Improving Theological Education using Intercultural Mission

Murray House

ABSTRACT—*One model for improving theological training is Avondale's Mission Immersion Experiences for ministry students. These intercultural service-oriented experiences have provided opportunities for transformative learning by placing students in a new and challenging context. This immersion has initiated the refashioning of students' communication and relational skills. It has caused them to be more self-aware and increased their confidence levels in ministry. As their cultural competencies have risen they have experienced confirmation of their calling and an increase in their confidence in their own readiness for ministry. This paper reports on the research into the personal, spiritual and professional impact upon Avondale's ministry students of the 2013 Mission Immersion in the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. It compares the results of the extensive questionnaire with the 2012 results to show how student transformational learning is being optimised. It assessed the students' responses to gauge the level of success in reaching the following goals: to build spirituality and personal transformation, to mature student ministry readiness and identity, and to improve student's commitment to mission. Strengths and weaknesses of the current program are reviewed and student's responses to new questions on their personal development are presented. The students' responses, from the more intercultural and evangelistically experienced 2013 cohort, show a continuing personal and professional transformation of students by this intercultural learning. The students' responses of increased spirituality are staying optimal.*

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I. Introduction

The changing landscape in societies' values and demographics presents challenges to those involved in theological education. Conferences have specifically focused on improving the way we are doing theological education (Ball and Harrison, pp. 7-9). Brueggemann speaks of a "deep crisis", "an immense crisis", "that deep social crisis", and urges theological educators that it must be "no more business as usual" (Jenkins and Rogers, xi).

Avondale College of Higher Education was motivated by the need to find ways in which we could improve the effectiveness of our graduates, especially in the area of cultural competency. After discussions with fellow faculty members who had all experienced the value of intercultural ministry, we created an evangelistic intercultural ministry for our students to experience. Avondale has selected the service-oriented MIE rather than the more passive and reflective immersions. This presents challenges and also provides benefits which we will discuss further.

Avondale's three goals in these Mission Immersion Experiences (MIE) were: to enrich the student's spirituality and personal transformation, to increase their readiness for and identity in ministry, and to intensify their commitment to mission. By placing ministry students in new and challenging contexts we hoped to provide opportunities for them to reframe their attitudes, values and skills. The transformational learning would be displayed in a more sensitive worldview and changes to the way they thought, felt and behaved.

Now after two years of giving students an intercultural evangelistic experience we have seen some consistent themes. We have had some success in improving the program and identified some challenges that must be met to maximise the MIE learning for our students. Each year at the conclusion of the MIE, students unanimously continue to recommend it as a compulsory element of our ministerial training. Avondale has responded, and from 2016 all our graduates will have some intercultural ministry in a 10-18 day MIE practicum.

II. What is Avondale's MIE program?

Avondale communicates with denominational leaders of other countries, offering them student-led multiple evangelistic series over an 18-day period. Our students share the preaching with each other in a 13-meeting evangelistic series. Avondale flies them to a country in our region where English is not the primary language. They live and work with local leaders, preparing and delivering ministry as requested by those local leaders. Some of those ministry tasks are quite specialised and therefore some alternatives for our diverse student enrolment need to be created. Beginning in 2015 we are offering a further seven possible intercultural opportunities outside of this evangelistically oriented ministry. (These include working in indigenous ministries, working with ministers and ministerial students from selected countries in the South Pacific, joining service teams across the South Pacific as Chaplains and other modalities suggested by students). This practicum fulfils one of our "Church Ministry placement" assessments in the students' final evangelism unit within the Bachelor of Ministry and Theology program. Student travel, accommodation and food expenses are covered by private donors.

In 2012, an Avondale lecturer took ten students to Fiji to minister at two sites within one hour of Suva the capital of Fiji. In 2013 Avondale sent nine students and a lecturer to minister at five sites in the Solomon Islands. Students write a reflection paper while on their trip and complete a questionnaire on their return to campus.

