

HOW TO HOST A SUCCESSFUL ONLINE RETREAT

Tips and tutorials for
connecting women
virtually



A RETREAT IS A TIME FOR WOMEN TO COME TOGETHER TO CONNECT AS FRIENDS AND TO DEEPEN THEIR FAITH.

This connection can happen anywhere - even online.

We don't have to tell you that the pandemic has created unique challenges for in-person events of all kinds, including women's retreats.

But we believe that hidden within these challenges are fresh and exciting opportunities to bring women together. An online retreat is one of these exciting opportunities!

Benefits of hosting an online retreat

Though meeting face to face encourages community and spiritual growth in a special way, an online retreat can be equally powerful. In fact, there are a few ways online retreats might be even better!

For example, an online retreat is resilient amidst the uncertainty surrounding the virus and local restrictions. No matter what the health orders are, your online retreat can happen!

Also, online retreats offer flexibility that in-person retreats don't. For instance, young moms often have difficulty attending retreats because of schedule conflicts and childcare needs. With an online retreat, you can schedule the retreat for evenings after kids go to bed, freeing up a mom's time and eliminating the need for a babysitter.

Likewise, online retreats are more accessible. They don't require travel arrangements or commuting time—women with an Internet-connected device can attend from anywhere.

Lastly, without the expense of a retreat center, catering, speaker fees, etc., online retreats are more affordable, making it easier for women to come (especially during a challenging economic season like this one).

Sounds good, right?! Let's dive in!

LET'S TALK ABOUT TECHNOLOGY

It's no secret that the most intimidating thing about hosting an online retreat is the technology. But here's the good news—you don't have to be a tech expert to pull off an online retreat! We recommend that you recruit one (or more!) tech-savvy volunteers to help you navigate the technology of your retreat. Already a pro? Even seasoned techies need help testing and troubleshooting. Start with a small team and tackle the questions and ideas below together.

Here's a short list of technological must-haves for an online retreat:

- A computer or smartphone (we recommend a computer because they often have more capabilities, but a smartphone will work, too)
- A reliable internet connection
- A web program that lets you share or live stream video to a group of people
- A way for women to chat with you and each other online
- A way for small groups of women to video chat or text/chat each other during discussion times

Finding Your Online Platform

There are many free options out there for hosting events online. Most of them provide a way for you to live stream or to share a pre-recorded video. Most also provide an easy way for people to chat, leave messages, tag others by name, and post images and videos themselves.

Two popular platforms that we invite you to consider are Zoom Meetings and Facebook Groups or Events.

- Here is [a library of video tutorials from Zoom](#) about setting up and hosting meetings.
- Here is more from Facebook about [creating an event](#), [creating a group](#), and [live streaming a video](#). Note that events and groups share a lot of the same features, so choose your favorite! Both will work for hosting your retreat online.

During each session, there will be times when women break away into small groups for discussion. So what do you do with your live stream video when this happens?

If you're using a platform without a breakout or small group feature, it will be easier to leave your meeting session open while women break away to their small groups. This way women can keep the meeting open on their device or use the same link to re-enter the large group session. For women who choose to leave the large group meeting open, consider creating a backdrop or a simple decorative slide during these discussion times, and play soft music in the background.

If you're using a platform like Facebook, you can simply end your recording and then come back to the group or event page and initiate a new live recording that calls everyone back to the large group.

Retreat planning just got easier!

Get a pandemic-friendly retreat program PLUS a comprehensive guide for hosting your event online

Group's current retreat themes – [Café Chocolat](#) and [WonderFull World](#) - now both come equipped with customized guides for hosting the retreats online. Imagine all the great information in this guide PLUS specific adaptations for every session, digital leader guides, copyright-approved music, and more!

[Learn more about Café Chocolat](#)
[Learn more about WonderFull World](#)

HOW TO HOST USING ZOOM MEETINGS

Yes, we are overwhelmed by all the choices, too! And while we are cautious to recommend any one platform, we know how helpful it can be to receive some direction. For that reason, we're writing this tutorial for [Zoom Meetings](#).

But if you're not comfortable with Zoom for any reason, there are many others that will work. Find a list of others that are conducive to hosting a Group retreat online at the end of this tutorial.

Just in case you're wondering...

Any online platform has vulnerabilities to outside influences like hackers. But there are specific things you can do when you set up your Zoom meeting to ensure your meeting doesn't get interrupted by someone with bad intentions. We'll tell you more below.

STEP 1 – Get a Zoom Account

Check with your church to see if they already have a Zoom plan you can use. If not, you'll need to set up a Zoom account.

