

# **Electronic participation at congregation meetings: one community's experience**

By the Sisters of IHM Technology Consultants

## **Introduction**

One sister is caring for an elderly parent in Argentina. There are six sisters in Lima and two in Sicuani, Peru. There are eight sisters in six cities in Florida and North Carolina. Sisters in parish ministry in Maryland have weekend duties. Meetings are held in Scranton, PA.

Engagement is an essential element of contemporary religious life. Chapters, assemblies, committee meetings, discussion groups, speakers, programs, social events -- all of these provide opportunities for our members to engage with each other and in the very life of our congregations. Distance, cost, responsibilities, age -- these conspire to make it difficult for sisters to take part.

Can today's Internet technologies help? That's the question our sisters have been asking.

## **First Attempts**

We tried using Skype, but it wasn't anything near like being there. We did it by bringing a laptop or two into our large meeting room, setting them up at our small group tables. We depended on the laptop microphones to pick up from the sound system in the room when there were speakers, presentations or open-mic sessions. During table discussion, the electronic participant (e-participant) took part in the discussion at the table that happened to have the laptop.

While this process did succeed in allowing the distant sisters to have some participation, there were problems with the approach.

E-participation was not factored into the planning of the meetings. Sisters perceived to be the most tech savvy were asked to manage the laptops and they landed more or less randomly at whichever of the twenty+ tables in the room to which the operator might be assigned. Handouts were rarely provided in advance, though eventually a wand scanner was introduced to the process so that handouts could be sent as paper copies were distributed in the room.

The distant sisters were limited by what the laptop's microphone and camera could pick up. There was a certain amount of distortion retransmitting sound from the room's loudspeakers. Not all speakers could be heard clearly. Webcams are not made to focus on speakers across the room. And forget about trying to view a PowerPoint presentation on a screen in front of a room.

Small group discussion was, perhaps, a bit better. The speakers were in range of the webcam. A laptop could be moved closer to each speaker at the table; however the volume needed for the distant participant to be able to be heard by all of the sisters at her table over the ambient noise of two hundred other sisters in the room interfered with conversations at neighboring tables.

Large group discussion suffered the same problems cited above with the additional problem of having the focus change to two or three microphone locations in the room. The distant sisters had no direct voice in these discussions.

This form of participation was limited to one or two laptops at a meeting, so only allowed one or two distant sites to take part. Because of this, we limited e-participation to our sisters in South America.

### **A Better Approach**

As we approached our 2014 Chapter, we wondered if we could do e-participation better. Our members were asking for it. In fact one of our mission groups presented a formal proposal to allow for wider and better electronic participation at Chapter and other congregational meetings.

The IHM Technology Committee (Tech Committee) was formed to study the issue and to recommend and implement a solution. Several sisters who have expertise in Internet communications technology were invited to be members of the committee. Our goal was to provide means for electronic participation for a larger number than we had done previously. We decided to do a pilot study that would include six sites. These six sites provided real-time participation for nine Chapter delegates and, because they happened to be in those locations, a few other non-delegate as well..

The committee considered our previous experience, polled other communities to see what they were doing to solve the same problems, considered resources we already had available, and researched a variety of possible solutions. We concluded that no one, single technology would provide our distant members with a full experience of participation. We determined that a blend of technologies would be required to achieve our goals.

Our analysis was that there were three major communication functions in use at congregation meetings.

Portions are largely non-interactive and **presentational** in nature. Opening and closing prayers, greetings, announcements, directions, presentations, speakers, etc, fall into this category. The focus during these times is the person at the podium or the large screen in the front of the room. Video streaming, a one-way broadcasting technology, is best suited to this function.

In our case, we already had a closed-circuit television system set up to broadcast meeting proceedings to two buildings housing our sisters on our property. We were employing a digital video camera with the system which produces a high quality image, far superior to what could be achieved with a standard webcam. With a little research we found that we could connect the closed-circuit system to a computer and simultaneously stream it out over the Internet. We chose Ustream as the provider.

Portions of our meetings involve **small group discussion**. We knew that Skype was suited to this purpose, but realized that one problem with our previous implementation was in the setting. A Skyped small group discussion is difficult to do well in a room full of small group discussions.

