (annually) Total \$139.95 | \$149.90   |

While there's a slight savings, remember that this is an annual subscription so you can't go month to month. If your Home group is not planning to continue with Zoom after face-to-face meetings resume having an annual subscription might not be worthwhile.

Where the discount becomes valuable is if you have a large meeting. Remember you get 50% off of zoom including the add-ons. That means that the \$600 add-on for having 500 participants is now priced at \$300 and that's a significant savings on an annual basis. An even more appealing discount exists for having 1000 participants. Instead of paying \$1080 annually you'll be paying \$540 per year and that's an incredible saving. Remember that these add-on prices are in addition to the \$139.95 you'll pay for the Zoom Pro annual subscription.

Whether you choose to use a discounted Zoom membership or not you are now armed with the facts decide if this is a good option for your group or not.

## Anonymity

Lots of people become very concerned about how virtual meetings affect their anonymity. After all, anyone can enter a Zoom meeting and say that they're an alcoholic. We tend to forget that anyone can enter an AA meeting room and claimed to be an alcoholic. In fact, in local face-to-face meetings you're not only likely to see someone who lives close by, a fellow member of the PTA at your child's school, a member of management from the company you work for, but you have a more difficult time escaping the situation if that's what you desire.

Remember in the real world someone can follow you into the parking lot and see what car you drive and even copy license plate number. They can track you back to your home. There are many ways to invade your privacy in the real world, and often we take this for granted. The truth is the vast number of people attending AA meetings have no interest but it's not difficult to violate your privacy in the real world.

Online you have a greater degree of control. If you feel uncomfortable simply pushing the “leave meeting” button takes you back into the real world and away from whatever was troubling you in the meeting. Even better, with the sheer number of Zoom meetings in existence you can jump into another one immediately and see if you are more comfortable there.

In addition, if the group conscious of the meeting allows it you can join with your video turned off. Turning off your video protects your anonymity much better than wearing a face mask in a face-to-face meeting.

Discussing these facts with anyone who has anonymity concerns should go a long way to putting their mind at ease. It wouldn't hurt to mention that one of our Co-founders, Dr. Bob, stated that we shouldn't be anonymous from one another. He went as far as to say that we should know each other's full name, address and phone number. These days I strive to give people my email address in addition to my full name and phone number so that they have no excuse for not calling me or dropping me a piece of email when they need to reach out to someone.

Once again, armed with the facts each person can make their own decision regarding how they treat their personal anonymity.

## Benefits of Virtual Meetings

I started this paper with a quote by Charles Dickens. I have little doubt that anyone would disagree that early 2020 was the worst of times. We had a disease sweeping across the country and forcing the recovery community into isolation. It hurt everyone who is trying to remain sober. Worst of all it hurt the newcomers who were looking to start their journey on the path of sobriety. If they knew enough to reach out to Intergroup and our central offices, there's a good chance they couldn't find the answers they needed at least in the beginning. In area 44 we have a program called Nightwatch where the Intergroup phone number is forwarded to a volunteer after hours. We do this so that nobody receives a an answering machine message telling them to wait till the office is open. While it's some comfort for people to connect with someone who knows what they're going through, it's certainly a let down when that person doesn't know anything about the state of meetings. This was certainly AA's darkest time and indeed the worst of time for those in recovery and for those who were looking to join.

Then something happened which rarely happens in AA. People stopped talking and debating what to do and they took action. Now, it became personal and individual AA members stepped up to arrange virtual meetings to ensure their own sobriety. They message their friends, either through social media or by picking up the phone, and opened the meetings to others. Groups formed around the world to support 24/7 AA meetings. Now members who were feeling particularly at risk could attend a meeting anytime day or night and suddenly this “new normal” made AA far more accessible than it had ever been.

So called “circuit speakers” could share their experience, strength and hope with people around the world from the comfort of their den or living room. Not only was money saved on travel and hotel rooms, but a speaker could talk in New York and then a few minutes later be speaking in London or Tokyo or anywhere they were invited. For those of us wishing to hear a solid message of recovery we could be exposed to speakers that we would never have a chance to meet in real life and we could experience that on a daily basis.

Additionally, members of recovery had a choice of what meetings they wanted to attend. They were no longer limited to meetings that they could travel to. Instead of being forced to go to an open discussion meeting, they could choose to go to a big book meeting, or step meeting, or a traditions meeting. The sheer number of meetings occurring at the same time guaranteed that there was a wide variety of choices to be had. Suddenly, what had started out worst possible thing to happen, ended up being the best of times for many people.

