Some Guidance for Safe Online Gatherings for Local Churches
Virginia Conference United Methodist Church
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Much of what is in the following document will already be familiar to many readers. However, it is the hope of the authors that it will serve as a primer for congregations who are still considering meeting online using videoconferencing technology while also serving as a reminder to all congregations of the importance of careful pre-planning so that online gatherings may occur in the safest way possible.

Terminology
The term "Zoom" refers to the offerings of a specific videoconferencing company of the same name. However, issues related to safe gatherings in video meetings apply to other companies as well, including WebEx, GoToMeeting or any other digital platform that allows individuals or groups to gather virtually using audio and video. For the purposes of this document, the catchall term "zoom" will be used.

Steps You Can Take
A very helpful resource for being safe in online gatherings can be found in an April 7, 2020 feature in ComputerWorld titled "Dos and Don'ts of Videoconferencing Security" which was tremendously helpful in preparing this document.

1. Have a Good Host: This is perhaps the most important step you can take. Videoconferencing platforms allow one or more participants to serve as a host. The host has privileges other users do not have, such as the ability to mute participants' audio, set rules for the chat feature, and even remove persons from the gathering. In the event of inappropriate behavior, the host or hosts will need to be able to think and act quickly to address the situation, so it is best for this person to not be someone leading worship or running a meeting. Typically, a person who is removed from a room by the host will not be able to reenter. A great summary of settings the host should set or adjust can be found at the article linked above.

2. Think About the Chat Feature: While it is nice for people to be able to fellowship in a virtual environment when gathering together, the chat window is difficult to control. One option is for the participant with host privileges to close the chat feature in Zoom early in the gathering after the initial fellowship time as well as making sure the feature that allows one person to message another directly without the message going to the entire group is turned off. Remember, when one person directly messages another, it is much easier for unwanted communications to occur, since even the host cannot see what is being said in these direct messages.

3. Think About That Link: What is the safest way to invite people into a virtual gathering without losing the radical hospitality that characterizes Christian community? Here are some suggestions:

> **A. Consider creating a unique link for each gathering**. This means, for example, each Sunday service has a new link. Same goes for each session of the Bible study or meeting. A constantly changing link makes it more difficult for a bad actor to access the group.

> **B. Use the passcode and "Waiting Room" features, and turn off screen sharing.** While not perfect, using a passcode and the waiting room can be helpful. The passcode makes it so that someone who wishes to enter cannot do so with only the link, since they also need the passcode, which you might consider distributing separately from the link. The waiting room is a place for persons to gather before being allowed in the room. While not ideal, this feature keeps all participants from entering the room at the same time, which allows the host(s) a greater ability to manage what is going on in the gathering by admitting people individually. Turning off screen

sharing for everyone except the presenter simply prevents uninvited sharing of what is on the screen of another person in the virtual room.

C. What's in a name? Videoconferencing software allows participants to share their first and last names. Encourage participants to do this! Also, if you see someone you do not recognize, consider inviting them to introduce themselves.

D. Remember Safe Sanctuaries: If your gathering is one for children's ministries and youth groups, you should require those who enter the meeting to identify themselves, just as you would for an in-person gathering.

E: Sharing is caring (sort of): Any invitation link you send to your church to a videoconference should include an explanation of how to protect the information within the invitation and the importance of being very cautious when sharing it. One possibility is to distribute the unique link for the gathering earlier in the week and the passcode closer to the event itself.

4. Maintain Radical Hospitality: Think about ways you can be as invitational as possible on your church webpage, social media, newsletter, or other mailings about how you welcome visitors to virtual gatherings and how you genuinely wish for them to be present in your gathering.

5. Conclusion: Online ministry, necessitated by the realities of the current global pandemic, represents some of the most creative and important innovation by churches and church leaders in the last fifty years. Technology is a gift, and like almost all gifts, it can be used for good or for harm. However, being intentional in planning, conversant with modern technological tools, and diligent in the gatherings themselves can help reduce the risk of harm for our congregations and communities.

Do not fear, for I am with you,
do not be afraid, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
Isaiah 41:10