

## Youth Ministry and the Pandemic

*Abstract: Crisis and chaos are not uncommon terms associated with youth ministry. Youth ministry professionals are trained to handle a wide variety of crises; however, managing the demands of youth ministry in the middle of a global pandemic is uncharted territory . . . until 2020. This article focuses on how (select) youth ministries operated, reached out to youth, and cared for youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Practical application alongside both challenges and joys are addressed.*

### Introduction

In 2020, as COVID-19 surged, the words of Megan Faulkner rang true for youth pastors across the nation, “What a time to be the Chaos Coordinator—I mean, Youth Pastor” (Faulkner in Oestreicher, 2020, p. 90). *Youth ministry, chaos, and crisis* are old friends. In fact, youth ministry and crisis are words that appear together consistently in the literature (Atkinson, Barnett, and Severe, 2016; Fort, Eriksson, Gottuso, and Wilkins, 2017; Mason, 2014; Ronen, Hamama, Rosenbaum, and Mishely-yarlap, 2016; Van Pelt and Hancock, 2005). In both training and practice, youth workers are well versed in managing a variety of ministry crises. Youth ministry leaders are trained to juggle all sorts of teen-related calamities. While, over the years, many of the “typical” youth ministry crises have shifted toward and emphasis on mental health and media-based concerns, youth pastors are still trained to deal with crisis (Severe and Senter, 2020). And yet, the typical youth ministry crisis is not the same as a global pandemic. Navigating a national shutdown alongside ministry has never been done—at least not before 2020.

Considering the nationwide crisis that COVID-19 sparked, and the novel nature of conducting youth ministry during such a season of unknowns, I set out to discover what was happening in the trenches of youth ministry. During the late summer and early fall months of

2020 I interviewed eighteen youth ministry professionals. In the midst of the interview process I was privileged to hear about their ministry experiences: the challenges and the joys. When I initially set out to interview youth ministry professionals—a term that will appear regularly in this article—I hoped to interview folks on both ends of the pandemic. Unfortunately, as I type this article yet another wave of COVID variants are ravaging neighborhoods across the United States. In fact, just yesterday I was talking with the youth pastor at my local church about our plans to engage our youth during this season of continued uncertainty. All in all, it has been, and continues to be a challenging season of ministry. It is nearly impossible to predict what our lives and ministries will be like by the time this article is in print.

During this season of ministry, alongside crisis after crisis, reaching and caring for students has been *different*. As I interviewed youth ministry professionals, they repeatedly reflected this sentiment in the stories recounted. Ministry and life are hard. Ministry and life are different. How to navigate youth ministry effectively in this season is an unknown.

Recent Barna research suggests Generation Zs, particularly during the pandemic, have felt incredibly lonely (Barna, 2020). Adolescents long for significant relationships and meaningful connections (Barna, 2018). Unfortunately, during the COVID-19 pandemic teens have been forced to alter many of their normal activities. The list of reasons teens have needed to adjust or change their interactions and participation in church, extracurricular, and family-life is long—uncertainty, disbelief, fear, health concerns (for self, family, or friends), being exposed to COVID-19, being symptomatic, events being canceled, and a host of other reasons. As I listened to the stories and experiences of youth ministry professionals over the fall of 2020 the recurring theme that things have been different, challenging, and frustrating were on repeat, but so were hints of joy, innovation, and hope.

## **Research Question**

The research question for this study was: How are youth ministries in the United States functioning in light of the 2020 global pandemic? This study focused on the exploration of general youth ministry practices. Specifically, how practices and programming were changed or adjusted, general response to the pandemic, how students were cared for, means utilized to reach out to students, technology usage, lessons learned, and tools utilized were focused upon.

## **Research Protocol**

The research presented in this paper is drawn from an interview-based study completed in the summer and fall of 2020. The research protocol was qualitative in nature including 45-65 minute, individual in-depth interviews ( $N=18$ ). The majority of participants were from the Midwest region of the United States. There were also participants from all parts of the continental United States. Participants included youth ministry professionals (the term, youth ministry professionals, will be used throughout to describe research participants in lieu of youth pastor, youth minister, youth leader, etc.) at all stages of ministry experience (early-career, mid-career, and seasoned) and across a variety of denominations (see Appendix A for demographics).

