

Virtual Presence Guide for Masonic Meetings

{Compiled by Bro. Ken JP Stuczynski with inclusions from the work of Bro. Douglas Wm. Barnert and the guidelines for the New York Grand Chapter of Royal Arch / Version 2012-10}

Videoconferencing is now part of our lives. Now that we have made events accessible to people via the Internet, it will be an expectation, and one that shouldn't be ignored. A hybrid model of in-person and virtual may become the norm. But like anything else, it's a skill for both those setting up and those using it.

Things for leadership to consider:

The first and foremost question: Can some or all of the business or discussion be lawfully conducted by teleconference or video? Every jurisdiction and grand body has its own rules and guidelines. Do not assume you can or can't do something without being informed or checking with them.

Some communications done this way may require a dispensation. Please note if a dispensation covers only that meeting or subsequent meetings for some definite or indefinite period of time. If you cannot do ritual or some business in a virtually accessed setting, but may have a presentation, discussion, or other business that does not require being tyled, you may turn on telepresence capabilities while being from labor to refreshment, or after closing.

The grand body may recommend or limit your choices of platform and settings used to ensure privacy and security. It may be required that the platform allow people to call in using a phone for those who may not have access to video capabilities. This is a good idea anyway.

A virtual version of a stated meeting should, of course, be held on the same day and time as dictated by a Lodge or Chapter's by-laws, and special communications given the usual due notice.

Like any event, attire should be made clear. Do not assume people won't wear t-shirts while others may wear a tux. Use a similar discretion as you would for an in-person event, especially if doing a hybrid of in-person and virtual. This particularly includes guest speakers or dignitaries -- no one should suffer embarrassment for being under- or overdressed.

Decide how you want to handle late-comers. A virtual waiting room may be an option.

Have an image or video of the Flag to screenshare for the purpose of the Pledge and Anthem, as the pledge is not ordinarily given without the presence of the Flag in some form. Let's not salute someone's lapel pin. Try to accommodate visitors from other jurisdictions with their nation's anthem, such as "O, Canada!" for our Brethren of the North.

Have some text version of the agenda that can be pasted in the chat. Consider if you want to screenshare or email documents to be reviewed, such as budgets, trestleboard dates, etc..

Special note: Some records, such as minutes, may NOT be shared in any such digital fashion in our jurisdiction for the Symbolic Lodge. These would not be read at a non-tyled meeting anyway, and along with

petitions and candidates in waiting, would only be read (and NOT recorded) if there was such a dispensation for a meeting to be held this way.

Minutes should be kept by the Secretary or a designated member. These may or may not be officially considered regular or special communications, but should be integrated into the records of the Lodge for historical and managerial purposes nonetheless.

Even if not tyled, but a somewhat formal meeting, it may be good decorum to have the presiding officer wear a hat and use a gavel (or respectful substitute).

Whatever you decide, keep it consistent for meetings of a similar formality. If there is a difference than a tradition or practice you establish, make it clear to members beforehand as helpful and necessary.

Sample Meeting Notice

You are hereby {summoned / invited} to a communication of {Lodge or body} on {date / time}. Participation will be {in person and virtual / virtual only}.

Attire is {describe}.

{Members only / Master Masons only / guests} may attend.

{Note level of privacy, such as assurance of self-tying with closed door without people entering, or not around others}

{Instructions, link, call-in number, etc.}

There will be informal discussion {before / after} {business / closing}, starting at {time}.

{Note if RSVP is required}

Things for Brothers / Sisters to consider:

Be aware of your appearance if using video. This not only means attire, but background and posture. Ask yourself if your surroundings may be distracting to others. A virtual background can be useful, but also distracting or inappropriate, so choose wisely. Have this planned and know how to use the feature ahead of time.

Posture is important, but it's more than sitting up straight. There is a best practice, as well as camera angle faux-pas to avoid. The best practice is to have the camera in front of you as if looking at someone across a table, as close as possible to the place on the screen as you will be looking. This reduces the stress of people always feeling like they are not being directly seen by each other, but looking elsewhere. Practice looking at the camera as much as possible. If on a mobile device that has one built in, be aware of where it is.

Avoid having the camera pointing at the ceiling. The up-the-nose shot is not attractive. Either is only seeing the top of your head. And one virtual background I saw recently made it look like the person's head was floating on the Buffalo river. A little awareness goes a long way.

