

Hybrid Phone Meetings Gaithersburg MD – Tuesdays and Fridays

Pre-Covid, there were two meetings hosted at the same location in Gaithersburg, one on Tuesday at 11 am and on Friday at noon. The two meetings included many of the same members. When the pandemic lockdown started, the meetings transitioned to phone meetings. Members also stayed connected via group email threads or through impromptu phone meetings as needed in between.

In early fall of 2022, the members of both meetings decided to restart in-person but keep the phone-in capability as an option. The groups believed that using the conference line technology provided simplicity, convenience and wider access to the meeting (especially for those who live some distance away) while continuing to carry the message.

The Tuesday group experienced some challenges with the phone-in hybrid model. A designated person in the room dials into the conference line and then puts the phone in speaker mode. However, the conference line technology is such that it plays music until a second caller joins. This can be a distraction, especially when no one joins the meeting by phone. Since they were unable to opt-out of the hold music, the group came up with the solution to dial in for the first 20 minutes, and if no one joins, to disconnect, assuming no one will join later.

The group has plans to purchase a two-way conference call speaker phone to help with audio. But ultimately, they are focusing on making the in-person meeting a more attractive environment while still supporting those who prefer to dial in. As a hybrid meeting, it is important for those attending in person to keep mindful that there are people on the phone, and to give them the opportunity to share. This meeting has seen attendance grow. Pre-Covid there were 4-6 people attending in person. Today, attendance ranges from 4-11 people total, with 2-3 of those on the phone.

The Friday group decided to change the location of the meeting, so it relocated to another church. The group decided to continue to use the phone-in hybrid model like the Tuesday meeting. In this facility, the room they have been assigned has a long conference table, so the audio is somewhat better.

Nonetheless, the group is considering purchasing a two-way conference speaker phone as well. In the absence of video, the group makes sure to include the attendees on the phone through introductions and calling on phone attendees to read, speak and share. Attendance has been improving. There are between 4-9 people in the room, and 2-3 on the phone.

The success of this hybrid model is attributed to a core group of fellows (including a newcomer) that were committed to re-establishing the in-person meeting. They recognized that OA fellows have a strong desire to connect and ensure there is time to have fellowship after meeting.

Both groups are satisfied with the experience, especially the growth in attendance. They are also very grateful to the two churches for providing a safe place to meet and for not charging rent. As part of the 7th Tradition, they support the churches with donations.

Both groups have found several challenges to the dial-in hybrid model. First of all, there is no video, so there are no visual cues. There could be background noise and it can be hard to hear people on the phone. People may inadvertently interrupt or speak at the same time. And of course, the conference line “hold” music is a distraction. A different challenge has to do with the practice of holding hands for the Serenity Prayer. While those in the room can join hands, there no clear way on how to make sure the attendees on the phone feel included.

Finally, a big challenge is around filling service roles. Those who participate only on the phone have a limited set of service roles for which they can volunteer. The people giving the most service are those who attend in person.

A key strength of these two meetings is that many members knew each other before the pandemic. Those relationships and prior experience with the Tuesday and Friday meetings have contributed to their success in the hybrid model. They realize that a phone meeting works best when everyone is on the phone; and an in-person meeting works best when everyone is in person. However, through group conscience the decision was made to keep phone-in option for both meetings and will continue to evaluate and make decisions via group conscience going forward.

The members invite all to come to Gaithersburg to attend one (or both) of these meetings!

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