For this study, participants were solicited utilizing ministry contacts, social media outlets (Facebook and Instagram) and a convenience, snowball sampling method. Interestingly, the use of social media produced fifteen contacts within just minutes of posting a request for research participants.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher personally. Like most meetings in 2020, the majority of interviews for this study were conducted via Zoom video conferencing ( $N=14$ ). A handful of interviews were conducted face-to-face in local outdoor venues or office spaces that

allowed for appropriate social distancing measures ( $N=4$ ). Most research participants were Caucasian ( $N=17$ ); however, Latinos ( $N=1$ ) were represented in the sample. Participants also represented a variety of denominational backgrounds (see Appendix A). All interviews were voice and/or video recorded and transcribed for data analysis. All coding and data analysis was done using NVIVO 12 software.

### **Review of the Literature**

As noted previously, youth ministry and crisis are terms that go hand in hand—the literature is teeming with books and articles that address various types of crises youth ministry professionals deal with (see Atkinson, Barnett, and Severe, 2016; Fort, 2017; Mason, 2014; Ronen, Hamama, Rosenbaum, and Mishely-Yarlap, 2016; Van Pelt and Hancock, 2005). The literature addressed specific types of crisis (e.g., suicide, family crisis, loss, anxiety, etc.) as well as crisis and trauma in general. Much of this literature helps prepare youth ministry professionals for the various types of crisis that must be addressed in vocational ministry. Nonetheless, the literature is a barren when it comes to suggestions on navigating ministry during a global pandemic. In reflecting on history and pandemics of the past, it is clear that we are charting new territory in these days. Formal youth ministry—the kind we refer to in western culture—didn't even exist during historic pandemics.

While there is nearly no research pointing toward pandemic-life and ministry, there is some research addressing the role faith plays when facing difficulty and dealing with crisis (Ano and Vasconceles, 2005; Bjorck and Thurman, 2007, p. 165; Fort et al., 2017, p. 120). A meta-analysis conducted by Ano and Vasconcelles (2005) addresses religious coping alongside psychological adjustments to stress. In their research, numerous studies showed evidence of the

positive impact of faith-based practices have upon crisis, stress management, and mental health (Ano and Vasconcelles, 2005, p. 477). The meta-analysis demonstrates the importance of religious participation and the part faith plays in the midst of difficulty.

Similarly, Fort, Eriksson, Gottuso, and Wilkins (2017) in their study discovered that an ability to simultaneously hold the good and the bad—and still have hope—seems to produce meaningful experiences and a deeper understanding of God when looking back on the experience (p. 121). Additionally, another study found that participants were better able to manage stress and depression in the midst of hardship, negative life events, or general life challenges if they practiced positive religious coping strategies, like spiritual communal support (Bjorck and Thurman, 2007, p. 164). With the literature in mind, the real question is, “How does all this apply to the COVID-19 pandemic and youth ministry?”

### **Research Findings**

While each ministry professional represented a unique ministry setting, there were many similarities across the interview process. Upon data collection, theoretical saturation was achieved before ten interviews were completed. Even with theoretical saturation reached, all 18 scheduled interviews were conducted.

One astonishing finding was how quickly most youth ministry professionals pivoted as the pandemic and shut downs began rippling through communities. And yet, I was also surprised by how many youth ministry professionals were frozen and didn’t do anything (see: Kwon in Oestreicher, 2020; Villa in Oestreicher, 2020). Overall, most ministries represented in this study pivoted to online formats within two weeks (or less) as their locations began to prohibit large gatherings ( $N=15$ ). Those who took more than two weeks to transition to another meeting format,

in this study, were all seasoned youth ministry professionals ( $N=4$ ). In light of such, following are some key themes and findings from this research endeavor.

### **Ministry Models, Relationships, and Community**

This literature addresses many models of youth ministry (Arzola, Cosby, Hunter, Stier, and Clark, 2015; Belsterling, 2019; DeVries, 2004; DeVries, 2008; Kirk and Thorne, 2011; Mayo, 2005; Root, 2007; Senter, Black, Clark, and Nel, 2001). In talking with the 18 youth ministry professions in this study, many of them discussed a pre-COVID model that consisted of a large group event alongside small groups. Many of them stressed how their pre-COVID model did not lend itself well to an online format. In discussing format and ministry model, an underlying layer discussed was youth group culture. The ministries with a self-reported sense of community emphasis seemed to notice less drastic swings in attendance and participation when they needed to transition to online-only meetings.