Remote communities took a huge leap forward as members of senior centers and assisted living facilities got access to AA, many for the first time in their lives. Suddenly AA was no longer moving at a snail pace, members were acting like their life depended on it because it did. For most of the world recovery had taken a quantum leap forward. The “new normal” had become that anyone with a smartphone or iPad and Wi-Fi had access to our program of recovery like never before.

## Benefits of Face-to-Face Meetings

Despite the convenience of virtual meetings there are people who prefer face-to-face meetings. For them seeing another member in person is a large part of fellowship. They long to go back to the old days before Coronavirus thrust them into isolation. The good news is states are opening up and allowing people to get back, usually with the restriction that they wear masks, frequently wash their hands, self-quarantine if they show signs of possible infection and socially distance.

The sad reality is that when people think about face-to-face meetings, they're thinking about the way things used to be. Like the desire to capture the magic of the first drink forces some to relapse and discover only disappointment, re-entering the rooms of AA may be equally disheartening. There will be little to no hugs when people enter the rooms, no sitting side by side sharing sarcastic comments about the person who's sharing (don't judge, you've probably done it as well), no holding hands at the end of the meeting. Compared to their pre-Covid-19 experience this “new normal” might be quite a letdown.

On the other hand, people like that they will get to share meetings with other members who they know in real-life. While it's exciting to meet other members from around the world, it's also comforting to be around people you know who know you as well. Plus, these days you can actually go out for coffee with friends if your group is small enough to not overwhelm the local coffee house.

The other reality about face-to-face meetings is that they are going to be small. In New Jersey, churches, restaurants and other gathering places are only allowed to have 25% capacity of their pre-Covid-19 capacity. As an example, our local clubhouse has a capacity of 83 individuals as set by the fire inspector. In keeping with the state of New Jersey requirements, chairs have been removed and the remaining chairs have been spread around the room to support social distancing. The maximum capacity of our room is now 21 people. Strictly speaking, the maximum capacity should probably be 20 people, but we AA's like to round up.

Even with all of our members wearing masks and socially distancing a lot of the older members of the fellowship, particularly those in poor health, are not comfortable coming to a face-to-face meetings. It is with this in mind that the idea of hybrid meetings becomes a very interesting concept.

# Hybrid Meetings

What kind of alcoholic wouldn't want to have the best of both worlds? This is where the concept of a hybrid meeting comes from. Let people who want face-to-face meetings join together in a physical meeting place. Other members, those who are concerned about their health or simply those who couldn't get into the physical meeting room because of capacity limits, can call into the face-to-face meeting through Zoom. This allows the core members of your group to share a meeting together whether they are physically located in the same space or calling in remotely.

There are a lot of exciting possibilities for this. How many people have been in the situation of wanting to be at their homegroup meeting but being too far away to make the commute in time? With a hybrid meeting they could join from across the state or across the country. Think of the possibilities, a member vacationing with their family far away from home could take an hour away to participate in his or her homegroup instead of searching out a local meeting, if they want to share with people they know.

What about that circuit speaker that your group has wanted to hear from but couldn't afford to reimburse travel expenses? Now that speaker can share their experience, strength and hope with your group from the comfort of their living room at a much lower cost than if they had to fly across the country. The groups only cost is the price of a Zoom subscription and Internet service.

Again, education of the members of your recovery community is essential. It needs to be explained that hybrid meetings essentially have two sets of rent, one for the physical meeting hall, and the second for the virtual connection. Giving your virtual attendees flexibility in terms of donations to the group may be very prudent. For instance, instead of using PayPal or Venmo to make a small donation every meeting, some people might be more comfortable sending a check on a monthly basis. With most bill pay systems they can schedule a payment for say \$20 or \$25 per month and not worry about the 7th tradition on a daily basis. As trusted servants you can suggest the donation amount per month that would help the group cover their expenses.

There are a lot of formats that a meeting could take. The simplest is a speaker meeting where one or more speakers shared their experience, strength and hope. Think of the possibilities, if your format is to have three speakers, one could be from Europe, one from the United States, and the third from Asia. The point is almost anything is possible because you're no longer limited by geography. I say this is the simplest format because the people in the physical meeting room as well as the non-speakers who are connected via Zoom just listen as the speakers share.

