

## **Virtual Ben Franklin Circles Guide**

**March 2020**

Welcome. We know it can be intimidating to create an online gathering place for the first time so we have gathered tips and suggestions that others have found helpful for hosting virtual Ben Franklin Circles.

As with all Ben Franklin Circle guides, we offer these ideas and resources simply as tips and suggestions to help you get started. Please use what you find helpful, create your own components, and adapt as you see fit. We invite you to be creative, try things that interest you and create your own approaches when you are moved to do so.

### **What's Here**

Part 1 - Helpful online platforms for virtual Ben Franklin Circles

Zoom, Google Hangouts, UberConference, Skype, FreeConference

Part 2 - Best practices and suggestions for hosting a Ben Franklin Circle Online

### **How to use this guide**

Below you will find some general information about some easily available free online video conference platforms that can be used for virtual Ben Franklin Circles. The information here covers the key offerings and limitations for the free versions of these platforms although each also has paid versions that offer additional features.

We have also included links to “how to” guides from the service providers directly and included a few additional guides that we found particularly helpful from 3rd party sources (indicated with an asterisk). These virtual platforms are continually being updated and revised. If you notice an inconsistency between what is listed here and what you see online, please let us know ([benfranklincircles@gmail.com](mailto:benfranklincircles@gmail.com)) so we can keep this accurate and up to date.

There are other free conference call services available and we hope that if you are currently using one not listed here, or come across another one that you like, you will share that with the [Ben Franklin Circle Host Facebook Group](#) and with us.

## **Part 1- Online Platforms**

Here we cover 5 of the most commonly used services-- they are free and easy to use. We use Zoom for our own Ben Franklin Circles and are always happy to talk to share what we have learned and to help troubleshoot where we can.

1. Zoom
2. Google Hangouts
3. UberConference
4. Skype
5. FreeConference

### **1. Zoom**

Quickly create and share a private meeting link with an individual or team and connect remote team members through video.

Getting Started: <https://support.zoom.us/hc/en-us/categories/200101697>

Zoom offers [live trainings and video tutorials](#) on set up and different functions.

This includes topics for people hosting meetings and instructions for people using Zoom for the first time.

**New- Zoom has a just added [this site](https://zoom.us/docs/en-us/covid19.html) specifically to help people effectively use zoom during the coronavirus pandemic.**

*Top Free Features:*

- Host up to 100 participants
- 1:1 and group meetings
- Unlimited 1:1 meetings
- HD video and audio conferencing
- Screen sharing
- Scheduled meetings

- Private and group chat
- Online “how to” videos and instructions via their help center [here](#)
- Customer support is through online chat and email initially but phone support is also available

*Things to Consider:*

- The one pitfall with a free Zoom account is that conferences with multiple participants are limited to 40 minutes. Paid services allow meetings of unlimited duration.
- Signing up for a free account to host meetings is simple and only requires an email address.
- Anyone joining a video conference will need to download an app or desktop version before joining your meeting. People can do this ahead of time or they will automatically be prompted to do so the first time they go to join a meeting. When you can, encourage people to do this before your meeting begins.

*Additional Resources:*

Best practices for hosting Zoom meetings (University of Minnesota)

\* <https://it.umn.edu/zoom-best-practices-in-meeting-one-page>

## **2. Google Hangouts**

Google Hangouts is the communication platform developed by Google that includes messaging and video chat functions. Use this tool for individual conversations, or group meetings with voice and video calls.

If you have a Google account, you have access to Google Hangouts.

To start a video conference go to <https://hangouts.google.com/>

*Top Free Features:*

- Video, audio, and messenger conversations
- Video meeting recordings
- Join calls using Google Calendar
- Screen sharing

*Things to Consider:*

- Need to sign up for or have a google account (free and easy to create)
- Hangout Video Chat limit is 10 participants (the first 10 in)
- Uses phone or Chrome browser

Guidance from Google: <https://hangouts.google.com/>

What you need to use Hangouts

- A Google Account.
- A computer or phone with a camera and microphone. Learn how to use your camera and microphone when you start a video call for the first time.
- An internet or data connection.

### 3. UberConference

[www.uberconference.com/](http://www.uberconference.com/)

The free version of UberConference is ideal for teams of 10 or less. The free version limits your video call duration to 45 minutes, so it's ideal for shorter meetings. It does allow unlimited video conferences though so you can

*Top Free Features:*

- Up to 10 participants
- Unlimited conferences
- Call recording
- HD Audio
- Screen and document sharing
- Mobile apps

*Things to Consider:*

- The free version of Uberconference limits calls to 45 minutes, and up to 10 people. They do offer an unlimited number of conference calls per month so you can call back to continue after the 45 minute limit.
- Free plans do not support international calls but paid plans do.

See UberConference [system requirements](#)

See how to [start or join a video conference](#)

## 4. Skype

Host a conference call: <https://www.skype.com/en/free-conference-call/>

The free version of Skype works well for small teams with less than 10 total members. It is a good tool if you need a simple way to video chat from your computer, phone, or tablet.

*Top Free Features:*

- Up to 10 people on video calls
- No sign ups
- No downloads. Generate your free unique link with one click, share it with participants.
- Screen sharing
- Video call recording
- Interactive video chats

*Things to Consider:*

- You can only host up to 10 participants at a time.

## 5. FreeConference

<https://www.freeconference.com/feature/video-conferencing/>

FreeConference offers free video conferencing for groups of up to five. It is easy to use with no downloads or set up required.

