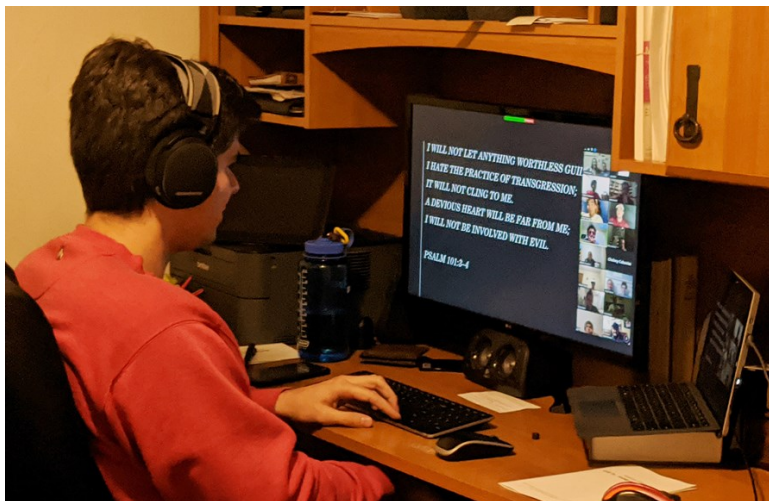


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College ministry leaders work to continue outreach amid COVID-19 restrictions

by Tess Schoonhoven, posted Friday, April 03, 2020 (24 days ago)

NASHVILLE (BP) -- College ministry thrives in community. But the COVID-19 pandemic -- and the resulting social distancing policies, including bans on large gatherings and campus-wide shutdowns -- has in many ways severed traditional connections.



College minister Noble Paddyaker meets with University of Oklahoma students from his work station at home.
Submitted photo

In an uncertain time, college ministries are finding ways to not only maintain community despite distance, but also working to foster an increasingly encouraging environment for the future.

A Heightened Focus

"Ministry looks like real life," said Tiffany Hudson, director for Vanderbilt University Baptist Collegiate Ministry in Nashville. "It looks like helping collegians understand their need for community and providing space for them to continue to navigate life together."

The correct focus of college ministry is leading students to the Word of God, where they can find true soul nourishment, Hudson continued. Even though most students have left campus because of the pandemic and scattered to their various homes, disrupting the traditional avenues for encouraging and equipping, that focus hasn't changed.

"Ministry [now] looks like helping them relieve stress, worry and anxiety with online hangouts, fun activities, and opportunities to express their feelings," Hudson said. "It's about helping collegians walk through sorrow, but also find joy in a new normal."

She said the pandemic is a call to ministry leaders to dig deep into the creative bucket for new and innovative ways to do outreach, discipleship and Gospel ministry. Around the country, college ministries are utilizing platforms such as Zoom, Facebook Live, Instagram, GroupMe and Skype to meet and maintain connections.

Morgan Owen, director BCM at University of Tennessee-Martin, said the staff's biggest focus during the disruption of normal activities has been on using Instagram to communicate.

"BCM thrives because of the dynamics of community," Owen said. "The obvious path to take was moving to a digital form of programming."

Owen said BCM at UT-Martin hosts different programs with varying audiences and content focuses throughout the week, including: a weekly worship service, short devotionals hosted by Owen, men's and women's discipleship groups, prayer meetings and devotionals for the student leadership of BCM.

Hudson said Vanderbilt's BCM has used Zoom for interactive meetings like Bible studies, but also for more laid-back sessions with the goal of simply building community.

"We host BCM 'Cribs' and each student gave us a tour of their home," Hudson said. "We learned about each other, the things people collect, and even met some family members and pets of our students."

A place to belong

Student leaders of collegiate ministries are also having to adjust to the now completely online platforms for ministry.



Elizabeth Schroeder, a sophomore elementary education major at University of Oklahoma, leads a weekly small group through the BCM chapter at OU. Schroeder said her hope in the Zoom meetings is to provide a comfortable space to engage, connect with each other and feel like they belong.

"I appreciate that we're still making an effort to be in community and still grow together, even though we're all spread out and isolated," Schroeder said.

Joe Bouchard, a junior linguistics and computer science double major, also helps lead a small group at OU. He echoed Schroeder's sentiments.

"We're still having good conversation," Bouchard said. "We're still doing things as a community, together, even though we're not physically together, which is a whole lot of fun."

Bouchard said students are also finding ways to have fun together outside of the regular scheduled small groups meetings through avenues like custom Minecraft video game servers, challenges on social media and simply hanging out on Zoom calls.

But continuing the mission of ministry outreach is not as straightforward as it was in person and on campus, Schroeder noted.

Outreach challenges

Last fall, OU BCM moved into a new building on campus. Adjacent to the school's dormitories, it features a coffee shop, which was designed to be a welcoming space for those not already involved in the ministry.

Schroeder said without that designated space for outreach, learning new ways to engage those students not already plugged in -- and now, not even on campus, as it's shut down and classes have moved online -- has been difficult.

"We're all so spread out, and I'm not seeing any of my classmates who I was trying to reach out anymore," Schroeder said. "So, I've actually been really struggling with what it looks like to be missional. What does it look like to the nations, to people around me right now, when I'm stuck in my apartment?"

UT-Martin's Owen expressed a similar concern, noting that fewer students have participated in some sessions since four mission trips scheduled for May were canceled.

Bill Choate, collegiate ministries director for Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, said many groups face the challenge of how to continue discipleship that is outward-facing. Moving campus ministry online was the first response.

Forward emphasis

Choate, who emphasized that college ministries must work hand in hand with the local church, said vigilant prayer is critical as churches and collegiate ministries of all sorts continue to figure out what all facets of their ministry look like during the pandemic restrictions. Likewise, Schroeder noted that in some cases now, prayer is the only available ministry, thus making it even more essential.

"It's something that, when that's one of the only things I can do, because I can't leave my house, takes on so much more meaning," she said.

As the immediate future of on-campus college ministry remains largely unknown, Hudson noted the importance of diving deep into the Bible and reflecting on the character of God. Many colleges and universities have already announced summer classes will be online-only; plans for the fall semester are uncertain.

"It's a challenge to see the future at this point, but as believers we know the One who holds the future so we trust it is coming," Hudson said. "I firmly believe God is doing a work in each of us during this time of quarantine. We are taking a slower pace, spending more time reading and reflecting on God's Word, seeking new and innovative ways to stay in community and further the Gospel."

Hudson said it's vital that leaders continue in prayer and faithfully work in the areas of ministry and outreach that are currently available. She is looking forward to the eager and receptive attitude of students when they return to campus, which she believes will create a prime opportunity to proclaim the Gospel.

"I believe whole-heartedly that as long as we stay the course, work hard and continue to do what it is God has called us to do, our ministries will flourish and be stronger than ever when COVID-19 is a thing of the past," Hudson said. "As leaders we will be better equipped to minister to college students. We may eliminate things that once worked, and we will most definitely implement new ministry tools and resources that we may not have ever created if it were not for a global pandemic."