How about a big book or step meeting? The meeting chair could screen share the readings right from the aa.org website relieving the group of a considerable literature purchase. As face-to-face meetings come back online, most members are being asked to bring their own literature so that is less of a chance of spreading Coronavirus by touching a surface. This is in line with restaurants who have switched to disposable menus or to simply using the menu on their website. Chairpeople could alternate between members who have raised their hand in Zoom, and those who are raising their hand in the real world.

Finally, the how about the ever popular open disgusting meeting, ah, open discussion meeting. Again, the chairperson controls the flow of the meeting by alternating between Zoom and real-world members who had their hands raised. This type of meeting opens the participants to a new form of service. For example, say one of the Zoom participants shares that are unable to get out to the store. Perhaps someone will reach out to them and help by picking up groceries on their way home from the physical meeting.

Obviously, there are some logistics involved in making these meetings happen. In a small group meeting a chairperson with laptop PC or a larger screen tablet and a hotspot could make sure everyone was connected virtual to physical. In a larger AA clubhouse or an Area office, a large screen display and a sound system would be beneficial to the user experience.

While it's useful to talk in abstracts, in the next section will look at three case studies. These are not hypothetical scenarios; these are real world examples that are either up and running or planned for Area 44. We'll look at three different examples of integration of Zoom meetings into the real world. These will include a small meeting held in a church, an AA clubhouse that hosts a variety of 12 step homegroups, and a Area office. While your personal integration of Zoom into face-to-face meetings doesn't need to mirror what's being done here, these examples are being given to give you an idea of what is being done already. I'm sure for all of us, more will certainly be revealed.

## Case Studies

These case studies are being presented to show what's being done with integrating Zoom into face-to-face meetings in the real world. It's far too early to be discussing standards or best cases. We as a fellowship are moving into a new territory and all we can do is continue to share our experience.

That having been said we've seen tremendous positive experiences come out of the use of Zoom. It is this authors hope that the fellowship will see the ongoing benefit of using Zoom, or another online platform, and not simply abandoned this technology for face-to-face meetings. We've come a long way very quickly and while that can be disconcerting to some, it certainly has brought new members to our fellowship who might never have found their way otherwise.

### Small Group Meeting – Dubious Group

The first case study is of a small meeting held in a church. This meeting's name is the Dubious Group but don't look for any information about it online. While it may have originally been registered with World Services, the group has avoided being registered with Northern New Jersey Intergroup. Part of the reason for this is the numerous roadblocks that Northern New Jersey Intergroup places on groups looking to get registered. The other part is simply that the group remains anonymous so that members can share without running the risk of being gossiped about at our local clubhouse. And yes that is the reality of AA that we have experienced. The group is listed in the churches calendar which has allowed us to have newcomers find our meeting. When this happens the whole focus of the meeting is on giving that person a fairly concise overview of the program and then an idea of what other meetings are available in the community.

Meetings of the Dubious Group are usually held in a kitchen that's used by the church for their grade school. It's certainly not an institutional sized kitchen it's slightly bigger than something you'd find in a private house. In the middle of the room is the table of roughly 8 by 6 feet surrounded by 10 chairs. When we have a large meeting, we squeeze in a bit and make room for people to pull up additional chairs. It's rare that more than a dozen people attend this meeting.

Our Christmas party is held in a larger assembly room which is also used to host our District meetings. One of the reasons Dubious Group has not considered resuming face-to-face meetings is because the kitchen is not large enough to facilitate social distancing, and the assembly room is not available on a weekly basis. When meetings can resume, possibly with an easing of the social distancing policy, we have