The Avondale MIE questionnaire uses 81 questions to measures student perceptions and confidence levels in attempting various elements of ministry. While it primarily seeks to measure engagement with core ministry competencies, it also has a focus on attitudes. Avondale is interested in measuring changes in our students' perspectives as well as the transformational learning they are experiencing. This instrument is being refined each year as more of our students' personal learning and development is becoming clearer. Avondale administers the questionnaire one month after the students return so we can collect data on the retained learning. The 2012 student responses are available (House, pp. 211-215) but this paper features the results from the 2013 MIE.

Avondale has designed the MIE as a capstone event to act as an opportunity to rapidly advance the development of ministerial confidence and readiness. Over 40 of Avondale's core ministry

competencies are experienced by our students through the MIE. These experiences have demonstrated effectiveness in transformative learning. They have been a catalyst for the development of our students' personal and spiritual lives. The students have grown in their professional identity as well as being nurtured in their passion for reaching lost people. See Figure 1 below (results were taken from eight students).

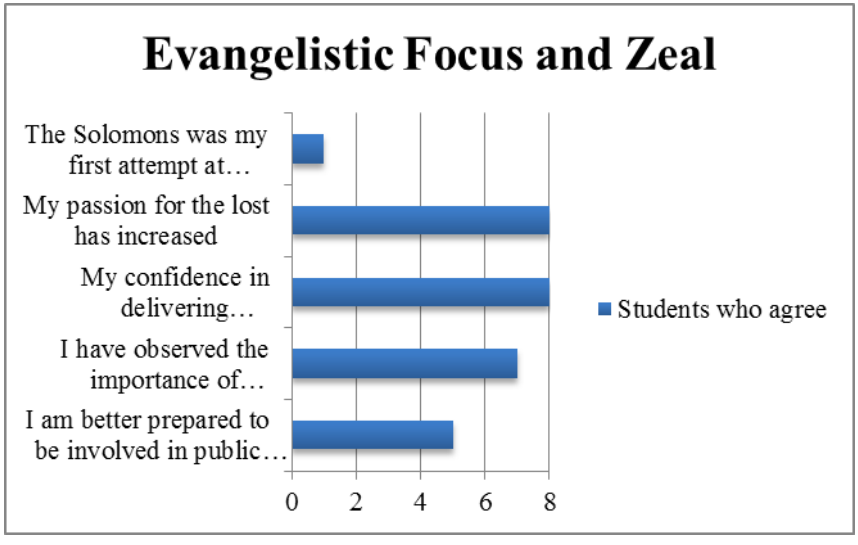


Figure 1

III. Consistent results from the 2012 and 2013 MIE

We have assessed how the MIE has impacted the students' ministerial competencies and the extent to which the program's main goals have been achieved. The transformation of students can be seen in the results below (Figure 2).

As one student reflected, "I have never done any kind of ministry overseas. I felt invigorated by the Holy Spirit and the Love (student emphasis) of the people. It really gave me a clear sense of my role and responsibility as evangelist/pastor, my heart really went out [for] the people." This response, one among many, exemplifies the deeply transformative spiritual experience enjoyed by Avondale's students.

Students have unanimously expressed an increased confidence in their readiness for full-time ministry. The 2013 MIE continued the

2012 trend to extend the students' spiritual gifts. Attempting a new form of ministry in a new country has challenged their skills and required the students to grow in confidence and ability. Both the 2012 and 2013 students report an increased awareness of their new ability to deal with the unexpected challenges that arise in ministry. See Figure 2 below.

