

A Practical Guide to a Virtual Lodge

Introduction: We have entered a new era of meetings in virtual spaces. This is true in medicine, law, businesses, churches, schools and masonic lodges. Although virtual meetings have been around for a while, the number of people adopting the technology and the demand for and drive to conduct meetings virtually has expanded exponentially due to lockdown orders in response to the corona virus. The desire among masonic brothers to continue their lodge experience has moved the need to meet virtually to the forefront. This paper is a practical guide for North Carolina lodges to meet virtually.

Hardware and software: A computer (desk top, laptop, iPad, smart phone) with a camera and a mic is necessary to participate in a virtual lodge meeting. Several software platforms are available and some have been pre-approved by the Grand Master. Pick your software platform and become familiar with its operation.

Notice of the meetings: Your members should have an email address and you should give them notices of the meetings reasonably calculated to inform them of the meetings including meeting links at least ten days before the meeting (and more time if you can) and the notice should inform them how to log into the meetings.

Tiling your space: Your space must be adequately tiled to participate in a virtual lodge meeting. This means that only a brother master mason should be able to see your screen and hear what is said. Having a private space (home office, bedroom, bathroom, garage) where you can shut yourself up away from others is important. Moreover, if the walls are too thin to contain the sounds of what is said by you and others in a lodge meeting, then one way to solve the problem of the meeting being overheard is to use headphones. If you have a speaking part then the only way to tile your space is to have no-one in earshot. In a virtual meeting, it is incumbent on all brothers to observe the video feed of other brothers so as to know that the tiled space for all is secure from cowens and eavesdroppers.

Taking up the Pass: The pass is taken up similar to how it is taken up at Grand Lodge. The pass is taken up before the lodge meeting begins. This is done in a separate meeting with one or more Tiler designees. The Tiler designee sends out a video conference invitation to all lodge brothers and any guests the Master will admit. Virtual meeting software allows for a waiting room into which a participant enters and waits until admitted one-at-a-time into a meeting with the Tiler. The Tiler satisfies himself that the brother is a mason in good standing (for members of your lodge and brothers with whom the Tiler designee has sat with in lodge this is easy). For a visitor or a person unknown to the Tiler designee, the brother should be prepared to show his ID card and a driver's license or other picture ID. If any doubt remains, then an examination is in order.

The Tiler designee will discuss with the brother the need to be aproned, tile his space and maintain a video feed. If the Tiler designee is satisfied that the brother will do his part, then the Tiler designee takes up the pass and provides the brother with a meeting pass code for the lodge meeting. The brother receiving the passcode should be prepared to write it down. The Tiler designee meeting

is a potential bottle neck. Preparing the brothers on what to expect in the Tiler's meeting and having them prepared to satisfy the Tiler and have pen and paper in hand to write down the lodge meeting code will help move this process along.

Possession of the lodge meeting passcode is proof that the brother has satisfied the Tiler that the brother will do his part, has given the Tiler designee the pass and is entitled to enter into the lodge meeting.

The Tiler designee meeting will take some time. Brothers should be prepared to sit in a waiting room for 20-30 minutes. If there are a lot of brothers to be invested with the pass then consider more than one Tiler designee meeting and divide your invitee list into two or more Tiler designee meetings (even consider having Tiler designee meetings on more than one day so as to timely process all brothers who desire to attend the lodge meetings).

Lodge meeting invitation: The lodge meeting invitation involves a different meeting ID number and passcode from the Tiler designee's meeting. However, for ease of access and convenience, the information on both meetings (links and meeting numbers) can be included in one email. Remember that the passcode for the lodge meeting should only be obtainable from the Tiler designee for all brothers except the Master, Senior Warden, Tiler designee, Grand Master, District Deputy Grand Master, and meeting host.

Admission into a lodge meeting: All brothers entering the lodge meeting should first go into a waiting room. The host will admit the brother from the waiting room to the meeting. The Tiler designee should text the host the name of each brother he invests with the pass as he invests him so the host will be ready to admit the brother into the lodge meeting when he enters to waiting room.

