



STRATEGIC
RE-INNOVATION
FOR STUDENT
MINISTRY



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INTRODUCTION

Everything has changed. . . almost.

The whole world is different right now. “Social distancing,” “pandemic,” “COVID-19,” and “contagion” are words only medical professionals and scientists used before, but are now commonplace for moms, dads, and teenagers. Old and familiar words like “viral” have new meaning. We are living in an unprecedented time of. . . well, everything.

Student ministry today feels different, but it is foundationally intact. In fact, if anything has changed, it is the artifice of what we thought was important because we had always done things a certain way. This is an unprecedented time, so there is no room to hold onto things “just because we used to do them” a certain way.

In this season of ministry, it is critically important to be consistent in whatever you commit to doing. When everything else has been disrupted in the lives of our students and their families, consistency is a gift we can give them.

The feelings of uncertainty for many and worries for others need to be met with a well-executed plan of action. Author and business leadership innovator Chris Trimble talks about how all innovation is marked and measured by execution. Here’s the important question for you—instead of “What could we do in a season of fresh challenge?,” we should be asking, “How well can we get it done?”

Today, we must ask these questions about everything we do in ministry:

“What is the purpose of this?”

“Does this pastorally care for God’s people?”

Our foundations are still intact, but the tools we have to accomplish our work have dramatically changed, and our students’ environments, time, and influences have changed. Because these things have changed, we must, too, in order to become better youth ministers, leaders, and pastors to our students and their families.

During this time, we must be student ministry leaders who will:

- Embrace the challenge to innovate
- Take the time to evaluate and strategize
- Delegate for growth
- Lead with excellence
- Execute consistently

In the scurry to figure out how to stay connected in a socially distanced world, we can feel a little overwhelmed with what we don’t know—so much so that we begin to forget what we do know. Do not forget! The work of ministering well has not changed. Finding focus areas and pouring your energy and time into those areas will help you successfully lead and pastor through this season.

This guide will walk you through four critical areas of focus in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.



FOCUS AREA 1: INNOVATION

Youth ministry has a rich legacy of innovation on the leading edge of crises. It is my prayer that if you are reading this right now, you will begin leading from within your church to push the Church to become a more engaged, agile, and caring community of faith.

Now more than ever, students have big questions and parents need supportive partners in the faith formation of their children. The importance of a Christian community to encircle and support their young people is still necessary and true.

Rest in the truth that your calling to love, serve, and care for students and their family units has not changed. The ways, means, and tools have shifted—those are the things we are looking to strategically rethink, reimagine, and innovate.

Innovation is necessary creativity.

Sometimes we get to be creative. Other times, we have to be creative. The whole world is currently living in a season of forced innovation, and everything that we were doing needs to be open for discussion, review, and evaluation. Everything.

- When we gather
- How we gather
- What we do when we gather
- Our communication systems
- Our training tools
- Our guidelines for pastoring

Everything must be reimaged to better fit to our now digitally defaulted world, but...True innovation happens inside of existing structures. We are not looking to reinvent student ministry; we are looking to innovate our strategy of how we do effective ministry in a now virtual environment.

This cultural moment is teaching us about the importance of being constantly innovative. This giant push to innovate is going to leave a wake of exhaustion, unless we are prepared to name the actual problems we are trying to solve.

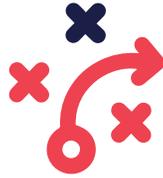
Before we dive in, give yourself the grace to know that is important and exhausting work. It is not a sprint or dash, but adopting a posture that is open to evaluation, critique, and improvement.

Creativity is Problem-solving

You may not automatically think you're creative, but you are. . .

- Every time you figure out how to make a shoestring budget fun and exciting.
- Every trip to Walmart to reimagine pool noodles into a 101 different ways to have fun.
- Each moment in teaching when you connect Biblical truth with contemporary culture.

You can do this. You just need to be strategic about what problems are the most important to solve right now.



FOCUS AREA 2: STRATEGY

Strategy is a word that often gets overused by church staff. It can serve as a cover for excusing why we are doing what we have always been doing, or as leverage for doing something new that feels important. Now—maybe more than ever—your strategy is key. You must focus on using your energy to execute what truly matters most.

Remember how we talked about exhaustion? A clear and focused strategy that is well-communicated and well-executed can help combat exhaustion.

- You are no longer bound to your former model—don't spend your time trying to reproduce a 90-minute service or gathering via Zoom or YouTube.
- Examine what you've been doing and ask these exciting and bold questions:
 - What if students could be challenged daily by each point of my sermon?
 - What if small group meeting options were more flexible than ever?
 - What if we had more leaders engaged because it didn't happen at the same time they wanted to volunteer in another ministry?
 - What if inviting a friend to experience student ministry was less intimidating than ever before?
 - What if students could help practice what we teach in real-time instead of just mentioning the spiritual disciplines like homework?