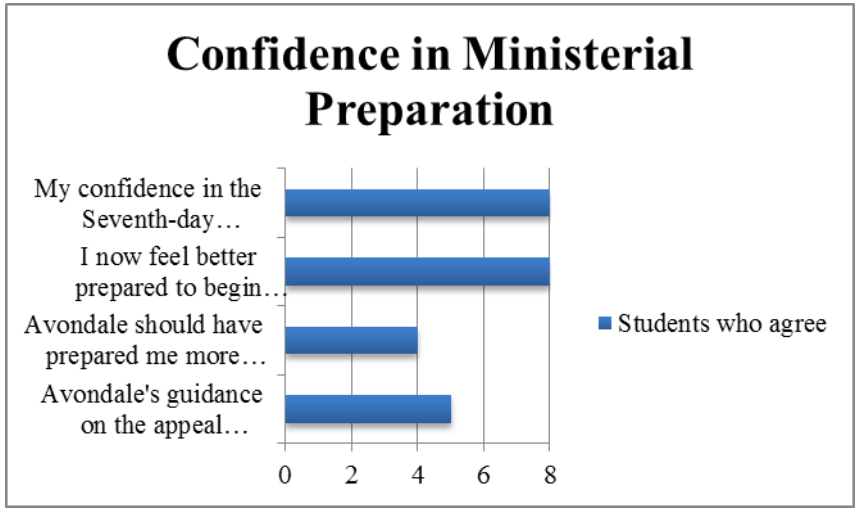


Figure 2

One of the great advantages of the service oriented MIE is that students have opportunity to experiment in intercultural ministry. It is much more than a reflective journey. There are still the disorientation of their current worldview and the challenge for them to interface with new values and diverse cultural assumptions (Mezirow, p. 167). Seeing ministry through the eyes of the local pastors and enquiring how they can be effective in their ministry in this new setting provides learning that a classroom does not. Service ministry enables our students to experiment with new approaches and to test and stretch their newfound skills in intercultural communication. So while MIE provides opportunity for our students to be impacted by a community-oriented spirituality, it also provides opportunities for students to practise their new understandings. Students face the challenges of communicating across the language barrier and this causes them to reflect upon the usefulness of simplicity and clarity in

all their communication. The wider impact includes them learning about the value of community in their own ministry. Immersed in this community-oriented culture, Avondale students have seen the need to create community in their home churches. The improved sensitivity to other cultures and to the differences in others will serve to enrich their wider ministry in the more diverse demographic they will encounter when in full-time ministry.

The 2013 cohort was an exceptionally well-equipped group, many of whom had previous intercultural ministry experience. They also reported a 10% increase over the responses of the 2012 group in relation to developing greater respect for others. It is affirming to see these basic attitudinal changes. One hundred percent of students in the 2013 cohort reported this increase in "respect for others" and in "learning from the local ministers". However, the less equipped 2012 students and the more experienced 2013 students both reported increased growth in their intercultural ministry skills. See Figure 3 below.

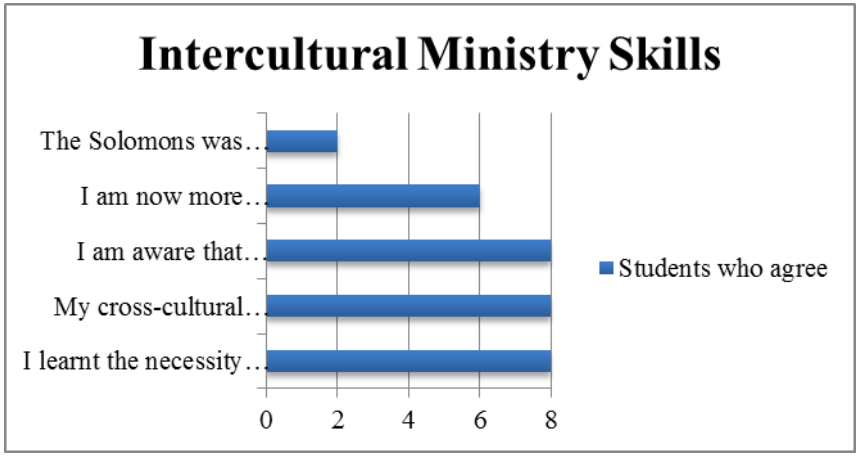


Figure 3

IV. Changes in students' positive responses

The 2013 students reported an increase of 20% for their positive experience of "the fellowship with local pastors and learning from them". This was a unanimous response from the 2013 students. One of the contributing factors for this increase could be that we planned

to offer five programs with two students at each venue rather than two sets of five students running two separate programs. In addition the organisers in the Solomon Islands spread our students around four separate islands. The students did not stay in the one place for accommodation. They therefore had more individual time with their local leaders.