Be aware of noise if using audio. The presence of children, pets, and other potentially noisy distractions may not be noticeable to you. You may be used to the television in the other room, or a grandfather clock bonging. But usually the problem is computer notifications, or a phone or messenger going off and people taking the calls. You wouldn't do that in Lodge I would hope -- please extend this courtesy to all but the most informal meetings. If you must do or answer to someone in person or on the phone, always use the mute feature, or even turn off video. Turn off notifications temporarily if you have to. Prudence is the thing.

Learn the software and how it works on your computer or device. Don't try to figure it out during a meeting unless the meeting itself is for the purpose of learning how to use it. Be aware the same software may have a very different interface on mobile, or PC versus Mac versus Android. Software also changes and upgrades and may catch you off guard. Joining early may give you time to work the bugs out. Just don't expect the host to be your tech support, though they may offer and be able to help. You may have to look closely at your options, experiment, or do a web search. There are plenty of tutorials online for any circumstance.

Ideally, you should mute yourself whenever you are not talking to minimize ambient noise and unexpected sounds. On Zoom, you can unmute yourself (if allowed by the host) by holding down the spacebar when using a desktop device.

Sample Agenda

A preliminary call to order should be done before any more formal opening, done at or just before the exact time the meeting is to start. (Promptness is still important!) This should include going over basic etiquette guidelines. These should include when to mute, how to address the chair (raising hand, etc.). Muting all for much of the meeting may be wise, but having people able to respond to votes (if allowed) or responses to prayers, etc., may require having muting off at times. This is also a good time to tell people there will be one person managing group muting and unmuting, as well as letting people know when they are trying to talk on mute. Like prompting, we don't want everyone trying to jump in at once to help.

It should be made clear at this time both the level of privacy expected and if the meeting will be recorded.

Formal opening, if any.

Prayer

If also done in-person and not disallowed by the grand body, opening of Great Light may be done as in any public ceremony (with the Great Lights NOT in the configuration nor pages used in tyled ritual).

Pledge of Allegiance (USA) and/or national anthem(s) as appropriate.

Self-introduction of the presiding officer, who may also introduce the primary officers, as well as any dignitaries. Grand honors can be given at that time, being sure the presiding officer's hands are visible to those participating virtually. Guests may be asked to introduce themselves, as it may be more difficult to acquire titles and full names before the meeting.

Sickness, Distress, and Good Tidings. You may wish to turn off everyone's mute for this.

Moment of Silence for virtual draping if in-person Altar isn't available.

Presentation or Instruction. It is recommended that if this is open to the public, it be done at a separate virtual event, but it is not impossible to open up attendance of non-members at that time using the "waiting room" feature. Alternatively, such a presentation could be done before or after a more closed meeting, with careful consideration of start and stop times to avoid any discourtesy for guests.

Business as allowed. If someone needs or wishes to share their screen, the host (manager) of the meeting may need to allow it or even temporarily give them control as host. Muting may need to be turned off for necessary and allowed votes, or straw polling.

Your grand body will determine what is allowed with respect to motions and votes. What many people do is accept provisional motions and votes during the virtual meeting to be presented for ratification at a subsequent meeting where such are official and binding.

Upcoming dates.

Good of the Craft. This should include any other announcements from the leadership and members.

Final Words. As in the usual order of precedence, dignitaries and grand body officers may speak, with anyone representing the head of the jurisdiction speaking last.

Formal closing, if any. This would include a closing prayer, and the closing of the Great Light if applicable.

Declaration of the end of the meeting, noting if the virtual presence will remain on for those who wish to socialize. The host will generally leave last, as it will end the virtual conferencing for everyone, but an alternative host feature may be used if available.

Chaplain's Prayers

All the available opening prayers are suitable, the first of which could be reworded to speak of meeting other than in person:

Most holy and glorious Lord God, the Great Architect of the Universe, giver of all good gifts and graces, you have made creation wide and Your people, though scattered, seek and find union in Your Fatherhood at distance and at hand. In Thy name we desire to proceed in all our doings, near and far. Grant that the sublime principles of Freemasonry may so subdue every discordant passion within us - so harmonize and enrich our hearts with Thine own love and goodness, that the Lodge at this time may humbly reflect that order and beauty which reign forever before Thy throne. Amen.