

Conference Call Guidelines

Types of Conference Call

The Centre for Christian Studies uses 3 different kinds of conference call.

- (1) A Conference Call arranged through a telephone operator has each participant (or group of participants) on a line. Participants can call in to a Conference Call number with a code. This kind of call is used for Council meetings, where there are many participants. It is easier for the participants. It is the most costly kind of call.
- (2) In a Daisy Chain Call the first person calls the number of the next person, who call the next (see end of document for detailed instructions). This kind of call is cheaper, but requires that everyone has access to the right kind of telephone. The order in which people come on line is important. If one person has to disconnect early, the rest of the chain also are disconnected.
- (3) The third kind is set up by the Centre, using the available phone lines at the cheap business rate. Up to five people can be called on five different lines with two phones (sometimes three) placed close together so that everyone can hear. This is the most economical. Audibility can be a problem.

Advantages for meeting by conference call

Meeting by conference call allows a wide diversity of people to connect across the country. There is a saving in time and money since people do not have to travel - a plus in inclement weather. It is often easier to find a time when people can connect by phone (rather than make the time to travel). Conference calls allow a more rapid response to issues. Some groups have found that conference calls promote shorter meeting times, and allow people to focus on the topics with fewer distractions. Some groups have also found that they can be working on the computer at the same time and been able to send written material by email or fax during the meeting.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that for some type of work and for some individuals, a conference call is not the answer.

Problems and concerns

A recent survey of CCS volunteers who meet by phone raised a variety of concerns. Technical difficulties sometimes make it difficult to hear, and therefore wastes time trying to reconnect. The lack of visual clues and non-verbal communication is challenging. In general conference call meetings require some different strategies for both facilitators and participants. The Centre for Christian Studies could explore the use of video conferencing in the future.

The following suggestions are offered to assist in preparation for and participation in conference calls.

Length of Call

Conference calls should normally be less than two hours. One to one-and-a-half hours is preferable. Although it was recognized that a few meetings required longer, meetings longer than two hours are too tiring.

Face to Face

Many people said that conference calls felt impersonal, especially when they had not met some or all of the participants. Some committees try to meet face-to-face once in the year if possible (and affordable). In an effort to “see” your fellow committee members, we suggest that a photograph of each member could be shared with the other members. You could also include one or two of the place you live or work in. You can either scan a photo and email it to your participants or send it to the Centre who will scan and send it to committee members. The Centre can also produce a map of Canada with the locations of committee members pin-pointed.

Agenda

A clear agenda and all relevant paperwork (minutes, worship, etc) needs to be sent out in time for the meeting. If material is sent by email, use rtf for attachments, and include information in the body of the email. Rtf is the most accessible form of attachment. Information in the body of the email will lose formatting. Note: attachments may carry viruses, so should be scanned before opening.

Openings

Worship and Check-In

Many committees have developed worship that can be prepared by one or two members, sent out with the agenda and other material, and shared with the group at the beginning (and end) of the meeting. Participatory prayers are appreciated. Council Meetings begin with people lighting a candle wherever they are. Other groups might have a different opening ritual. Some groups sing on-line! Creating a prayerful atmosphere at the start of the meeting reminds us of our purpose and helps centre the participants.

A brief check-in is also helpful. This time allows participants to connect, build community, hear each other’s voices, and helps break down the sense of distance and isolation.

Facilitating

- Ensure agenda and relevant paperwork (consisting of minutes, reports, background documents and draft motions) is mailed out ahead of time
- The facilitator could develop a format for writing consistent reports
- Good structure and direction helps focus the meetings, keeps discussion on track, and therefore keep the meeting time within reasonable limits
- The facilitator should plan some time-lines around the agenda to keep the process moving
- Review progress of agenda at intervals through the meeting
- Find ways to build up trust
- Recognize the different dynamics if there are a several people gathered in one location, and one or a few on line, and encourage participation of those more isolated
- Since it is harder to communicate without faces, or visual clues, remind people to say their names each time before speaking
- Ask for clarification
- Encourage participation by allowing time for all to speak (a sample chart to monitor who has spoken on each topic, and who has agreed or disagreed with the decisions is attached)
- Check to see if everyone has spoken and expressed their opinion
- There may need to be several rounds of input to ensure ownership of a topic, especially if the topic is controversial
- Recognize that there may be hesitancy to speak or express opinions, particularly if the momentum of those who have spoken already is contrary to that of other participants
- Making decisions and reaching consensus may be more of a challenge when one cannot see

nods or visual clues, and therefore:

Have patience

Clarify the different opinions expressed

Ask if agreement has been reached by all participants

Read and re-read motions when necessary

(take time to fax or email motions if that would help)

- Evaluate the meeting, asking for feedback on what worked well, what problems there were, and what changes people would appreciate to improve participation
- Acknowledge that this kind of meeting can be hard and even exhausting work

Participation

Read all the information which has been shared before the meeting begins. Let people know when you can't hear. Speak clearly and distinctly. It's hard to recognize some voices, especially when you have never met, so give your name each time you speak. A small group who have become familiar with each other's voices could dispense with this. Ask for clarification on any topic or issue. If you need to see information, keep paper handy to write down facts, numbers, names, motions, etc, or ask for the information to be faxed or emailed if possible.

Practical Issues

Comfort is an important issue. Here are some suggestions:

All paperwork required for the meeting within easy reach of the phone

Photos and map of committee members are visible

Hands-free or use of headset is beneficial

Comfortable seating, suitable ambient temperature, good lighting all help

Take an all-purpose-break before the meeting

Have drinks and snacks to hand

Put the barking dog in another room

Distract the baby or child

Have the computer up and running if you plan to use it

Not recommended: the pay phone in a drafty lobby (winter of course) of a Husky Gas Station in Dryden (the truck drivers think it very odd to hear you reciting part of a prayer or scripture; the subway station in Toronto; a cell phone on the highway.

To make a daisy chain call

- 1 find your white pages and look up 3-way calling in your area.....
- 2 someone calls you
- 3 you put them **on hold** - press the hold or flash or connect button on your phone (sometimes a particular phone likes a short press or it might like a longer press).
- 4 then you continue as for a 3-way call...
 - likely you will dial *71 (depends where you live)
 - then you dial the number of the person who you will be calling
- 5 then you should connect with the person you are calling
- 6 now **press the hold/flash/connect** button and you should be back with whoever you put on hold at the beginning
- 7 if there is a busy signal or for some other reason it doesn't work
 - press the hold/flash/connect button twice to get back to the person who called you

Sample Chart for Facilitating Conference Call Meetings

Date of Meeting

Present:

Topic 1:

Decision to be Made:

Name	Spoken on Topic (#)	Position / Decision	Comments

Topic 2:

Decision to be Made:

Name	Spoken on Topic (#)	Position / Decision	Comments

Topic 3:

Decision to be Made:

Name	Spoken on Topic (#)	Position / Decision	Comments

Topic 4:

Decision to be Made:

Name	Spoken on Topic (#)	Position / Decision	Comments

Topic 5:

Decision to be Made:

Name	Spoken on Topic (#)	Position / Decision	Comments