Most of the students were located away from the largest town. By living near smaller towns and villages they had more exposure to the local culture. Their food was provided by the local people. This provided greater opportunity for transforming relationships. Among other factors students reported an increased sensitivity to culture in comparison to the 2012 group. This 10% increase could be because they were already more experienced in the need to be sensitive as guests in a new country. One hundred per cent of the 2013 students were aware that they were varying their normal delivery to meet the local preferences. This was an increase of 20% over the 2012 students. These factors have justified the changes we made to pair our students at five separate locations. It increased the impact of the local leaders and the local culture upon the students. The everyday dialogue with these local ministers and the mentoring provided by them has provided an avenue for change that Avondale needs to explore further. The increased immersion within the culture should be replicated where possible in planning future MIE.

In spreading our students around five sites instead of two we realised our hope to provide more opportunities for leadership and preaching. We were also successful in improving the opportunities for each student to exercise greater leadership (from 50% of 2012 students to 100% in the 2013 students).

The largest difference in the 2013 students lies in their previous experience in speaking publically for Jesus. Seven of the eight students (2013) had previous experience doing this type of ministry. Yet students from both years expressed sufficient freedom in the MIE to "personally experiment with their own ministry style".

Students also expressed a more positive appreciation for the cultural orientation offered by Avondale to its students. By making this compulsory and providing students with the MP3 file of the 90-minute cultural orientation we have tried to position this orientation as an enriching learning experience. Using a highly ranked church administrator to do this orientation also gave students more confidence in its delivery and purpose. These were some of the reasons that students' satisfaction with Avondale's orientation

increased by 15%. Avondale could also prepare some visuals for students showing what previous students have experienced and what our expectations are of them including how they might act in a safe manner.

Students in both years have been conscious of their ministry to inactive believers. In 2013 the students' awareness of their nurture of church members improved by 20%.

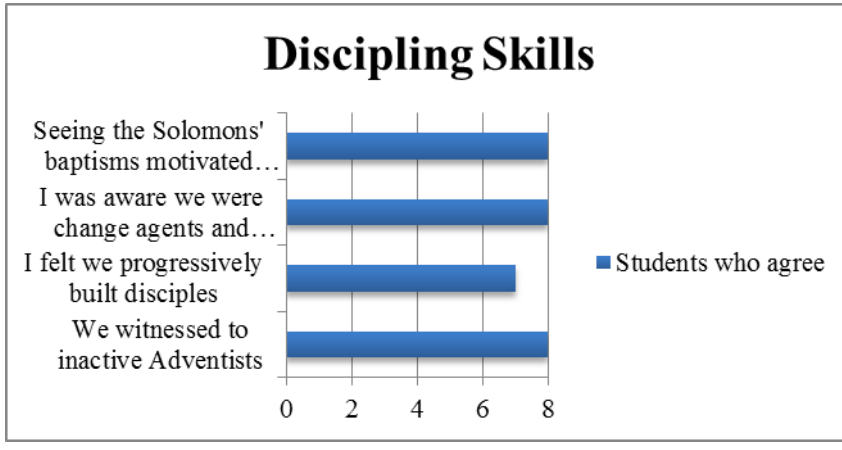


Figure 4

V. Additional changes in students' responses

Some students felt that the 2013 MIE did not help prepare them for offering public preaching to their own culture; however, this was a small change of 8%. Students' awareness of the improvement in their preaching skill of momentum, preaching with media, preaching with passion and sensitivity, all improved marginally over the 2012 responses.

The mentoring possible by Avondale representatives in five separate sites over the 18 days was limited. Student responses (2013) saw a decrease of 18% in the effectiveness of team leaders' mentoring, reflecting the reality that the major mentor left the project early.

Students have requested that they be given even more education on how a preaching series works and why we preach what we preach. This is encouraging while also giving Avondale pause for reflection. This content has been partially covered in class yet students do not

seem to be grasping the usefulness of those lectures. Perhaps those lectures and some additional material need to be offered as MP3s for students on an MIE. The intercultural setting has provided students with the opportunity to integrate their learning as well as motivating them to seek more learning.

