

A look at student life in the age of COVID-19

BY DANA PREUSCH

A group of ATS student life professionals recently met via Zoom to discuss the conundrum of nurturing robust community and spiritual life among seminary students in the age of COVID-19.

Helpful tips and takeaways from the conversation were posted in the ATS Open Forum community on [Engage ATS](#). They included:

- Consider the larger context of students when assessing their growth and realize their community and spiritual formation will not be limited to what the seminary alone provides (chapels and in-person and online gatherings).
- Get key students involved—they will bring others along to the events you plan.
- Prioritize live gatherings over recorded/asynchronous discussion as much as possible.
- Try to attach larger events (lectureships, concerts, convocations, etc.) to hybrid weeks/intensive weeks for maximum participation and cross pollination of local and distance learners.
- Do not be afraid to try something new. See what sticks.
- Accept that some students will participate and some will not.

For some, encouraging and further developing community and spiritual life was a new and burgeoning reality considering the challenges of the last two years.



For others, like my institution, it has been a long time coming.

The residential population at Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) has diminished significantly in the last decade with more and more students opting to learn in place while accessing their degrees online via Zoom. Now, with our distance learners far outnumbering in-person students, the faculty recently voted to consolidate our teaching modalities to just two—hybrid (synchronous Zoom, one-week intensives) and asynchronous online. While this was a nod to the realities on the ground and made the most sense practically and pedagogically, the question remains of how to create a robust community life in these changing and challenging times.

A look back at the larger history of our institution, however, reveals that establishing meaningful connections with other NTS students and the larger NTS community has been an elusive endeavor from the start. I believe the challenge is embedded in the work/life balance that seminary students must strike once they begin their educational journeys. Recognizing this reality might be the first step toward addressing the issue of community and spiritual formation.

Graduate school is a unique experience. Unfortunately, younger students who transition immediately from college to seminary often encounter culture shock when community is not immediately available to them right outside their dorm rooms. Another hard truth for the adult learner is the myriad responsibilities that compete for one's time. Students must decide for themselves what level of community involvement they want or need once they embark on their seminary careers.

For some, family and ministry commitments will already be set, so finishing a degree will be their highest priority. Others will come to seminary looking for robust conversations and meaningful social interactions with their professors and fellow students and they will want to take advantage of offerings on campus and/or online. Finally, there are those who are somewhere in between—wanting to participate as much as possible in extracurricular activities but, at the same time, recognizing the need to balance this with other important commitments.

Considering these differing levels of needs, NTS has opted for a multi-pronged approach to student life. With our curriculum change, all students (both local and distant) will be placed in a cohort and journey with a specific set of students as they complete their degrees. Our one-week intensive *Convene* gatherings held each fall are also an opportunity for students to gather for in-person

class time, meals, and daily times of worship and prayer with NTS staff and faculty.

Outside of *Convene*, monthly *Koinonia* chats via Zoom offer a time for the NTS community to gather online for both formal and informal conversations around ministry and life. Local students are also given the opportunity to gather at least once monthly for a community meal at our *Koinonia Café* on campus. Finally, our new MyNTS app that launched last year acts as a full-service portal to allow students to check class details, emails, and upcoming campus and virtual events, as well as to communicate directly with one another.

Spiritual formation is, of course, another top priority as we try to approach the seminary experience holistically. Book studies, story circles, mentoring, spiritual direction, and more are offered to our students on an as-needed (and as-wanted!) basis both in and outside of class times. Although not every need can or will be met, we hope that by offering a variety of in-person and online opportunities for community building and connection throughout the academic year, our students will feel loved and supported throughout their time at NTS.

Note: The recording from the recent discussion with ATS student life professionals is available by emailing [Dana Preusch](mailto:Dana.Preusch@nts.edu).



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