We decided to move Skype discussions out of the main room into smaller spaces. We also recognized this as an opportunity to involve more members in the process. We recruited twelve "Skype Buddies," two for each site, to manage the small group discussion for the six sites in our pilot. The Skype Buddies were members who, while they did not consider themselves to be technical experts, were familiar with the use of Skype. Each distant site was paired with its buddies for each session of meetings (pre-chapter and chapter).

Finally, portions of our meetings involve **large group discussion**, or open mic sessions. For this function, we decided to use moderated video conferencing. This allows all distant sites to connect simultaneously.

The faces of each participant or group appear on the big screen, and they can address the group. Having a moderator helps us to control for ambient noise at the different sites and to facilitate the discussion. We chose WebEx for this purpose.

We found that to experience the best picture and sound quality, it worked best for the e-participants to watch the discussion via video stream and then come into the WebEx at the end of the discussion session to address the group.

### **Making it All Work**

Selecting the technology is only one part of the solution. A lot of preparation was essential for all of it to work.

A member of the Tech Committee performed a **technology check**. She called each site, in most cases several times, to determine if they had a computer, camera, speakers, and microphone that could work with the technologies we were planning to use. If deficiencies were found, she recommended, and sometimes purchased and shipped, the appropriate equipment. Her knowledge of the particular set up in each location was critical for giving each site ongoing support throughout the process.

We ran three **practice sessions** with our e-participants to prepare to use and switch among the three technologies. We explained how each one worked and how we would use them. We introduced a connection web page that showed the schedule for the day and included links for the Ustream and WebEx sessions. We practiced switching among the different technologies until they could move smoothly from one to another. We invited the Skype Buddies to attend one of the sessions.

We created a **connection web page** with an easy to remember URL. The main part of the page contained the schedule for the day. Links and other connection information were embedded in the schedule. In the right column of the page, we provided auxiliary links that would be used if there were ad hoc changes to the schedule. The use of these auxiliary links was explained during the practice sessions.

Finally, we made sure that **e-participation was included in meeting planning**. All planned *handouts* were collected and sent by email to the e-participants in advance of the meetings. Of course, we kept our wand scanner handy so that we could scan any ad hoc handouts and email them to the participants immediately. *Time for movement* to and from Skype rooms was included in the schedule. The meeting *facilitator* was briefed on the procedures being used. A member of the congregation leadership was a member of the Tech Committee and served as a *liaison* with the planning committee and facilitator. She acted as an *ombudsman* for the participants during the meeting to ensure that they were included as events evolved.

### **How It Worked**

We used these technologies for four weekend Chapter sessions over the course of a year. The e-participant traveled to Scranton for the last two meetings where the actual voting took place since Canon Law requires physical presence for voting.

As might be expected with any first time experience, things did not always go smoothly.

The e-participants had a range of knowledge and comfort with using technology. Some were located in developing world countries whose Internet infrastructure is not as good as it is in the United States. One

of the US sites had an Internet outage that lasted about an hour. There were, at times, problems with the connections. These were usually of short duration.

On-site Skype group members needed to move out of the main meeting room to smaller spaces for their discussions. This facility was not designed for small break-out groups, so the rooms they needed to move to were not always close by. Travel time cut into discussion time. Though an effort was made to build extra time into the small-group discussion periods, often backing them up to a break time, the non-Skype groups that stayed in place had more time to talk.

Members of the Tech Committee were not assigned to the Skype groups, so they were able to monitor what was going on and respond rapidly when problems were encountered. This did reduce their participation in small group discussion, but once everyone was connected they were also able to participate.

The WebEx connection for large group (open mic) sessions proved to be the most challenging part. Prior to logging into WebEx, the e-participants would be watching the video stream. They needed to close down that connection in order to avoid issues with feedback and then go to our connection page, locate the link for the particular session, and log in to WebEx. The login process for WebEx is the most complicated and lengthy of the three technologies used. Waiting for members to log in to this system caused delays in the meeting. This was the technology that was the least used, so most of the participants did not gain a real comfort in using it.

## **Reactions**

Notwithstanding the challenges, which were for the most part short-lived, overall, the people who took part in both sides of these discussions were satisfied with the quality of their interactions.