One example was Dave's group. Dave shared how he was hired at his church right before COVID hit. In his reflection he discussed how close his group was and what an amazing culture the youth group possessed. Specifically, he said,

So they just wanted to be together. Yeah, I was actually really humbled and honored, because they didn't have to meet with me, but they wanted to. So, they were getting together on their own anyway, they were like, 'We want to meet at church—that way we can get to know you.' It was really encouraging.

Likewise, Peter told me his youth group was a "really close group" and "there is just this culture of love, closeness, and loyalty that has been there for years and years and years . . . . It's the work of those before me . . . . And I don't want to mess it up!"

On the flip side, ministries that did not consist of a tight-knit community seemed to struggle more during COVID-19. Times of online only options seemed to be the biggest

moments of struggle for these youth ministries. In my conversations with ministry leaders, a theme of the importance of building community within the youth ministry above some of their previously held priorities was evident.

Relationships seemed to be the core of this theme (see Bradbury in Oestreicher, 2020, p. 126; Chiang in Oestreicher, 2020, pp. 35-36; Joiner, Ivy, and Shefchunas, 2019; McNutt in Oestreicher, 2020, p. 101; Powell and Clark, 2011; Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, 2016; Smith in Oestreicher, p. 99). This is not a new discovery by any means. Thoughts concerning the youth ministry system being broken and the focus of youth ministry needing to shift to relationships have been noted in the literature (DeVries, 2008; Oestreicher, 2008, pp. 20-25; Saunders, 2020). Pandemic restrictions seemed to force many ministry professional to reevaluate the essentials. The theme of creating/sustaining youth group community culture was central to other ideas and topics discussed. Ministry professionals who served in communities with a tight-knit culture seemed to better navigate COVID with confidence, comradery, and hope. Ministries that lacked a sense of community seemed to struggle the most.

### **Student Care and Engagement**

Another significant themes that emerged involved caring for and engaging students during COVID-19. Every ministry professional interviewed addressed struggles in this area. Regardless of the measures taken, there were always some students who disengaged or became nearly impossible to reach. A frequent topic of conversation related to student-care was the ever-growing list of concerns dealing with mental health (Barna, 2021, p. 22-23; Severe and Senter, 2020, p. 465). Many of the youth ministry professionals suggested some run-ins with suicidal ideation and loneliness (see also: Barna, 2020). With concerns in mind, the youth ministry

professionals talked about the various ways their teams of leaders tried to connect with students. Some specific examples will be mentioned later in this paper.

## **Technology**

It wouldn't be a pandemic study without some mention of technology! Across the board, nearly every youth ministry professional interviewed utilized various technology platforms. During the interview process, all of the ministry professionals mentioned using social media (various platforms) and Zoom at some point during the pandemic. Some utilized additional specific technologies (YouTube Premier or more specific means of social media, such as Instastories and TikTok, or video-driven technological options). Interestingly, many of the youth ministry professional wondered if the system they set up was the most effective way of doing ministry to students.

Many of the participants were asking, "Is *this* technology a *good* way to engage students?" Several interviewees described their process: COVID-19 hit, they went to Zoom (or other technologies), participation numbers dwindled, they searched for other solutions, and eventually (as allowed) they began meeting in person again. The process was on repeat across the interviews. In large group contexts, connecting virtually with students was an overwhelming challenge.

Jason, as he reflected on his struggles to connect with students, reflected on his process. As we chatted he told me he discovered students were not even opening the content-driven videos he was recording. Once he discovered they were not engaged he started posting funny videos of himself, "doing stupid stuff." After his strategy changed he noticed a significant increase in views. Similarly, Sally told me her ministry offered incentives to students via video



and noted engagement went up with a “carrot” being offered. All of this aligns with what Donna Freitas (2017) discusses in *The Happiness Effect*: a little dopamine hit seems to go a long way for the current generation. And yet, a great deal more time and effort was required from ministry leaders to pull it all off!