One of the surprising changes the MIE provides for our students lies in the changing views they develop of work ethic. They repeatedly see the need to be more prepared and to be more spiritually dedicated in their ministry. The life of a student in meeting assignment deadlines is replaced by the real pressures of ministry requiring their total time commitment and stretching their abilities to speak with minimal preparation. They learn, as one student commented, "the importance of having more things prepared before we arrived". Fortunately they also stated that "God is bigger than our circumstances," and "God always comes through, even if it is only in the last couple of minutes."

VI. New data from 2013 (see Figures 5 and 6 below)

Nine questions in the 2012 questionnaire that directly related to the Fijian context were replaced in the 2013 version. The new questions relate more to the students' perceptions of internal changes of perspective, attitude and spirituality. Students' responses on their openness to learn from others were 100% positive. They also all believed their prayer life had changed, their compassion for diversity of culture had increased and their overall connection with God was now more personal. Improved spirituality makes these life-changing MIE crucial for any ministry training college that wants to maximise the spiritual life of its students. It is a rewarding and transforming goal consistently achieved by the MIE program.

Seven students reported that "an awareness of the priority of spiritual readiness for ministry" came from the MIE. Not only do our students need to be confident in their skills, but they need to see that successful ministry is dependent upon Spirit-led lives. It is pleasing to see that the MIE provides opportunities for Avondale's students to go on this journey together with God. Each year it has been rewarding to see the impact of these MIE upon the students' prayer life. Figures 5 and 6 below demonstrate that students are responding to the challenges of the new cultural settings by seeking God's presence and blessing in prayer.

Seven out of the eight students reported that they had increased perceptions of their weaknesses and how to relate to others. The students' readiness for ministry depends so much on the mastery of a deep level of self-awareness. Immersion within another culture extends this element of emotional intelligence and readies our students for ministry. One of the unstated goals in many ministry training colleges is to build the students' capacity for empathy. To achieve a 100% response that the MIE improved their capacity for empathy highlights the vital place that MIE has in ministry training. While the eighteen days does not provide sufficient time for the mastery of all ministry skills and competencies, it is evident that students' deep personal transformation has been catalysed by their intercultural service.

Three quarters of the students also felt that the MIE gave them an increased awareness of their own personal strengths. This can only affirm them and their calling. The discovery that God has equipped them for ministry in new and challenging areas will empower their future ministry. It is the confirmation of their faith in responding to God's call—if God can use them in this form of ministry where else in ministry can God use them? What else awaits them in ministry where God will again surprise them and use them?