*Top Free Features:*

- Up to 5 online meeting participants
- Screen and document sharing
- Text chat
- No downloads or set up

### *Things to Consider:*

- Limited to 5 people for a video call with the free version

## **Part 2- Best Practices for Hosting a Virtual Ben Franklin Circle**

### **General**

- Have links, quotes or notes that you want to share easily accessible and ready to be pasted into the chat. Depending on the platform, someone joining at a later point may not be able to see what was put into the group chat before they joined. You may want to re-post links or documents part way through your meeting or gathering.
- Take time at the beginning to handle housekeeping - muting the mic, using the chat, general agenda etc.
- Get some reliable headphones. This ensures that you can easily hear everyone else and that they can hear you without confusion or interruption. Using headphones when you are in a room with other people also signals to those in your meeting that their comments are private and are not being overheard by anyone else. Any headphones or earbuds with a quality microphone will work. Double check that you have any attachments or adaptors that might be needed if you are switching between devices. And always test out a new pair ahead of time to make sure your computer audio settings are working correctly.
- Give audio extra attention. The key to a good video call is the audio. The quality of a video meeting can be greatly improved simply with good headsets and good audio etiquette. Encourage participants to use headsets if sharing space with others (including pets) or if there is background noise of any kind and ask that they mute themselves when they are not speaking. It is helpful for a host to be firm about this point. Unclear audio or background noise from just one or two people can ruin the experience for everyone else. By sharing these expectations ahead of time and including a reminder at the beginning of each call you are helping to keep the experience accessible for everyone.
- Close the tabs and applications on your computer/ device that you don't need

during the call; this can significantly improve video performance. And, close or mute any applications that include sound alerts (like email).

- To give others a clear view, place light sources behind your computer instead of behind you. Sit in front of a bright window with the camera facing you.
- Most platforms offer a version of “raising your hand” that participants can use if you are in a large group and want to make sure you have a sense of who has something to say. If you have all your participants muted you can also let them know they can simply unmute themselves to indicate that they’d like to speak. Then keep an eye out for this cue - or even delegate that “job” to another participant who might like having a specific role.
- Make use of non-verbal cues. To gauge agreement or readiness to move on, you can simply say, “give a thumbs up if you’re ready to move on.” This can be a really effective way to invite participation without requiring everyone to speak at once. It also gives you a chance to ask those who may seem unsure if they have something else on their mind. This can be an especially helpful way to invite participation from those who are quieter or like to think more before they speak.
- Direct some attention to identifying and talking about some of the benefits and opportunities created by an online platform and maybe even the current structure of people’s lives. For example, meeting online may mean that you can now include people from far away, or those who were not able to participate in person to person meetings because the space was not accessible for them.
- One advantage of meeting online is that groups can create shared notes as you go. It can be helpful to bring this in from time to time or just encourage people to add to the document over time. [Google Docs](#) or [Etherpad](#) are two tools for sharing and editing together in real-time. One thing to keep in mind is to make sure that if you are sharing notes that no one is left out of this process, for example if you have one or two people on a phone call.

**Advice from Ben Franklin Circles Host, Kim Crowley:**

- First suggestion: pause, drop in to what you're feeling as you facilitate and share it. When you model your own vulnerability and uncertainty by expressing it, it shifts the tone. It brings in the extra sense of humanity people often need when they are sitting in front of a computer. It's not that humanity can't shine through

over the internet -- personally, I've had many deeply connecting experiences over Zoom -- it's just that many people have had a lot of low level (or more intense) dehumanizing experiences connected to software or sitting in front of a computer. The brain often needs some extra doses of humanity to feel safer in front of technology.

- Around tempo and whose turn it is to speak: people's brains have associations that looking at a screen is more of a download experience. Even if they are not thinking that, the screen can feel more like passive time looking at a talking head on TV or Youtube or someplace else. Ramping up the human side as mentioned before can help with this, but also giving people a little more structure and security around knowing when to speak can help to. One approach that I like to do is to give one specific question and let people know that we'll go around once and give everyone a chance to speak before crosstalk. I suggest that people practice curiosity and jot down anything they'd like to follow-up on later. This helps people know exactly what they are being asked and whose turn is when. It also mixes it up a little so that people get both the structure and another experience that feels more organic.
- To create more intimacy, I also like to put people in groups of 2 to 4 in breakout rooms with something to report back to the larger group. I know for myself whether I'm online or in person, I feel more hesitant to speak as the group grows larger.
- Embrace silence. When you ask a question count to at least 10 before you speak again. People need time to think of an answer, decide whether they want to share, and perhaps find the unmute button. If you're uncomfortable waiting that long, just share that that's what you're doing and it feels hard. This puts responsibility back on your group. They probably feel less passive, and people do love to help you out when they realize what you want. Keep asking for help from your group. It can work wonders.

#### Advice from [the MIT Media Lab](#)

- Do a Roll Call. Online meetings lack many of the social and visual cues that groups rely on to communicate. In an in-person meeting, you can see who is in the room. Taking a minute at the start of each meeting to go down the list of attendees, either by reading out from the invites or having everyone identify themselves, will make the subsequent conversation

more productive.

- As a Host, plan to facilitate a little more actively than you might for your in person gatherings. Online meetings require higher levels of facilitation than in-person discussions. Whoever is hosting the meeting will need to play an active role in moving the conversation along and distributing time for people to give their updates and opinions. The meeting facilitator needs to be willing to actively invite comments, calling meeting participants out by name. Do not be afraid to move the conversation along, even if that means cutting people off or redirecting to making progress at the task at hand. A good online meeting facilitator will firmly direct the conversation through the agenda and across all the participants.

In an in-person meeting it is easy to pick up on physical cues and often conversations flow naturally without a dedicated facilitator. That's much harder to do online, and quiet people often end up participating even less. Good facilitation is a skill and facilitators need to keep in mind that they play that role.