In the interviews, when I asked the youth ministry professionals how they discovered the various forms of technology they utilized many heard about various tools from colleagues, ministry connections, or had already been using some form of technology before COVID-19.

Several youth ministry professionals also divulged how they became the “church tech guy/girl” overnight. Some participants shared how the church noticed what they were doing with the youth ministry and asked for help with additional church services/streaming. For the youth ministry professionals who were asked to do *that technology stuff* and manage a youth ministry, the stress level was through the roof. Considering the reflections shared by the participants of this study, the technology piece is not an “add-on” position. It was most definitely not a realistic expectation during the pandemic.

## **Challenges**

As I heard youth ministry professions discuss their pandemic experiences, several wondered if they “had what it takes” to do ministry during this season. In reflecting on this season here is what a few youth ministry professionals had to say,

Eighteen-year youth ministry veteran Joe said, “Let me tell you, this has been the hardest year of my life—I feel more lost in ministry than ever before.”

Brad shared, “It's like you just have to reinvent everything so regularly and that gets draining.”

Tanya, a fairly new ministry leader shared openly about some of her struggles saying,

“About six months into this [COVID-19] I thought, clearly I don't know how to do this. And that was like a lie straight from the enemy . . . and I worked through that. I figured that out . . . but there was just a lot of doubt in my ability to lead a ministry if I'm like, ‘man when things get tough if I don't know how to innovative enough to do this, or I don't, or can't, figure out how to do this, then I'm not good at this.’ So, that was a big, big challenge for sure.”

Stuart shared, “Oh. My. Gosh. Parents are mean! Nobody prepared me for that [during a pandemic].” Stuart went on to share how he had never had to manage so many strong and varied opinions while leading a youth ministry.

This is just a sampling of quotes from youth ministry professionals. Over and over I heard everything from personal struggles, to ministry struggles, to restrictions denominational affiliations, to city regulation changes, to wrestling a variety of perspectives and expectations in a constantly shifting, unpredictable landscape.

### **Positives and Lessons**

While the struggles were free flowing, there were also plenty of lessons learned and positive take-aways shared. Jesse, when asked what he learned in this season, through laughter, said, “I learned to pivot quickly!” Joe, a seasoned youth ministry professional said, “I think we’ll rethink how we use our spaces. I hope that is a change that comes out of this and how we can impact our community.” Brad, while reflecting on the priorities of his ministry said,

“You know, it [COVID-19] does provide these opportunities to move towards the things that we probably should have changed a long time ago. Like we should have had a stronger effort and emphasis on loving our whole list a long time ago. We should have done a better job of partnering middle school and high school teams on more than with like ‘this is going to be good.’ We're going to come out of COVID-19 better at those two things: better on our staff team at partnering together and better on our volunteer team at loving our whole list.”

There were many reflections on what was learned in this uncertain time of youth ministry. The quotes above provide a sampling of the responses.

## **Implications for Ministry**

While 2020 was challenging there is hope—and there was hope shared. A few practical application ideas gleaned from ministry professionals will be shared in this section as they relate to relational community, innovation, and technology.

### **Relational Community**

Based on interviews with the 18 youth ministry professionals in this study, COVID-19 will leave certainly leave a lasting impact relationally. Many ministry leaders interviewed discussed how this season helped them realize how much community matters. Several leaders suggested they have always valued community—but it wasn't necessarily the top ministry priority pre-pandemic. However, during the pandemic, leaders began to recognize how critical a sense of belonging is for students. Finding a sense of belonging, hope, encouragement, and friendship was central to their youth group experience and what kept them coming back week after week, year after year.

When I asked leaders what changes they believed COVID-19 would require moving forward related to community and relationships, Pedro shared, “I mean, but I will say, there's youth ministries that probably have to change completely where it's not just on a stage, not just an event. It will probably have to be more one-on-one, or more relational a little bit.”

Another leader, Kevin, in reflecting on the pre-COVID youth ministry format he utilized and how COVID-19 has impacted things shared, “We noticed how hungry the students are for, long for, just relational ministry.”

Based on the findings of this study, it is clear that building intentional avenues for relationships, and creating a youth group community, is an essential for youth ministries. The

COVID-19 pandemic may have brought lots of changes and turmoil; however, it also reminded leaders of the importance of community—building meaningful community—to the surface as a felt priority and need.

