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## Student ministry leaders engage and innovate to connect with youth

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Thursday, March 26, 2020 (one month ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- Social distancing should not mean social isolation, according to Alex Davies.



Alex Davies, pastor of worship and youth at Heights Baptist Church in Billings, Mont., has been posting Bible studies to YouTube while the students he ministers to are homebound. "Social distancing does not mean social isolation," Davies said. Screen capture from YouTube

The global pandemic COVID-19 has forced changes in how ministry leaders communicate with their congregations. It has also caused many to pause and rethink how they can effectively serve and teach while unable to meet in person.

When it comes to ministry to middle- and high-school students, Davies, pastor of worship and youth at Heights Baptist Church in Billings, Mont., emphasized efforts to become even more intentional in building community.

"With the separation caused by the CDC's advice, we are constantly reminding the youth that social distancing does not mean social isolation," Davies said. "We are putting more effort into connecting with youth than we did before the pandemic crisis began."

Billings is the largest city in Montana, with a population of approximately 110,000. Davies said Heights Baptist's youth group averages around 30 students.

"Montana is a fairly reserved state. People are proud and more likely to try and deal with things themselves," Davies said. "This creates an atmosphere of loneliness, which breeds depression quite frequently within the youth."

To combat that loneliness, Davies said, connecting personally with the students is vital. And now, it's more challenging. Davies and other student ministry leaders around the world are facing the question of how to maintain those personal connections during a period when meeting in person is not an option.

Various student ministries are employing methods including Zoom calls, Facebook Live broadcasts, partner Bible studies through bible apps like YouVersion, Google hangouts and video chatting through apps such as Marco Polo. The method and delivery format sometimes depends on whether the occasion is teaching the Bible to a group or having a conversation with a few participants.

Ben Trueblood, director of student ministry at LifeWay Christian Resources, said the innovation of student ministry activities now will permanently affect the very future of the ministry.

"An exciting question to think about is, 'What if COVID-19 provided the space for teenagers from coast to coast in our country to truly engage with God's Word like never before?' That has revival energy all over it," Trueblood said.

Hoping for exactly that, Davies and his team have produced videos three times a week for their middle-school students, posting them to YouTube. The videos contain challenges, encouragements and questions.

The videos and the live broadcasts are meant not only to encourage and connect the students, but also simply to help fight boredom.

Davies has used Marco Polo, an app similar to Snapchat in function, to stay in contact with his high school group. Using the app, users send video messages in a chat format; unlike Snapchat, they can be saved, paused and edited.

"I post what I read that day but mostly keep the app focused on community-building," Davies said. "So far we have had 90 percent engagement with the senior high and around 60 percent with junior high."

Davies also engaged in joint Bible-reading plans through the app YouVersion, even encouraging students to invite others outside their youth group to join.

Other leaders in student ministry have found their vocation to be of help in this new outreach landscape.

Jared Parks, student ministry small-group leader at Front Street Baptist Church in Statesville, N.C., works in the IT manufacturing world. He found making adjustments to platforms such as Zoom fairly simple, and was able to teach some other group leaders how to use Zoom for their meetings.

Even so, Parks said the biggest challenge is still getting connected to one another.

"Virtual only goes so far," he said, adding that students are not only adjusting to virtual youth meetings, but also virtual school and saying the shift can be difficult.

But Parks said the overall reaction has been positive, adding: "The students seem encouraged that we're continuing to engage with them."

The hope is to bring a sense of normalcy in a difficult time, Parks continued.

"From the church governing council side and the student ministry leadership side we are continuing to meet, now virtually, periodically to adjust to changes and plan for the future," Parks said. "This is an ever-changing landscape, so it's been difficult to plan more than two weeks out at most."

Parks said Front Street Baptist is located in a very poor area, making community outreach an already essential part of their ministry.

"We provide meals to 60 students from the elementary school across the street each weekend," Parks said. "We've been working with the school to try to see that these students continue to receive this food during this time when they are not in school."

Maintaining existing ministry and moving into greater areas of community outreach is a unique challenge and call during this time.

Trueblood said one of the biggest challenges while guidelines for social distancing are in place will be how to truly connect with teenagers beyond simply offering an online service option.

"Caring for teenagers who experience loss or hardship because of the impact of the virus will be very important in the coming days," Trueblood said. "These moments of pastoral care in student ministry will be much more significant than an online student service."

Davies said he also hopes that the youth of Heights Baptist will cultivate a greater responsibility for their faith through these challenges.

"I am attempting to leave plenty of space for youth to guide the conversation and make discoveries from the text before spoon-feeding them anything in the discussion videos," Davies said. "My hope is that youth will find their own love for the Bible without the 'crutch' [of] youth group each week."

Trueblood said his prayer is that teenagers will fall in love with God through the Word during this time, cultivating that personal connection even more than before.

Trueblood encourages student pastors and leaders to take care of themselves spiritually and to connect with ministry peers for support and encouragement, as well as to trade ideas on how best to serve well.

"I have been so encouraged by student pastors in the last 10 days as they've figured out how to continue pastoring teenagers in this moment. They have been heroic in their effort," Trueblood said. "My encouragement to them would be to make sure and take care of themselves as well. To seek out community among other student pastors, to be vulnerable about concerns that they have and seek out trustworthy relationships where they too can be heard and cared for."

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