Running a Start Course with online conferencing (Zoom, etc.)

We have been asked a lot recently about if it is possible to run a Start Course online via online conferencing. You will be pleased to know it is! Here is a brief article to help you get going with that.

For this article I will refer to online conferencing as 'Zoom'. There are alternatives such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc. However, I am most familiar with Zoom. It may be that some of the features I will mention here are not available in all online conferencing, although I imagine they are.

Let's get started!

How does it work?

The first thing is, as with a normal Start, you need some people to invite along - contacts you have made - and you need to be able to invite them. If you have been on a Leading your Church into Growth conference before you will have heard that we think that a personal invite works best – you can post a card through a door, or make a phone call: even better, do both!

We also talk about the idea that people often need to see multiple invites to remind them of the personal invite they have seen: so make a Facebook post and/or Instagram post, send them a WhatsApp, send a text message, email, put it on your church website...put it everywhere you can!

If you do invite via social media, *be aware of security issues* with that: some meetings have been 'Zoom-bombed' (people have joined the meeting and been 'inappropriate') and so you may want to password protect your meeting and only share that with people you know. Alternatively, you can have a 'waiting room' from where you can admit people to the meeting or not. It is also possible in the screen share settings, to set it so that only the host can share

their screen, making 'Zoom-bombing' more difficult. Please contact your diocesan IT support for more information about security.

It is okay to post an invite on social media not including the link and password asking people to be in touch for the necessary information. And of course you regular congregation can and should share those details with friends and family who they are inviting to come on your online Start Course.

Once you have Zoom downloaded and have invited people to come along, and you have decided a time and day (remember there are six sessions to Start), you have send guests the link, and they have also downloaded the free software, you are ready to begin.

If you have run a Start course before, this will be familiar to you. If you haven't, then make sure you read all the material in the leader's manual for session one, and cross reference that with the member's notes so you know what they will see. They can be downloaded here: https://bit.ly/2XocaYo

Here's the practical information you need to know in bullet points. And at the end are the pros and cons as we see them of Start via zoom.

Practical, step-by-step information

- Course leader purchases and downloads Start digital: https://bit.ly/2XrzX9X

- Course leader downloads the free Start PowerPoint: https://bit.ly/2XSo5g3

- Course leader inserts the video clips into the PowerPoint (if you are not sure how to do this, it is very simple, just drag the videoclip from the folder it downloaded to and drop it on the slide)

- Course leader sets up Zoom link, invites participants, and emails them the members' notes: https://bit.ly/2XocaYo

- At a set time the meeting takes place online, the host 'screen shares' (https://bit.ly/3clEbE9) the PowerPoint (when you screen share remember to click the box that says 'Use my computer's audio) and when there is a clip the PowerPoint plays the clip (you may have to press play on the clip)

- Participants can discuss the exercises together. On Zoom it is possible to have breakout rooms with small groups - the host assigns these. There is a Youtube tutorial about these: https://bit.ly/3eTYFpx

- Repeat six times for each session

Pros of Start on Virtual Conferencing

- There is very little difference to a 'physical' Start Course, except it is a bit easier as participants can stay at home - and if they get 'freaked out' easily leave the meeting

- Good community and sharing in the groups

- The original Start material can be used easily via screen share

- Participants can interact with one another and group leader

- Leader/Church knows who is there and can follow up appropriately

Cons of Start on Virtual Conferencing

- Participants need to download (usually for free) the online conferencing software - this puts some off and excludes some. With some video conferencing it is possible to simply view in a browser window, i.e., click a link without having to download software - Google Hangouts is one, but it is limited to ten participants at a time.

- Unlike the YouTube version of Start Course (see this article https://bit.ly/2zVUYR3) it is not anonymous. However participants can easily change their name as it appears to an alias, and keep their video off, and even their sound too.

- Has to happen at a set time that works for the majority

Also check out how you might do Start via YouTube (https://bit.ly/2zVUYR3), and the pros and cons of that approach.