**One example of effective online support groups + 5 Tips for launching an online ministry**

May 18, 2020 - Joseph Northcut, Director of Church Resources, ChurchInitiative.org

In this season of shelter-at-home, churches came to realize quickly that it was impossible for small groups to continue to gather in person.

In my context, Church Initiative (creators of DivorceCare and GriefShare) was able to convert our support group materials into an online format so groups could continue to meet. You can do this also with all kinds of curriculum.

The good news for us is many of our DivorceCare and GriefShare groups are now meeting virtually online. Over the last several weeks, we saw more than 1,500 churches and 30,000 group members migrate over too virtual groups. These numbers have continued to grow weekly.

In our new online model, group members have access to the DivorceCare and GriefShare videos and participant workbook. They come together weekly for discussion and fellowship using audio and video conferencing services in meetings. We’ve trained the group leaders how to effectively use this new online model. These leaders and their pastors are excited about how effective an online group can be.

We offer the online version of DivorceCare and GriefShare at no charge to churches who already own the GriefShare curriculum. ***To have access to the online option, your church would need to purchase one of our DivorceCare or GriefShare curriculum kits.*** Go to <https://www.churchinitiative.org/> to learn more about these resources.

The anxiety caused by COVID-19 amplifies the emotions that accompany the pain for those experiencing separation, divorce, and the death of a loved one many times over. The new online model for DivorceCare and GriefShare allows churches to minister to hurting people when they most need support and encouragement.

***In looking to the future, your church will now have the flexibility to offer a virtual online group and/or a face-to-face group. Some of our churches will offer both.*** Perhaps, your church would prayerfully consider launching a DivorceCare and/or GriefShare group this Summer or Fall 2020.

**Here are 5 Tips for Launching an Online Group**

Whether you’re already a high-tech whiz or just discovering new technologies, these 5 tips will help you experience success as you lead an online group.

**1.  Ask for help**
It’s not you versus the internet! You’re not alone as you lead your online group. Reach out to the many resources at your fingertips:

Call a Church Initiative ministry coach for help with accessing the videos or sharing them with participants. 800-395-5755

Watch a tutorial. There are many how-to videos and articles available. Here are two that offer everything from getting started to enhancing your online meeting experience.

[Zoom](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206618765-Zoom-Video-Tutorials)
[Google Meet](https://support.google.com/a/users/answer/9282720?hl=en)

Contact people in your church or in your group who have technical experience. Don’t be afraid to ask!

*One of our group members is an IT guy, and he set everything up for us.* – Joy

*Our associate pastor graciously worked with me and taught me how to use the technology.* – Eileen

**2. Practice**
Take the pressure off by doing a practice run before your first online meeting. Invite everyone to a 10–15-minute practice session to give you and the participants a chance to work through any issues and get used to the format.

**3. Break the ice**
Icebreakers are even more important when you’re using a new format. They’re great to help everyone get more comfortable with the online group setting.

A “virtual tour” is a good icebreaker for video meetings: Have people talk about something visible in their background (a picture on the wall, the room they’re sitting in, etc.) or play a quick game of “I Spy.” Check out this helpful [article](https://www.smallgroupnetwork.com/8-icebreakers-for-online-groups/) from the Small Group Network to learn more.

**4. Know how to handle common audio problems**
There are some simple solutions to keep your communication clear. Check out this helpful [Zoom](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/204484835-My-Audio-is-Not-Working-on-iOS-or-Android) [article](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/204484835-My-Audio-is-Not-Working-on-iOS-or-Android) for specifics on muting, microphones, and other troubleshooting tips.

**5. Use these available features**
You don’t have to reinvent the wheel. (Yay!) Technical experts have already designed tools you can use for a smooth online meeting.

Polls – These can be helpful for icebreakers or to get feedback during discussions. Here’s [a short video](https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/213756303-Polling-for-Meetings) on how to use polls in Zoom.

Raise hand, chat, react – Just like when you were in school, these tools prevent people from talking over each other. Here’s a quick [tutorial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK80ovbnvj4) on using these features.

Breakout rooms – If you need to break into smaller groups for discussion or prayer time, these are perfect. Here are quick how-to videos on the subject.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lo3Uhgz3cKg>
<https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/articles/206476313-Managing-breakout-rooms>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbPpdyn16sY>

**Bonus—but most important: Change your perspective**
It might not be the ideal situation, but online groups are a great way to stay connected. We’re finding that participants are grateful for the opportunity to get support, especially now when options are limited.

*A few of our members are now alone and are really feeling the effects of the isolation. The meetings online have been a godsend.* – Mike

*People don’t stop hurting just because there’s a pandemic. We’re committed to serving these people. They need us, and we can’t abandon them.* – Joy

*It’s virtual. It’s not the same, but it’s still so much better than people just struggling on their own.* – Roseanne

**Additional Resources**
The tools below are free solutions that can help you and your group members stay connected while meeting virtually. (And you don’t need high-tech skills to use them!)

**Phone conferencing**
[Freeconferencecalling.com](https://www.freeconferencecalling.com/)

**Video conferencing**
[Skype.com](https://www.skype.com/en/)
[Google Hangouts](https://gsuite.google.com/products/meet/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=na-US-all-en-dr-bkws-all-all-trial-e-dr-1008072&utm_content=text-ad-none-any-DEV_c-CRE_246638620286-ADGP_Hybrid%20%7C%20AW%20SEM%20%7C%20BKWS%20~%20EXA%20%2F%2F%20Hangouts%20%5B1:1%5D%20Google%20Hangouts-KWID_43700015211414153-kwd-362516399437&utm_term=KW_google%20hangouts-ST_google%20hangouts&gclid=Cj0KCQjw09HzBRDrARIsAG60GP921eYneR6tnyUU_F510J5_nbVeQ4w2-cv11f8kEvH1-yb-8RUpMbgaApx4EALw_wcB&gclsrc=aw.ds)

**Have Questions?**
As you step up to take on this new virtual role, you probably have additional questions. Don’t hesitate to let me know if you would like to explore offering the online version of DivorceCare and/or GriefShare, I would be happy to walk through the startup process with you.

I pray that you and your family and friends remain healthy, and that your church will continue to be beacon of hope to your community.

With a grateful heart!

Joseph Northcut

Director of Church Resources

jnorthcut@churchinitiative.org

919-621-2542