All of these areas of innovation stem from your existing values to disciple students and are things we believe to be important to their faith formation. The difficulty lies in deciding what comes first, right?

Your strategy begins with communication.

Communication with Families

If you did not have a consistent and thorough weekly communication plan for your parents and volunteer leaders, this is your season to make that priority number one.

There has never been a more important time for youth ministers to call, connect, and support the parents and guardians of their students. Communication was always the most important weekly work and it still is. This is your moment to jump-start, restart, and fully invest in connecting specifically and personally with the parents and guardians of your students.

More than adopting a new tech tool, you need a strategy and weekly plan for how you will be communicating and what parents and guardians need to do to get looped into that communication feed.

Why?

Because they want to hear from you.

They have questions and even though you don't need to have all the answers, you need to not be silent. Your students and their parents are feeling isolated, worried, and alone. Some form of weekly and daily communication from their pastoral leaders is vitally important.

Because they need to hear from you.

This is a cultural moment for the role of many youth leaders to shift into ministers and pastors of a deeply loving and patient gospel.

Daily social media posts, multiple update texts, and weekly emails are vital contributors to ministering well. In a season of crisis, over-communicating is important to keep the most faithful reminders in front of them.

Communication with and Investment in Leaders

One thing that is definitely unchanged is the need for a support team of amazing adults to mentor and lead students. Never innovate alone. You need their insight and collaboration. They are as much in the middle of rediscovery and innovation mode as you are, bring them into the complicated challenges and important ministry you are doing.

Some of your leaders are parents, so ask questions and learn from them:

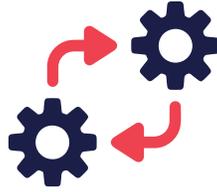
- What are they feeling?
- What does good ministry to their family look like?
- What is the best channel to communication, update, and comfort?

Invest your time in teaching leaders your communication strategy.

When leaders can answer questions on your behalf, it not only protects you against a million micro questions, but reinforces your strategy for them. Your leaders should know really well how your ministry is structured and how parents and students can connect and receive updates.

There are new tools and opportunities to connect with your leaders that will create a more dynamic relationship between ministers and volunteers and subsequently, volunteers and their student small groups. Because of these new tools, it is becoming increasingly easier to schedule flexible meetings or record meetings and share that information with those you have handpicked to love and lead your students.

- Have more frequent (and shorter) volunteer meetings and training opportunities to keep your leaders in the loop on your plan. They need to know it as well as you do.
- Build momentum for your team as you seek their input and involvement in ministering to students.
- Rally their help and focus their efforts.



FOCUS AREA 3: EXECUTION

Teaching Messages

20th century Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, is famous for saying “The medium is the message.” Which is to say, how we deliver what we say matters as much as what we are saying.

When it comes to preaching and teaching the gospel, what we are used to has now shifted. Gone is your weekly 20-25 minute sermon from stage to a room full of students in folding chairs. The mechanics, run time, and audience have shifted.

It's time to engage in a way that is relevant to students' lives now.

Before creating anything, consider your own engagement with digital content. You are on your phone throughout the day—how do you consume content? In what ways do you find material engaging?

I know in my own personal habit, I am engaging with multiple touches throughout the day in short bursts of 8-12 minutes segments. Every so often, I will catch myself digesting something long-form, but for the most part, I love 10 minute or less videos, sermons, or meaningful clips.

- Craft messages with meaningful content for students to absorb in the morning, between rounds of gaming, or right before bed.
- You can still preach a “sermon,” but get to the material that challenges students more directly, specifically, and quickly.
- Preach ONE big idea and offer ONE very specific next step. Can they perform that next step with their phone or tablet still in-hand?
- Remember that as soon as they finish watching, they're onto the next thing. Don't just empower, impact.

The medium or tool you use will always shape the best practice for implementing it. Fully understand your tools before creating content. This will help you share and deliver content well.

Worship

What about corporate worship gatherings? Ironically, of all of the technological advances that we are discussing to get people together online, creating a synced shared singing experience is still difficult. Whether it be lag due to computing power or differing internet connection speeds, it is difficult to emulate a shared worship experience across a Zoom room or FaceTime call. Encourage your students and their families to connect with your church's live-streaming options.

Heart of the Worshipper

Perhaps one of the most important things that student ministry leaders and pastors should consider is: what does it mean to prepare oneself for worship? Do not take for granted that the physical movement from a student's house to church house signaled a posture change towards the sacred. But how do we help students make this change now when they're no longer leaving, but instead tuning in on a device that has probably been in their hand all day?