## **Innovation**

In addition to the centrality of relationships and community, another important area was innovation. Over the course of youth ministries' existence it has been known for creativity—sometimes to its fault. COVID-19 brought this youth ministry hallmark to light! The innate ability of youth ministry professionals to think innovatively and create things afresh was a seen advantage in this season of chaos. In interviews with youth ministry professionals a host of innovative ideas were shared. Some were incredibly successful and some, like a Pinterest recipe, failed. Many of the youth ministry professionals emphasized the need for things to shift, change, and take on innovative thinking because they cannot be done the same way (see also: Libick in Oestreicher, 2020, p. 60).

Time and time again, youth ministry professionals shared creative ideas they utilized to reach students, care for them, and provide community. Many of the specific ideas youth ministry professionals shared may not be transferable to specific ministry contexts; however, the general ability to be innovative during uncertainty is a finding that will endure.

For the sake of idea sharing here are a few innovative ideas gleaned from this study:

**Bonfires:** Several churches hosted bonfire gatherings. Some had a collection of small bonfires for students to gather around and allow for social distancing (Peter, Jude, Stuart, Sally, to name a few).

**Discord channels:** One ministry set-up a discord channel for students to connect with each other and game as a youth group (Peter).

Drop-offs: Many youth ministry professionals mentioned dropping off curricular supplies, devotional materials, care packages, or encouraging leaders to do so. This was especially meaningful for missed events, traditions, or celebrations, like graduation (Sally, Kevin, Bridget, Cindy, and others).

*Front Yard Fridays*: One ministry hosted “*Front Yard Fridays*” and allowed students to sign-up for a time slot. During the time slot the youth pastor showed up with a car full of yard games for an hour of yard gaming fun (Kevin).

Hand-written letters/notes: Some ministry leaders took time to write hand-written notes to each student (Bridget and Sally).

Jam sessions: One ministry set up times to meet on student’s lawns, porches, or social distanced spaces to jam together (Matt).

Park and parking lot parties: A few churches set up lawn games, drive up food stations, hosted drive-up movies/concerts, or held get-togethers at local parks (Jude, Tanya, Sally, and Bridget).

Porch meet-ups: A few youth ministry professionals mentioned picking up a soda or favorite candy and meeting with students one-on-one on their front porches to chat, connect, and check-in (Ryan, Sally, Joe, Kevin, Jason, to name a few).

Re-thinking Traditions: Due to canceled events and opportunities some ministries got creative with ways to be sure traditions could still be enjoyed. One ministry created host homes for VBS and sent youth to each home to lead (Bridget). Another ministry created a local mission trip in lieu of the international trip being cancellation (Peter). Other groups joined forces with local ministries to create camp options when larger camps were not able to continue as planned due to local restrictions (Tanya and Kevin).

Special deliveries: One ministry used a van and drove to every student’s home delivering ice cream treats several times during the summer months to connect with and care for students (Matt).

Zoom-Creativity: While most ministries used Zoom in a variety of ways. One ministry hosted “lunch-hangs” and allowed students to jump on during their lunch break to chat, hang out, ask questions, and share about how things were going (Bridget).

## **Technology**

Another key area was technology. While it is nearly impossible to predict how technology will impact the future of youth ministry post-pandemic, the youth ministry

professionals in this study did have some speculations. In general, predictions focused on continued streaming options and implementing various technology platforms (e.g. social media) beyond the pandemic season. In thinking about how some changes brought on by COVID-19 will carry over into the future Tanya suggested, “I think there will be digital changes and streaming from now on for students that can’t come for any reason—with Zoom small group options—at least that’s what we are planning to do.”

Additionally, in discussing technological implications of COVID-19, Pedro and Stuart voiced the belief that the COVID-19 pandemic only increased his deep-seated belief that face-to-face interactions are essential for youth ministry. Stuart said, “I think meeting physically is still the best way that you’re going to engage students . . . but then, also I don’t think we’re ever going to leave having to have some sort of technology.” Similarly, Pedro shared,

I honestly think it is [COVID-19] going to be life changing, you know, our teens will talk about this and it will affect how they see actual church attendance. I honestly think so. Well, it [COVID-19] would force the church to be more relational, kind of more face-to-face. We’re seeing now that it [COVID-19] is really forcing the church to kind of get out of the box and see how else we can reach them [teenagers], maybe we can go to them. So, that’s going to be one of the big things even for my generation—post 9/11 generation—things changed us. Post this [COVID-19] is going to change them [teenagers].