Removal from a lodge meeting: The hosts should be familiar with the procedures for removing a brother from the lodge meeting and placing him back into the waiting room. This could become a necessary step in the event the brother's space appears to be inadequately tiled. Moreover, the hosts should know how to communicate with a brother put back in the waiting room so that the issue leading to removal can be identified and resolved and the hosts will know when the brother is ready for re-admission. This can be done with a Chat feature while the brother is in the waiting room. He can be sent a message describing the problem and inviting a text to the host when he is ready to return. The host should be familiar with the procedure for returning the brother to the meeting.

Video cameras always on: It is necessary that video cameras always remain on so that all brothers can see that everyone else's space is adequately tiled. If any brother shuts down his video feed or loses his video feed he should be removed from the meeting and placed in the waiting room until he can resolve his issue and return.

Screen participant displays: Screens should be set to display as many thumbnails as the system will permit. There are probably limits on how many thumbnails can be displayed in your chosen platform. Zoom has a 49-thumbnail limit. If you have more participants than thumbnails, then you

may want to conduct all votes as polls (see discussion of polls under Voting by paper ballot below) to be sure to count everyone, and look into ways to cycle members into the visible thumbnails.

Audio: It is often helpful to have brothers who are not speaking to mute their audio.

Voting by the usual sign: Voting in a lodge is usually done by a show of hands. To vote, have brothers hold up their hand in the view of their camera and keep them up until counted. Most platforms allow for non-verbal communication (emojis including an open hand) which could be used as a way of voting. We encourage the show of the actual hand at least until such time as virtual lodge meetings are common place and hand emojis are considered the indubitable equivalent of a raised hand.

Voting by paper ballot: Most platforms have a “polling” feature which can be used to submit a paper ballot to the brethren. The ballot can be done anonymously. When the pole is closed the results can then be displayed to the brethren.

Secret ballot: We have not yet come up with a way to do this in a virtual environment in compliance with THE CODE. A solution will be found. For the time being there should not be any secret ballots conducted in a virtual lodge.

Displaying the Three Great Lights, the Flag and other masonic images: Masonic images are important. During appropriate times of the meeting you will want to display the columns, the three Great Lights, an altar, the flag of our country and the letter “G”. Alternate ways for display:

- A. PowerPoint and Screen Sharing: Most platforms allow for screen sharing. A dedicated screen share computer allows screen sharing to display the Bible, Alter, Three Great Lights, columns, “G”, Flag of our country, and any other image you desire. A brief PowerPoint presentation can contain your images. Screen sharing usually takes up most or all of a screen such that you can only see a few thumbnails if any.¹
- B. Placing Photos in Front of the Camera of a Dedicated Computer: This allows you to display desired images in a thumbnail at all times without gobbling up most of the screen in a screen share.²
- C. Virtual Backgrounds: These may be able to supply your images. Changing virtual backgrounds is usually more time consuming and requires more steps than might be desirable in a meeting.

Reporting the pass: The exchange between the Master, Sr. Warden and the Deacons will be as in Grand Lodge³. The confidential sharing of the pass between these four is done in a conference call with deacons’ mics muted. Someone with an iPhone or similar device should set up the four-way call before the Master gavels the meeting to order. When the deacons give the pass to the Sr.

¹ If you would like a PowerPoint with these images contact Bill Faison, luxlibertaslodge@gmail.com, or 919-606-6700, and I will be glad to share with you.

² You can print the images from the PowerPoint referenced above if you like.

³ If you are unsure what this is, call me, Bill Faison 919-606-6700, or speak with your DDGM.

Warden, they mute their mics and use their phones to give the pass. The Deacons' mics remain muted as they communicate the pass to the Master by conference call. Thereafter all four leave the conference call and the Deacons unmute their mics.

Conducting the meeting: The Master gavels open the meeting just as any other lodge meeting and the officers do their parts as usual. The difference is in the floor work, but even that is very similar to being in lodge. The Master still gavels folks up and down; the Jr. Deacon still steps to a door with staff in hand and knocks; and the Tiler opens a door, closes a door and he too knocks; the Sr. Deacon still steps to a Bible opening it and displaying the three Great Lights; the Chaplin still approaches an alter and kneels before the Bible to pray; and the brothers rise for he pledge of allegiance, and join the Master for the signs, etc.

Brothers are recognized to speak just as in a regular lodge. Motions are voted just as in any other lodge. And, the lodge is closed as any other lodge.