Help students ask the big questions about worship. What does it mean to move your understanding of worship from outside the walls of the church and build an altar of praise in the world, in your living room with your family and TV or next to a computer on shared screens with faithful friends?

Sketch The Shadow

In Hebrews chapter 8, the author reminds us of the importance of form for worship. Moses was instructed to, "carefully copy the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain." Or in one translation, to "sketch out the shadow" of what God had laid before him. This imagery of a tabernacle or temporary gathering site for worship is a particularly convincing image for this odd time we are currently experiencing.

Help your students connect with what was normal by reconnecting with the ancient image of the tabernacle. Help them to engage with worship beyond what is provided for them by involving them across the screen and across the stream.

- Utilize spiritual practices and disciplines that are less depending on music.
- Quiet moments of while on a shared call with friends can be powerful. Don't be afraid of them.
- Slow down the worship gathering time by encouraging students to actually take the time to journal while you are studying Scripture together.
- Be visual! Students can virtually journey to ancient biblical sites while you are discussing them, or take in art related to the biblical story. Use the tools at your disposal.
- Get creative—there are a variety of ways in which a digitally defaulted ministry can be hyper-connected in a socially distanced season. Encourage worship times to be expansive for their theological imagination, not limited.

Activities

Don't forget the fun. Your students first fell in love with digital technology and community-building tools because it promised social connection and entertainment. If your primary move to get student ministry online is to deliver your content or to inform them, then **you** are missing out on what first drew your students to all of their favorite platforms.

Your students were born with infinite access to information, and yet they spend all of their time on five or fewer apps. Students aren't looking for answers, they're looking for meaningful connections. That connection comes from engagement. If there's a new word we can use to measure our effectiveness, it's engagement.

The Metric of Engagement

Engagement in virtual student ministry requires us to consider not just what we are doing, but how and how much students are interacting with what we're doing. Embrace that smaller gatherings are akin to the shorter messages that you will share. Moreover, better engagement usually happens when gatherings are smaller and therefore probably more focused.

Just a few months ago it felt like the battle was getting disconnected students more involved, and now there is a hunger to be even more connected than we can handle. Students are starved for connection, and we had previously neglected meeting them on their preferred turf—online. ***If we are serious about discipleship in a digital age, then we need to be willing to engage daily in their native domain.*** (Remember not to virtually mimic the ninety minute midweek by taking it all online, but reimagine the important parts and build a new week of connecting with your students relationally.)

There is a chance for some redemptive work here as we seek to help students find connection, mentoring, community, and purpose in a place that was reserved for distraction and half-hearted homework.

One of my favorite insights that has emerged from this wildly innovative season is how important and essential the online gaming/streaming students have become for many student ministers. These Twitch-obsessed, multi-display, mechanical-keyboard-loving teens have been on the inside of a revolution that is deeply competitive, creative, and communal. For the last six years, they have been on the leading edge of the technologies that make online community-building possible and loaded potential. They understand the value of both large-scale virtual gatherings, and smaller, more focused gatherings. They are comfortable flipping between tools to connect with the game, community, or people they trust and value.

Follow-up

The principles you know about follow-up still hold true. There are just lots of platforms for you to perform it on now.

Digital follow-up may be a new thing for you, but the ability to collect social media information and connect across multiple platforms is not just nice—it is necessary. The management of all of your messaging may be more detailed, but the potential is even greater.

What about students without the internet or an online presence? Your “new tool” here may honestly be an old one—a conference phone call with a student and his or her parent. No matter what, the joy of knowing that their minister loves them, cares for them, and made the time to call them is everything.



FOCUS AREA 4: FLEXIBILITY

The tireless and exciting work of innovating is exhilarating and **exhausting**. There will always be more that could be done, but ceaseless work must be met with genuine self-care. Why? Because you are learning as you are doing. You cannot know enough fast enough. Learning when to sprint and when to slow down is one of the most important lessons this season can teach you **and** your students.

Without the walls, commutes, and boundaries of a church, office, or building, working and worshipping from home invite us to really consider how we spend our time.

In the kind and reminding words of the late Pastor Eugene Peterson, “Incrementally, without noticing what I was doing, I had been shifting from being a pastor dealing with God in people’s lives to treating them as persons dealing with problems in their lives. I was not being their pastor. I could have helped and still been their pastor.”

Let us not get so worried about solving problems that we forget the people who God is working in and has allowed us the divine joy of serving.

With all the excitement, creativity, and innovation, of this season, never forget that you were first called to pastor.