Zoom has a free plan that allows 40-minute meetings for up to 100 people. But we recommend at least purchasing their "Pro" plan so you can take advance registrations, have longer meetings, and utilize some additional features you'll need. It's just \$14.99 per month, and you can cancel anytime.

STEP 2 – Schedule a Meeting

Once you log in to your account, click on "Schedule a Meeting." Use the Zoom chat feature in the lower right corner of your screen for any questions you have during this process. But here are some basic tips:

- To use Zoom as a registration tool, check the "registration required" check box. If you don't enable this feature, you'll need to have some other way for women to sign up, and then you'll have to send them the link to access the Zoom meeting. It's definitely easier to use Zoom for registration because the system will do all of this for you.
- We recommend unchecking the box that requires a password.
- Check your video "ON" for Host and Participant. This makes it so everyone can see each other during the meeting.

Basic tips continued:

- Go through the list of Meeting Options and check all your preferences. If you're not sure what they mean, use the Zoom online chat to ask a Zoom representative.
- Be sure your breakout rooms are enabled—if you don't see this option on the main scheduling screen, check your account settings under the "In Meeting (Advanced)" section. Before each of your meetings/sessions, the host can go in and pre-assign the women who have registered to groups. If you don't use Zoom to take registrations, you can import your registration list before assigning your groups.

TIP! To protect your meeting from hackers, go to your Settings for the meeting, click on "In Meeting (Basic)" and then scroll down to Screen Sharing. Make sure "Who can share?" is set to Host Only.

STEP 3 – Copy the Zoom Invite Link and Send Out

If you have a list of emails, you can paste the link into an email invitation. You can also post the link to your social media page.

STEP 4 – Schedule a Practice Meeting

We definitely recommend scheduling at least one practice meeting with your team. That way you can practice using the platform, breaking into groups, and other features. Do this more than once if needed!

TIP! When you start a Zoom meeting, you also have the option to live stream it to Facebook. If you think this feature will help you reach more women, you might want to give it a go during the practice meeting.

STEP 5 – Host Your Retreat

Have fun! Be sure to ask women to keep their microphones on mute, only unmuting when they want to talk. That way you won't hear everyone's dogs barking, doorbells ringing, and kids screaming during your retreat.

Other Platforms:

If you would like to shop around for other platforms besides Zoom, there are many to choose from. The below list isn't exhaustive of every platform available—it's simply a list of other platforms we have either heard of or used AND have the features you'll need for your online retreat. Again, these are the features we advise you to look for:

- The ability to create breakout groups
- The ability to share your screen or to broadcast yourself talking
- A chat feature so participants can type in comments or questions
- The ability to tag other members in the meeting
- OPTIONAL: A registration function

Other platforms you may want to look at:

- [Cisco Webex](#)
- [Adobe Connect](#)
- [LiveWebinar](#)

A WORD ABOUT COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS

Many songs and videos are protected by copyright laws that prohibit their use online without permission. In fact, websites like YouTube and Facebook will often block videos that have copyrighted music playing in the background.

To prevent the frustration of having portions of your online retreat potentially flagged or blocked, take the time to research the permissions of the songs and videos you plan to use. Recording artists, publishers, etc. often provide links on their websites to submit requests of this nature, so start by researching the owner of the song or video and reach out to see if they have a process for requesting permission.

Also, many churches have special permissions licenses for music in place already, so don't forget to check with your church about what might be available to you as a ministry of the church.

Note: Both Café Chocolat and WonderFull World retreat kits now include digital guides detailing which songs are permissible to use online. Take the guesswork out of copyrights and explore these kits today!

HOW TO ADAPT YOUR RETREAT FOR AN ONLINE SETTING

Many women's retreats focus on a featured speaker who teaches women from the stage throughout the whole event.

We think this one-way format has limitations, and those limitations are even more pronounced when a retreat moves to an online setting.

Why? Because listening to a "talking head" doesn't get women involved! Rather than learning together by sharing stories, discovering Scripture, and enjoying hands-on activities, women are passively sitting and listening to someone else talk. It's easy for minds to wander and for distracting thoughts to intrude. And these obstacles are amplified when women are watching a screen from home.

Because of this, we strongly recommend that you make several key adaptations to your retreat program so that it will shine online! These include building in a lot of small group discussion time, shortening your retreat sessions, and using tangible props and participant items.

Let's dive into more detail about these modifications!

Creating Online Small Groups

To help women get to know each other, and to share more deeply with each other, consider adding small group discussion sessions throughout your retreat.

There are many technological options for your small groups. If Zoom Meetings is your preferred platform, you can use their Breakout Room feature—simply assign a breakout room for each small group. Or you can choose to have women use their phones to connect, either through a group text or a 3rd party app. Popular 3rd party apps for groups are Marco Polo, Facetime, Houseparty, and Skype.