Practice: Do at least three practices with all of the officers (elected and appointed) before trying to do a virtual meeting. Be sure that everyone is comfortable with their parts in a virtual environment. Have a couple of additional brothers who are comfortable doing any part participate in the practice and be ready to fill any vacant position. On the night of your lodge meeting someone with a part will be unable to attend (hardware problem or some other problem) and you will need a fill-in.

Conclusion: Think about your virtual meeting just as you would think about a regular lodge meeting. Conduct it just as you conduct a regular lodge meeting using images to represent objects that may be important in a regular meeting emphasized at the appropriate time.

■ END

CHECKLIST

1. Choose a virtual meeting software platform and become familiar with its operation.
2. Gather the email addresses for your lodge members and any invited guest.
3. Schedule both Tiler designee meeting(s) and lodge meeting.
4. Provide the brothers reasonable email notice of the Tiler's and lodge meetings but only provide the brothers the passcode to the Tiler meeting(s). See Exhibit 1 as an example of how this could look.
5. Provide the lodge passcode to the Master, GM, DDGM, Senior Warden and Tiler.
6. The Tiler designee provides the passcode to the brothers in the Tiler's meeting after confirming that the brother is vetted as a master mason, acknowledges the requirements for tiling his space and being aproned, and gives the pass to the Tiler.
7. The host who schedules the meeting should be facile with the system used to display images (PowerPoint, etc.).
8. Schedule three practices limiting the invites to the practice participants (all officers both elected and appointed plus at least one alternate) before attempting to do a lodge meeting. Go through steps 1-6 as part of the practices in addition to all that follows.
9. Prepare polls (written ballots) to the extent you know what these will be in advance of the meeting and know how to do them during the meeting.
10. Just before the Master calls the lodge to order, set up the conference call between the Master, Sr. Warden and the deacons, so the Deacons can communicate the pass. Remind the deacons to mute their mics during this procedure.
11. Display appropriate images at the appropriate time (bible, alter, columns, Three Great Lights, letter "G", Flag of our country, and lodge room).
12. The Host should be prepared to identify brothers who are having problems logging in and should have contact information for them so he can assist with getting them into the meeting.

EXHIBIT 1

To enter the virtual meeting it will first be necessary to attend a Tiler's meeting. WB _____ is our Tiler Designee for the evening. His meeting will start at 6:00 p.m. EDT. The Tiler will confirm that you are invited to the meeting, remind you of the necessity of tiling your space and then he will take up the pass and give you a passcode to enter the lodge meeting. You will enter the Tiler's meeting through a waiting room from which you will be taken one at a time to the Tiler's meeting. Depending on where you are in the queue, you may be in the waiting room for as much as 20 minutes. Please be patient. When you leave the Tiler's meeting you will then log into the virtual lodge meeting with the credentials that follow the Tiler's credentials below and use the pass code the Tiler gives you as part of the log-in procedure for the meeting. Be prepared to write down the passcode given you by the Tiler.

When you log into the lodge meeting you will again enter through a waiting room. The Tiler will text me your name and I will admit you into the virtual lodge meeting. We plan to start the virtual lodge meeting at 7:30 p.m. If the vetting process takes longer than anticipated this may need to be pushed back just a little. Please enter the Tiler's meeting as soon as you practically can to assist in moving the vetting process along.

The Tiler's meeting log-in information follows and after that is the information you will need to log into the virtual lodge meeting.

Tiler's Meeting Log-in Information:

_____ is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Topic: Tiler's Meeting

Time: Apr 21, 2020 06:00 PM EDT (US and Canada)

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/9394842519?pwd=RnBOjVzMHNFaUrNituUnVyM2ZuQT0>

Meeting ID: 939 894 2519

Password: 5seq9v

Virtual Lodge Log-in Information:

_____ is inviting you to a scheduled Zoom meeting.

Join Zoom Meeting

<https://zoom.us/j/9361433123>

Meeting ID: 936 143 3123

Password: You will obtain this from the Tiler. It is a 6 digit number.

My brother, you may be able to enhance your Zoom experience by going to Zoom.us and scrolling to the bottom of the page. In the black band, second column is “Download”, scroll to your device’s system (ie, Outlook Plug-in, Lync Plug-in, iPhone/iPad App, Android App) and download.

If you have any questions about tonight’s meeting procedures, meetings, etc., please call me at 919-606-6700. I am Secretary of Lux and will do all I can to assist you.

Fraternally,

Your Brother

Bill