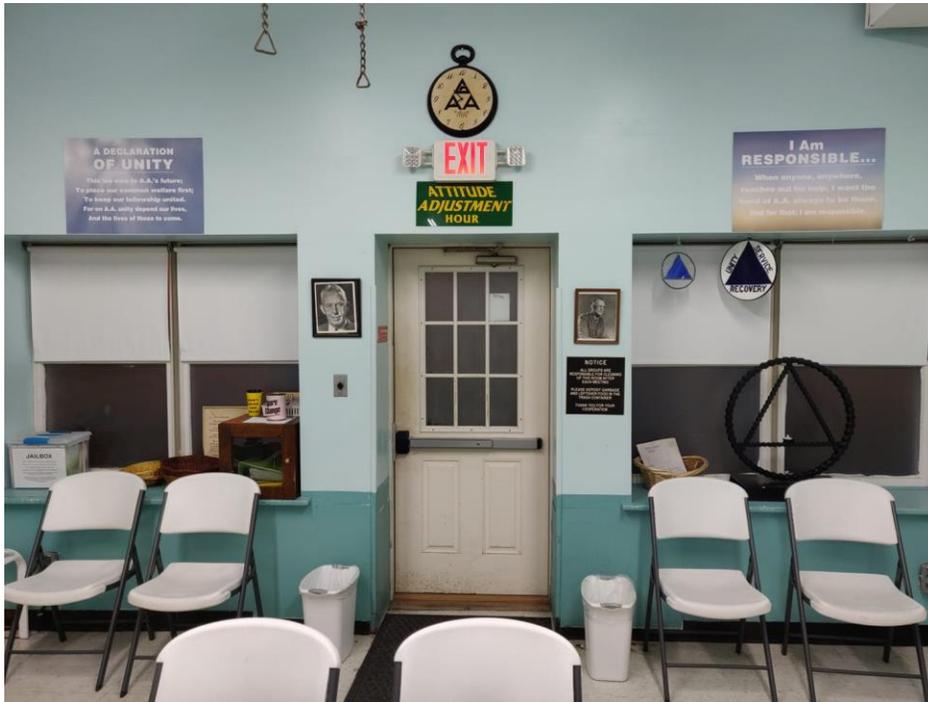
core members who simply won't be comfortable attending. One of our members stopped attending due to his mobility issues, before Covid-19, and we included him in the meeting via conference call. If we held a meeting on Zoom my guess is that he would prefer to call in rather than use the Zoom application. We also have a member who received a double lung transplant and is on anti-rejection medication. Despite a successful transplant, ironically from a young man who overdosed, he is on lifetime anti-rejection medications and is still immunocompromised.

Our plan for this particular facility is to place a laptop computer at one end of a table visible to the attendees. With approximately a dozen attendees this will be all that's required to host the Zoom meeting. The church does not have Wi-Fi accessible to visiting groups, so we power the laptop off the hotspot of a member's cell phone.

This arrangement is not a hypothetical. A group of members not with the Dubious Group ran a test meeting to check the viability of this arrangement. All of us agreed that it was a very positive experience. The important takeaway from here is that most standalone meetings held in churches or civic centers do not have secure on-site storage. Bringing in laptop and hotspot would certainly be acceptable. Carrying in large screen TV on a weekly basis might well prove to be cumbersome. On the other hand, a slightly larger group might want to bring in something on the order of a 40 inch flat screen and make the delivery and setup of this equipment a service commitment.

## **Clubhouse Meeting – New Attitudes Clubhouse**

Prior to Coronavirus, New Attitudes Clubhouse was a facility that hosted 41 different 12-step meetings for 4 different fellowships. Of these meetings 38 were AA, 1 Al-Anon, 1 Cocaine Anonymous (CA), and 1 Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA). The 38 Alcoholics Anonymous meetings were held by 5 main homegroups, and a handful of separate meetings. The facility was rated by the Fire Marshall to have a capacity of 83 people. The facility itself was basically a storefront in a strip mall that was owned by a local church. The church rented out space to various groups who they felt furthered their values. As such the clubhouse was surrounded by a food bank, a thrift shop and a social worker whose specialty is arranging emergency housing for those in need. A board of 12 trustees collect rent from all the groups, made sure that this rent was sufficient to cover the facilities rent from the church, water & sewer charges, electric, natural gas and insurance. In addition, 12 step literature was purchased and put in a central location for all groups to use for meetings. we had at least 50 copies of the Big Book, 12 and 12, Living Sober and Daily Reflections as well as individual copies of most of the other conference approved literature.



*New Attitudes Clubhouse prior to COVID-19*

While this photo doesn't show the bulk of the room it does give you an idea of how dense the seating was. This was the reality before social distancing. Behind this photo of the front of the room was another 77 seats some along the walls and the rest in row after row of seats four across.



*The new normal*



*Anonymity protected volunteers*

The Clubhouse is a sad shell of its former self. With a capacity of 21 people there's a lot of fear that we would be turning people away, but the last meeting that they held only four people showed up including the chairperson. You can see in the photo on the right that all of the AA conference approved literature as well as a commercial Bunn coffee maker have been moved into storage. Still, like before, now the front of the room is the focal point. A single large monitor or even a pair of monitors one to each side of the room would make for an incredible Zoom experience. The Clubhouse is already halfway there having installed an audio system with speakers mounted to the wall and wireless microphone systems. There's also a Bluetooth option so getting the audio from a PC into the sound system would be quite easy.