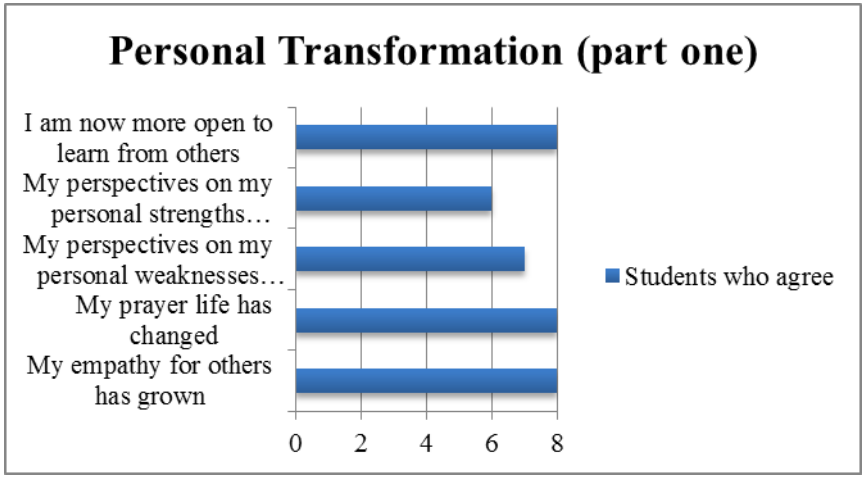


Figure 5

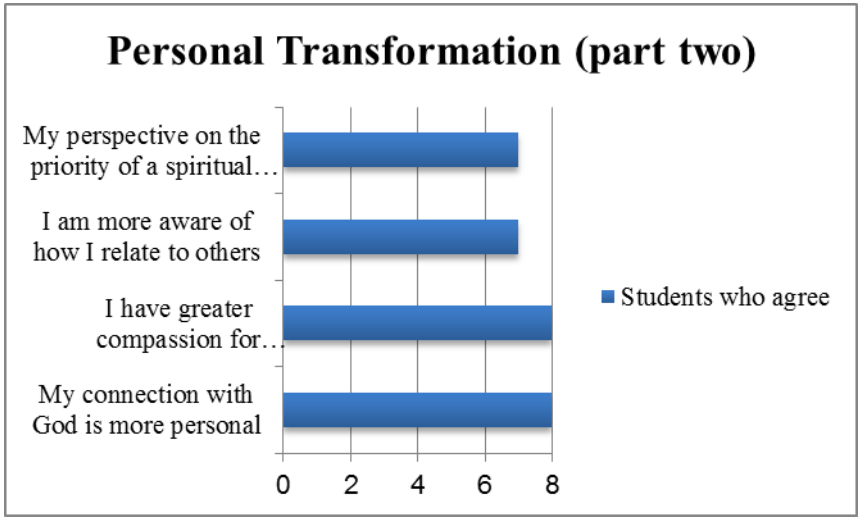


Figure 6

VII. Relational development of Avondale's students

Students' response to the question "What did you find to be most helpful?" included the following relational responses: "I learned the value of ministerial respect and missionary values"; "I was really making an attempt to connect with the people as much as possible"; "I really came out of my shell"; "Be more culturally sensitive. Trust in the Holy Spirit. Spend time with locals"; "Seeing, not just hearing about Servant leadership".

Relational growth for ministers in training doesn't happen as quickly in the classroom as it does when the MIE acts as a catalyst to learning. These experiences are life transforming and are a source of personal growth that Avondale has found to be exceptional (see Figure 7 below). The peer support provided by the students, ministering in pairs, has strengthened those relationships and furthered the students' other relational learning. The relational impact of the local leaders and ministers upon these students should also be carefully analysed. This is currently underexplored in Avondale's research and yet it is likely a formative influence in building these ministry graduates' relational skills.

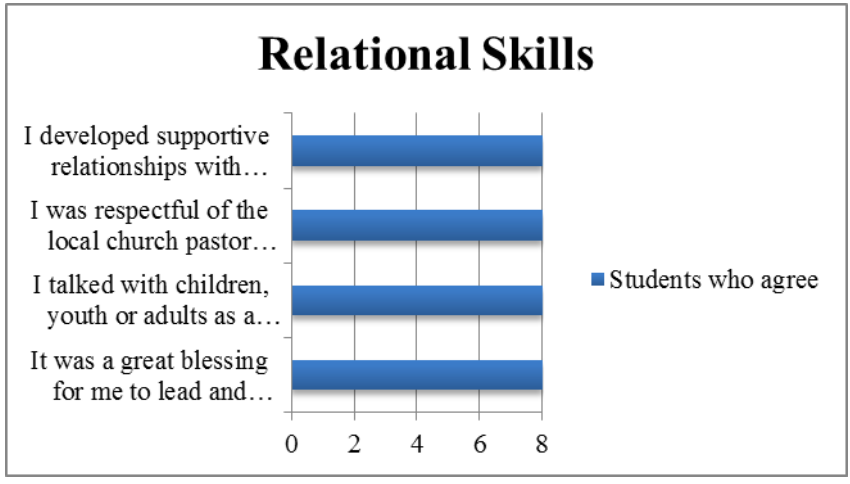


Figure 7

VIII. Areas to Improve in Avondale's MIE

The optimising of Avondale's MIE program is necessary to maximise student learning. Avondale wants to produce the best possible ministers and this necessitates adjusting our offerings to suit the best outcomes for our students. Because we see the advantages in students doing ministry and practising their intercultural communication skills we want to continue with the service learning MIE.