The reactions of our e-participants have been overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps this quote from one of the participants sums up the e-participant experience best:

There is no doubt that we were able to participate fully in these sessions and in some ways, I felt that I was closer to the process because I could see much more than I could have if I were in the chapter room.... I was able to participate and it was effective for me as well.

Our in-person participants also reacted positively, for the most part. They expressed an appreciation for the inclusion of the distant sisters and felt that their participation enriched the chapter discussion. They acknowledged that inclusion of the e-participants had some effect on the flow of the meetings, but largely believed that the value of their participation was worth the minor inconveniences involved. Most believed that as we gain more experience with the various technologies used and as technologies continue to improve, the experience will only get better. As one delegate stated:

I think this was a good first attempt at including members from a distance. Like any "new" attempt I feel we need to be patient with the process as it evolves and improves. The more people who can be part of chapter and other gatherings where important information is shared, the better.

## **Learnings**

Based on our experiences, we can offer the following things we have learned about facilitating e-participation:

### **General**

- Training is vital.
- Work with participants in advance to be sure they have compatible equipment (webcams, speakers, microphones, etc.) and that their software and drivers are up to date.
- Arrange alternate means of communication that does not interfere with the technologies being used. Use text messaging, phone and/or email, depending on the participants' circumstances. Agree on who should be the point of contact at the meeting site.
- Be sure that participants have only one program on one computer open at a time to avoid feedback and echo.
- People making heavy use of the same Internet connection in other parts of the building at the same time can affect the connection strength
- Be aware that there is at least a four-second delay with Internet audio/video transmission.
- Train participants to use tabbed browsing so that they can keep email open while using the various technologies.

### **Meeting Planning**

- Keep the wider audience in mind: distant participants, closed circuit audience (if applicable).
- Table discussion will require Skype groups to travel to locations outside of the meeting room. Plan for travel time. "Quick" table discussion ("buzz") disenfranchises distant participants.
- Collect handouts (in electronic form) and PowerPoints to send to participants in advance. If new handouts are developed in the process of the meeting, acquire electronic copies or scan to send immediately. Advise e-participants to monitor email for these.
- Be sure all speakers use microphones.
- Ask meeting planners for the sequence of processes: presentation, small group discussion, large group discussion. Create a connection web page with relevant links for all processes.
- Be aware of copyright issues for music performed, played -- broadcasting these requires a license.
- Plan for changes to the schedule, provide auxiliary links and train e-participants in their use.

### **Video Streaming (Ustream)**

- Microphones for open mic need to be placed so that speakers can be seen by the camera. Speakers should be encouraged to face the camera.
- Connect the streaming computer to the sound system for better quality audio.
- If you are using video streaming in tandem with a closed-circuit system, members with a choice should use the closed-circuit system because multiple users on the same Internet line will affect bandwidth and the speed and quality of the connection.

### ***Video Conferencing (Skype)***

- Calls should be initiated from the meeting site.
- Arrange a contingency plan in the case of a loss of connection.
- Consider the need for amplification and auxiliary microphones in the small group meeting rooms.
- Select screen sizes that are appropriate to the size of the group and the layout of the room so that speakers can be seen by everyone.
- Arrange a method for on-site groups to alert tech support when they need help so that the conversation is not interrupted by support people checking on them. For example, put a red card on the door if help is needed or send a text message to a designated person.

### ***Moderated Conferencing (WebEx)***

- Train participants to use the internal chat in the conference program to communicate with the moderator.
- Set the conference up so that all microphones are automatically muted when participants enter.
- Two computers are needed in the meeting room: one to project the conference, one for the moderator (microphone muted).

### ***Going Forward***

- Decide how to institutionalize the process for future meetings.
- Monitor emerging technologies, assessing their potential to make the process better.
- Develop training for new participants and refreshers for those with experience.

### **Conclusion**

Finding ways to keep our membership connected and involved in the life of our congregations is essential. Today's communication technologies offer intriguing possibilities for helping members who live at a distance from the community's center to participate in congregational meetings. No one technology provides all that is needed to participate fully. A blend of technologies that supports the different activities can be used to achieve an experience closer to "being there."

There are many challenges involved in using any technology, but when the goal of connecting membership at a distance is realized, the effort far exceeds the challenges.