The most significant takeaway from this is that because AA groups control the space they can easily set something up in place and not have to move it every time they have a meeting. If they decide to only use a large monitor for some meetings it can be easily moved to the supply closet when not in use.

In our next section you'll notice some similarity between a clubhouse set-up and an Area office.

## Area Office Setup

The Area office presents an interesting scenario because it has two distinctly different types of meetings. The majority of the meetings are the various committees all of which lean toward the size of a small meeting. Some committees such as Grapevine have a fairly good turnout. Other committees are lucky if they have half a dozen people. All the committees share one point which is they resemble a small meeting. Now, when the Area has an Area Committee Meeting (ACM), the room is full with all area officers in attendance, all chairs and/or alternates of standing, special and ad hoc committees, and all DCMs and/or their alternates. During an ACM literally every chair in the room is filled.

As I've mentioned before in New Jersey there's a requirement that restaurants, gyms, religious gathering places (churches, temples, synagogues and mosques), and 12 step facilities, only allow 25% of their normal capacity to return. There's simply no way for an ACM to be run under these conditions. On the other hand, there's plenty of room for even largest committee to meet and still have the proper social distance between members.

Even for committees that have the room to socially distance there are going to be members of the fellowship who are not comfortable because of their prior medical history or possibly other reasons to come out to face-to-face meeting. This dictates that committees that want to continue their work without interruption plan to have a virtual component to their physical meetings.

In Area 44 this year, we conducted an assembly with more than a couple of hundred in attendance. It was 100% virtual and conducted on the Zoom platform. The assembly went well and received positive feedback. When we have a face-to-face assembly, one of the districts arranges with their largest meeting hall to host our assembly. Among other things we bring in a podium, and a sound system that supports wireless microphones which are placed around the room to give our members the chance to provide feedback to the entire body of the assembly. It wouldn't require much additional effort to bring in large flat screen, presumably the one that's used in the area office. Again, if an Internet connection was not available through the host facilities Wi-Fi then a hotspot could be used to provide that connectivity.

We have envisioned the Area office being outfitted with two large screen monitors, one for the left side of the room, and the other for the right side. These monitors would be mounted to the wall but would be removable so that they could be taken to Area assemblies. Our office already has business grade Internet

service because our ACMs have all gone paperless over the last couple of years with committee reports and recommendations all being distributed to the members via SharePoint. In addition, we already have a sound system with microphones used to support the ACM. The area chair would need access to a PC or tablet to establish the Zoom meeting. We agreed that a laptop PC would be the right tool for driving the monitors via HDMI connection. This is still in the planning phase as the Area office just recently reopened for committee meetings.

Although we realized we have a lot of work ahead of us I think we're all looking forward to the challenge.

## Conclusions

The pandemic certainly ushered in the worst of times, and yet the members of AA used virtual meeting technology to turn it into the best of times. Suddenly the world has come together. Members from around the globe are found sharing the same meetings because geography no longer plays a factor. We made friends we haven't met yet, people we may never meet in person, and yet their compassion and caring resonate through time and space to reach a home in our hearts.

By blending Zoom and face-to-face meetings we get to keep the best of both worlds. Make no mistake it won't always be easy. There'll be times when you're holding in assembly in the basement of a church and find that there's no cell service to support your 4G hotspot. Maybe the only alternative will be to have somebody host the Zoom portion of the meeting from a nearby restaurant and relay the information via conference call. There will be situations that require that we think outside the box but luckily nobody seems to do that quite as well as a real alcoholic.

Using this hybrid meeting model we will be able to reach out to people confined to nursing homes, to senior centers, even to their own homes. AA will have the tools to reach people they could never reach before. If it weren't for the pandemic, we would still be sitting around in committees debating how to do what we're doing today. Necessity certainly was the mother of invention. Finally, AA is no longer moving at a snail pace. We are moving quickly but carefully, responding purposefully to a disease we know wants to kill us.

I hope this paper and my talk has helped give you some ideas as to possible ways to integrate Zoom or another virtual platform into your face-to-face meetings. If I can be of any help whatsoever please don't hesitate to contact me and we'll try and figure things out together.