However, we also need to look at some of the strengths of the more passive and reflective MIE programs at other institutions. To this end Avondale needs to consider developing a reflection instrument that would enable students to reflect about what is happening to them while in an intercultural encounter. Finding questions to help students process their experiences in the intercultural encounter would enable more individuals to experience a deeper transformation. Many already show an innate ability to discern that they are culturally sensitive in all their approaches and communication with others. In addition they need to see themselves as cultural beings interfacing with the diversity all around them (Tortorici, p. 49-59).

Avondale needs to find yet more relevant training for its students as they prepare for MIE. We need to find intercultural preaching that

may be seen by students as more preparatory. Interestingly 50% in each year have requested that they have even greater opportunity for preaching. Avondale may or may not be able to provide this but thought needs to be given to addressing this issue raised in the research. In addition, each year Avondale finds a local congregation where students can practise their preaching before going to their MIE. The students' perceived value of this experience is consistently tracking at only 60%. Avondale needs to discover why this well-meaning offering is not more efficient in its goals of preparing students. Making it a clear intercultural ministry activity for students could be a helpful improvement which Avondale should consider.

Avondale has been somewhat successful in helping students more adequately prepare for this intercultural service of public preaching. We have added videos of appeals in a community cultural context. In addition we have given every student copies of the lecturer's series used in Fiji to resource their own preparation. These PowerPoint sermons model simplicity and clarity and show how Christ can be shared in all presentations. More recently created visual resources could also be provided for future use. The students' awareness of their improved preparedness increased 15% between 2012 and 2013.

Student feedback suggests Avondale needs to improve the quality of its mentoring on site and do more to prepare students for the task of calling people of other cultures into a relationship with Jesus. The proposed MIE for 2014 is in both a rural and urban setting in Malaysia where our students are staying together and are participating at four separate sites. It remains to be seen what impact this has on their ability to exercise leadership and whether they continue to see that they have insufficient preaching opportunities. Avondale's practice of continuing to use different staff each year in onsite mentoring of students is not without its problems, though a necessary and pragmatic decision.

Avondale needs to address the change in students' perceptions that this MIE confirmed their lifelong call. A decrease of 25% in this area gives reason to pause and re-assess. What factors may have lowered this level of confidence? Was the already high level of experience in the 2013 group reason for their providing less confirmation of their calling? Further monitoring in 2014 of students' responses to these questions is warranted. Accompanying this question was, however, a unanimous response to the MIE developing their sense of identity as ministers.

They have also consistently expressed increased confidence in the messages they delivered. Seeing people respond to the gospel and to a Christ-centred focus has grown their confidence. Students were asked, "What did you learn that was most helpful?"- two students replied, "The importance of Christ-centred preaching and the value of servant leadership." and "To fully rely on God! I was a front-line soldier and needed to continuously trust God!" Their ministry growth and success positively impacted their confidence to be what God needs them to be.

IX. Conclusion

Avondale is committed to investing time and energy into students' growth and ministry readiness. Some students tell us they have found the MIE to be more impactful than their trip to the Bible lands. It is a spiritually maturing experience for them to serve others with the gospel though separated by culture. Having the students serve others in ministry has deepened their consciousness of God's activity in their lives and in the lives of others. It has given them the confidence that when they step out in faith the Holy Spirit will be present to bless their ministry.

Intercultural ministry has stimulated personal transformation, increased spirituality, provided an improved passion for mission, and improved skills in communicating Jesus to others. Their levels of improved intercultural competency have also risen. This improvement will be a life-long journey of learning for all those in ministry. These MIE provide a solid basis for that future learning. This catalyst of intercultural ministry activity has also hastened students' ministry readiness and sense of identity by building self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Research into the extent of our success in reaching these outcomes continues to be explored as the MIE program provides surprisingly significant transformative learning for Avondale's ministry students.

The MIE program has become a necessary element in a balanced and contemporary preparation for ministry. Avondale can certainly improve the students' reflection opportunities and their potentially transformative impact. We will continue to reformat our MIE offerings to maximise the transformative learning for our students as we also seek to improve our training of ministers for a rapidly changing context.

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