Because there are more steps for setting up your small groups online vs. an in-person retreat, we advise you to assign women to small groups ahead of time. At least a week prior to your retreat, send a message to your registrants that shares a) who will be in their small groups, and b) instructions for how to set up their group text or 3rd party app ahead of time. This gives women time to ask questions and request help before the retreat.

Shorter retreat sessions, longer retreat

Often our face-to-face retreats are scheduled to be full-day or weekend events. This time frame is ideal for in-person events but can be overwhelming when women are connecting alone from home. For this reason, we advise you to modify your schedule by:

- Shortening individual retreat sessions by 20%
- Stretching out the retreat over multiple days or even months

Sample modified schedules for your online retreat

Use the following routine for each session:

- 1 hour before your start time: Team check-in.
- 5-10 minutes before the event: Women will start logging in.
- Start the session on time to encourage punctuality.
- 5-10 minutes after signing off the broadcast: Quick team debrief.

Sample schedule for 1 week/1 session per day

Sunday - Session 1

Monday - Session 2

Tuesday - Session 3

Wednesday - Session 4

Thursday - Session 5

Friday - Session 6

Sample schedule for 2 weeks/2-3 sessions per week

Sunday - Session 1

Tuesday - Session 2

Thursday - Session 3

Sunday - Session 4

Tuesday - Session 5

Thursday - Session 6

For a 6-week "retreat," choose a day and time per week that works for most, and host a new session each week for 6 weeks.

Frequently Asked: What time of day should I schedule my sessions?

The answer really depends on the women who plan to attend (hint: this is a great opportunity to survey women in your ministry and see what they prefer!)

Use props and participant items

Just because your retreat is online doesn't mean that you have to do everything digitally. In fact, tangible participant items and hands-on activities help Bible lessons and spiritual experiences stick, especially with an online event.

The key to creating hands-on experiences is to create and coordinate participant packets ahead of time for the women who will be attending your retreat.

In our [Group retreat programs](#) we often include a craft activity that serves as an outreach project, keepsake items that are used during affirmations and blessings during the event, plus additional simple sensory experiences using common household items. Any or all of those ideas will work to enhance your online retreat!

Here are three options for distributing participant materials for your online retreat:

1. If your group will be meeting in-person prior to the retreat (like in a small group or church service), make a plan to distribute them there.
2. If group/meeting limits are in place, you can deliver participant packets to each woman's home. Arrange to leave the packets on the front porch or another drop-off location at the residence.
3. Have participants pick up their packets at a centralized time and location (like the church or a home) prior to the retreat.

SPEEDY RETREAT PLANNER FOR ORGANIZING AND HOSTING YOUR ONLINE EVENT

Today

Pray. It's always a good idea to get God involved from the very beginning!

Set a date. You can have a great retreat in just a few weeks! Use this planner to help you plan an event about four weeks from today, or feel free to add more time between steps for an online retreat scheduled further out.

Choose a virtual platform. Explore options (ex. Zoom and Facebook) to determine which platform you'll use. Take advantage of tutorial videos if you have questions, and don't forget to ask your tech-savvy connections for help! Remember that you'll need a platform that allows you to play pre-recorded videos or (even better!) to live stream a video, plus the ability for women to chat with you and each other. Set up an account if needed, and spend time exploring all the options and features of the platform.

Get a couple of women to help you. You can lead the entire retreat yourself, but it's more fun (and easier) if you have even one more person doing it with you! Together spend time training on the virtual platform you've selected. Decide who will do what (who is going to spread the word, who is going to lead the sessions, who is going to gather supplies—stuff like that), and you're ready to get started!

Tomorrow

Invite women to the retreat. Start spreading the word and getting women signed up! Don't forget that you'll need to collect additional information from your guests ahead of time, like email addresses and social media handles (if needed). And if your group can't gather in-person for registration, you'll need to set up an online registration option. Sites like Evite, or even a free Google Sheet, will work.

Get women excited about connecting for friendship and spiritual refreshment! Reassure them that the event will be fun and relaxing, and that they're going to be amazed at how much this online retreat will deepen their relationships.

Three Weeks Before Your Retreat

Order your participant materials, and source additional supplies that you'll also need to include in participant packets if you've elected to provide them.

Order these supplies as far ahead of time as possible to allow for shipping and distributing to your retreat guests. Remember that you'll need a little extra time to assemble and distribute, so don't procrastinate. It's no fun to get your box of goodies two days after your retreat is over!

Two Weeks Before Your Retreat

Coordinate the distribution of your participant packets and arrange to deliver them or have women pick them up. Send a communication to your guests about the process, including the relevant dates, times, and location for drop-off/pick-up.

