

Hybrid Zoom Meeting Columbia, MD – Saturdays

The Saturday morning OA meeting at the Serenity Center in Columbia, MD has been going strong for 23 years. During the pandemic, this meeting, like many others, pivoted quickly to Zoom. After people started getting vaccinated and felt safer, there was an interest in going back to meeting in person. However, a number of long-time members had moved from the area, and new members were geographically scattered, which proved to be a dilemma.

Via group conscience the group decided to explore a hybrid option. Fortunately, another Twelve Step fellowship at the Serenity Center had experience with hybrid meetings, which provided inspiration and a model they could emulate.

The hybrid format evolved over time as the OA members gained experience. They used the group conscience to decide how to refine the model. Today, attendees experience a truly blended environment. The leader can be in the room or on Zoom and ensures that all participants have the opportunity to read or share by alternating participation between the Zoom attendees and those in the room.

The technology setup adds to the experience. It evolved over time as well. The in-person meeting started with a laptop to connect the attendees in the room to the Zoom meeting. Then audio speakers were added for the attendees in the room to hear the Zoom participants better. Then a microphone in the room to improve the sound for the Zoom attendees. The next improvement was using a music stand to rotate the laptop computer camera in the room, which enabled the person speaking to be more easily seen on Zoom. Most recently, the Serenity Center installed a 70" television screen and provided a speaker and camera so that the attendees in the room could see the Zoom attendees better. Each new technology connection enhanced the experience for all attendees.

Over the past two years, there has been an overall increase in attendance, bringing it to pre-pandemic levels. As the in-person number increases (from a low of 4 to a high of 22 most recently), there is a slight decrease in the Zoom attendees (currently about 8-10). The hallmark of this meeting is a strong group conscience, which continues to guide the evolution of the meeting format. Also, the meeting offers a strong welcome to newcomers, inviting them to stay for fellowship in the room and after the meeting on Zoom to speak with experienced members, who are available to answer questions and share experience, strength and hope.

The key to the success of this meeting is the commitment of the members to a spiritual foundation, to recovery and to sponsorship. There are a number of long-term members who moved away during the pandemic but continue to participate via Zoom. And, because of Zoom, this meeting has attracted attendees from around the country. Overall, the perspective is that OA needs to be a "big tent" welcoming a diversity of ages, genders, race, sexual orientation, as well as food plans and approaches to taking the steps.

The main challenge to the hybrid model is getting enough people to volunteer for service responsibilities. For example, in addition to regular service roles (such as leader, meeting timer, speaker seeker) there is a need for a laptop provider and a secondary laptop provider in the room for every meeting, whose role is to facilitate the technology and connection between those in person and on

Zoom. And you need one or more people to be the Zoom host (and backup), to sign on early enough to test the system with the room set up.

There are some additional challenges with the technology setup. For example, laptops people bring are not consistent: some are Mac, some PC; each has its quirks for connecting to the system. You need to have someone understand Zoom sufficiently to get the right modules to load. You need prep time before the meeting. And, certain responsibilities can only be undertaken by those in the room, such as setting up and testing the technology connections. This becomes a pressure point if there are too few attendees in the room or people who are not as tech-savvy.

The key lesson learned from this experience is that it takes a core group of committed members with clarity of vision and agreement on the importance of this effort to establish and maintain the hybrid meeting format. It requires the willingness to collaborate and find solutions using the group conscience. It takes persistence and perseverance, and patience to increase the number of attendees in the room. In this case, it took two years until there was a significant number of people. However, the benefit to this approach is a more powerful ability to carry the message to those who still suffer.

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