

Connecting with God Online

By Canon Dawn Davis, Diocesan Faith Formation Coordinator

Responding to a pandemic causes tremendous disruption, anxiety and fear. People need:

- to connect;
- to relocate their anchor of faith;
- to find calm and reason;
- to move beyond immediate tactical reactions to deeper spiritual meaning.

Social distancing is particularly challenging to the Church since we are used to physically gathering to grow in faith. Do not despair! There are some easy ways for us to reach out and “virtually” abide in Christ!

Like Jesus, we must stop and be in God’s creative, redeeming and renewing love, even in times of distress. Care for yourself and enjoy this new world of connecting with God and God’s beloved, online!

How to Pray Online

At first it may seem awkward to say a prayer online (FaceTime, Instagram, Google Meet, Skype, Zoom) but you may be surprised at how deeply people go on this medium.

Opening and Closing Prayers

1. Begin by inviting people to close their eyes or cast their eyes down and away from the screen or to look at something like a candle or icon. This is important because it provides some privacy and allows participants to relax without feeling like they are being watched.
2. Let them know that you will clearly end the prayer time with “Amen.” This will provide confidence in the boundary you are creating for their sacred space together.
3. Begin with something like, “Let us pray,” and then invite people into a few moments of quiet to allow their bodies and breathing to still. Ask them to place themselves in God’s loving care.
4. Offer the prayer and, if appropriate, allow for a bit of quiet for the people to focus their intentions throughout the prayer. Ending with the Lord’s Prayer allows everyone a chance to participate vocally.
5. Each community has different prayer practices but, for most, opening and closing prayers should not exceed one or two minutes. A long, rambling prayer can break the sacred space that has been created.
6. Complete the prayer with an audible “Amen.” and invite people to return to the screen.

Don’t immediately jump into business as usual. Let prayer and a holy presence have space in your meeting, even in an online medium and especially during times of stress.

Scripture Reflections and Study Groups

Bringing small groups together to reflect on scripture in light of the current reality is a significant spiritual growth process. Make sure you establish some common norms for your group meeting.

1. Begin by spiritually checking in, perhaps with the question, “How is it with your soul?” Make sure you clearly communicate that this is a quick check-in which is intended to surface the feelings, but it’s not for the therapeutic or pastoral treatment of those feelings.



Scripture Reflections and Study Groups continued...

2. The leader informs the group of the agenda and structure of the time together.
3. The leader facilitates the process and monitors individuals' participation. This is important as it is easy to lose people to distractions if they feel left out or ignored. Periodically invite participants who have been quiet to speak.
4. Keep on time and end on time. The leader ends the meeting.

Don't let any reflective process stay academic! Spiritual formation rarely happens unless we allow ourselves to draw closer to Christ in relationship.

Centering Prayer, Contemplative Groups and Examen Practices

It may seem odd at first to gather online and then to sit for a duration of time in complete silence. But the online group provides structure and discipline that helps focus the frantic, anxious mind.

1. Begin by spiritually checking in, perhaps with the question, "How is it with your soul?" This is a quick check-in to surface feelings but does not provide therapeutic or pastoral treatment of those feelings.
2. The leader informs the group of the structure of the time together and how the people will know when they are to transition from discussion to one form of prayer or another. Prayer gongs, bells or a simple "Amen" helps mark the end of the session.

Online Worship Services

A wonderful way to gather for prayer is to join someone who has posted a prayer or worship service on social media. They do this by live streaming or by videoing the service and saving it to Facebook, Instagram and/or a YouTube channel. The link to the service is then emailed out to the community and/or is saved on a social media platform like Facebook or Instagram.

Don't watch it passively like you are watching another cat video! This online form of prayer requires discipline and intentionality. When the leader invites participants to enter silence and then looks off camera, the participants must take the time to look away too, slow down the breathing and become more aware of God's presence. Remember, it is important to get past simply "saying our prayers" and enter into a spiritual space where we are in relationship with God.

Phone Trees

Many parishioners cannot easily access online resources, so getting a call can be a tangible way of sharing God's love and presence with them.

1. Recruit a team of callers and assign them with the names, numbers and information you want them to share.
2. Provide them with a written prayer (perhaps your church has a prayer for this situation) teach them how to lead public prayer (*see above, Opening and Closing Prayers*).
3. Encourage the callers to offer the prayer at the end of the call with words like, "Now before I go, would you like me to say a prayer for you and your family and all that we are going through right now?"
4. The callers need to respect the choice of the person they have called to have a prayer or not and not feel that choice is a reflection on them.