One Week Before Your Retreat

Send a communication to your guests with instructions for joining the retreat online. Make sure to include technical details, and provide a way for them to reach out to you for help if needed. Also share which small groups your guests will be in, and instructions for how they'll be connecting with each other for small group discussion during the event.

Test the online platform and practice leading a session with your team.

The Day of Your Retreat

Go have fun! You deserve it!

COMMUNICATION SCHEDULE FOR YOUR ONLINE RETREAT

Just like an in-person retreat, you'll need to communicate the details of how women will participate in this retreat. Instead of maps and room assignments, however, you'll provide links and technical instructions to log on to the retreat, watch videos, and connect with their small groups.

We encourage you to gather an email address, a phone number, and relevant social media handles (for example, someone's Facebook name if you're planning to use Facebook to host your event) in your registration process. Then, once you have this information, you can send the following messages:

- **Within 24 hours:** Send a confirmation message when someone registers.
- **Two+ weeks out:** Include details about the platform you'll be using to broadcast your event, and encourage women to set up access ahead of time if needed. Share any relevant links at this point, such as your Facebook group link or your Zoom meeting link. And share instructions for how women can get their participant packets in time for the retreat start.
- **One week out:** Send a reminder about the date, start time, relevant links, and any materials women will need.
- **One day out:** Send another reminder about the first session's details and a note saying you're looking forward to seeing them tomorrow.
- **(Optional but recommended if your retreat is stretched over multiple days)**
 - **Within 48 hours after each session:** Send a follow-up thank-you, plus any links or resources you promised during the previous session, and share details about the next session or steps if relevant.
- **After the retreat:** Send a final thank-you, plus instructions for how women can provide feedback and share stories from their retreat experience.

QUICK-STEP OVERVIEW OF YOUR RETREAT

At the Retreat

It's time to get your retreat started! You and your leadership team have gone through all the preparation steps. Now you're ready to kick off your event!

Opening Session

You and your team should log on to the online platform at least an hour before the event begins. This will give you time to troubleshoot technical challenges if needed, and to get set up for your first broadcast. Use the following list to prepare for your retreat's first session:

- Leadership team logs on to your virtual platform to check in and pray.
- Post a welcome image or slide to greet women as they log on to the platform, and send a final reminder message to your guests about when and how to log on to the retreat.
- Check your microphone and video to make sure everything is working properly. If you plan to play music, be sure sound levels are appropriate.
- Put supplies to be used in your opening session on a table near you where they'll be easy to access while you're recording.
- Set out water for yourself to sip if needed while you're presenting. And don't forget to eat something light so your stomach doesn't grumble while you're recording.
- Decorate the background behind you to create a welcoming atmosphere that will delight women from the start!
- Be sure you have your small group assignments and instructions for the groups to meet, plus other information women will need to connect during the retreat.

Women begin to arrive—Make sure someone is available to answer questions and troubleshoot technical challenges that might pop up in the chat or via email.

About 10 minutes before your first session begins, check in with your leadership team to be sure they're ready, and then pray with them.

Begin broadcasting on time, even if everyone hasn't logged on yet. This helps set the expectation of starting on time for all the activities at your retreat. Enthusiastically welcome women and go over any schedule updates or announcements that need to be made. Make sure everyone knows how to use the chat features, and ensure guests' microphones are muted to prevent distracting background noise.

About Breaks

During an in-person retreat, this is the time when you'd break for snacks and free time. These free time sessions are welcome and often much needed. Though your online retreat won't be able to offer the same kind of casual in-person connection during free times, you can still encourage women to:

1. Spend time encouraging each other online. Suggest ideas for deepening relationships in between sessions, like sending encouraging texts and messages, following each other on social media and interacting with updates, grabbing an impromptu phone call, etc.
2. Carve out quiet alone time to relax and spiritually recharge. We've learned from weeks of quarantine that just because we're home doesn't mean we're resting. Give women permission to take a few timeouts before or after retreat sessions, like a long bubble bath, a quiet minute listening to worship music alone in the bedroom with the door shut, or a long solitary walk to enjoy nature.

Finish

Can you believe it's already over? This is a good time to provide women with instructions for how to complete and return their evaluation forms or follow-up surveys.

Ask leaders to stay logged on for a few minutes after the retreat broadcast ends to pray together, thanking God for the event and for all he's done.

START PLANNING YOUR BEST WOMEN'S RETREAT YET WITH AN ALL-INCLUSIVE KIT

(New!) Kits now include a digital packet for hosting your retreat online, including session adaptations, shareable leader guides, copyright-permissible music, and more! This packet is automatically delivered when you purchase your retreat kit.



LEARN MORE AT
GROUP.COM/RETREATS