Several youth ministry professionals also discussed how this season of tech-based youth ministry was a vocational challenge for them. Many youth ministry professionals followed a call to youth ministry because they love being with students—in person. COVID-19, for most youth ministries, seriously limited in-person options. While thinking about the desire to meet in person again Jesse shared, “I was ready to go in, like, April [2020]!” Similarly, Joe and Stuart shared that they “didn’t sign up for *this* [virtual ministry]” and were looking forward to resuming “normal meetings.” The longing to be in-person was stressed by youth ministry professionals and many hoped for a quick return to face-to-face options and a diminishing of virtual options.

## **Delimitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Due to the scope and nature of this research, and the restrictions of 2020, a limited sample was solicited and utilized for this research endeavor. Generalizability should be done with care. Most of the sample ( $N=17$ ) was Caucasian. Much of this is related to ministry networks and the snowball sampling method utilized. For this study, full-time youth ministry professionals were focused upon. This limitation in the sample led to neglecting some denominational groups, ethnic groups, and faith communities that lack full-time youth ministry professionals. There were also a variety of church sizes (small, medium, large, multi-site, and standalone), locations (rural, suburban, and urban), and denominations (see Appendix A) represented. In light of the variety related to church size, location, and denominational affiliation, generalizing to specific church sizes, locations, and denominations should be done with care.

Additional research is still needed to further understand youth ministry practices and the 2020-2021, COVID-19 pandemic. Studies that include greater ethnic diversity, greater denominational focus, and part-time as well as full-time youth ministry professionals are needed to strengthen the findings, assumptions, and applications mentioned in this paper. \

Many other areas also need focused research. For example, youth ministry professionals' experiences, how youth and families navigated the pandemic, and the long-term implications of the pandemic upon ministry practice need further exploration. The impact of COVID-19 upon retreats, camps, training opportunities, short-term missions, community outreach, community service projects, and other youth ministry programming needs further probing in future research.

## Conclusion

From this study it is abundantly clear that youth ministry professionals tried anything and everything to keep students connected during an unprecedented, challenging time. Offering a sense of stability, connection, support, care, and the hope of God's love during an increasingly uncertain time was the underlying message many youth ministry. The core focus of youth ministry, pandemic-stricken or otherwise, seems to remain the same—love students in Jesus' name. Matt said it well as we concluded his interview, "I'm just trying to invest in students' lives." Youth ministry professionals consistently seek to lead students to know and love Jesus. That mission will endure well beyond COVID-19.

Overall, as I reflect on the data collected, I am overwhelmed by the stamina of youth ministry professionals. I am encouraged, surprised, and impressed by their innovation, creativity, and insights over the last year and a half. I have great hope for the students under their care and those under the care of those they represent. I hope this research reignites your love for ministry and a desire to see youth ministry professionals trained and equipped for all seasons of ministry.

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## Appendix A

Pseudonym	Location	Institution Size (church/youth)	Denomination
Jesse	suburb	large multisite (3500/200-300)	Covenant
Peter	urban	medium (220/25-30)	Episcopal
Stuart	rural	medium (250/60-70)	Converge
Matt	rural	medium (250/22)	Baptist
Sally	rural	large (500/80)	Converge
Jim	suburb	medium (200/25)	Reformed Church of America
Joe	rural	small (100/20)	Baptist
Kevin	suburb	medium (350/20-30)	Non-Denominational
Bridget	suburb	large (500/40)	Lutheran
Ryan	rural	small (100/20)	Baptist
Brad	suburb	large multisite (3500/200)	Evangelical Free Church of America
Tanya	rural	large (1500/150)	Non-Denominational
Jude	rural	large multisite (15,000/160)	Converge
Dave	rural	large (1500/20)	Baptist
Pedro	urban	large (1300 denominational group)	Church of God of Prophecy
Cate	suburb	large (1400/75)	Evangelical Free Church of America
Tom	suburb	large (750/95)	Non-Denominational
Jason	rural	medium (300/20-30)	United Methodist Church