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Cross-Cultural Mission as a Transformative Learning Experience

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Cross-cultural Mission as a Transformative Learning Experience

A Report

Murray House

Abstract

Theological Field Educators provide opportunities for the students to integrate learning with the practice of ministry. Avondale students' cross-cultural experience in Fiji was a capstone event with "just in time" learning. It had a maturing effect upon the student's ministerial readiness. Students' sense of their call to ministry and their development of a ministry identity were enhanced. They understood better the importance of "servant leadership." Students focused on creating community and its importance for a vitalised ministry. It involved them in ministry outreach and relationships that stretched and nurtured their giftedness. They developed a passion for prayer and the need for the Holy Spirit in their lives. Students' self-understanding grew. It increased their levels of confidence as ministers. All students recommended that intercultural learning be incorporated into their theological education.

Introduction

In recent years, seminaries have designed Mission Immersion Experiences (MIE) as capstone experiences in ministry formation.¹ Unfortunately, published quantifiable data on the MIE impact upon ministry students has been lacking. I have sought to address this gap in research by measuring the impact of the MIE's role in improving students' awareness of their ministry identity, commitment to mission, and spirituality. After 18 days in Fiji we measured changes to these categories of ministry readiness and student confidence in their growing competencies for ministry.

Upon their return to classes, students were asked to write a 500-word reflection paper on what they had learnt and experienced. Common themes evident in these papers informed the research and also informed the development of 81 survey questions. All ten student participants were surveyed and their anonymous responses collated. Questions were consistent with Avondale's curricula objectives and graduate outcomes.

This MIE proved to be a capstone event that maximized the integration of learning and the practice of ministry. It had a maturing effect upon the students' ministerial readiness with a hothouse style formation in a unique cross-cultural context. In this article, students' evaluation of the impact of this MIE will be shared. Seventy-five percent of Avondale's ministry competencies were experienced in Fiji. The data confirms that this Fijian MIE was a transformative learning experience. Student self-understanding grew. They realised their need to rely on God. It indeed was a sacred moment.

History and Preparation

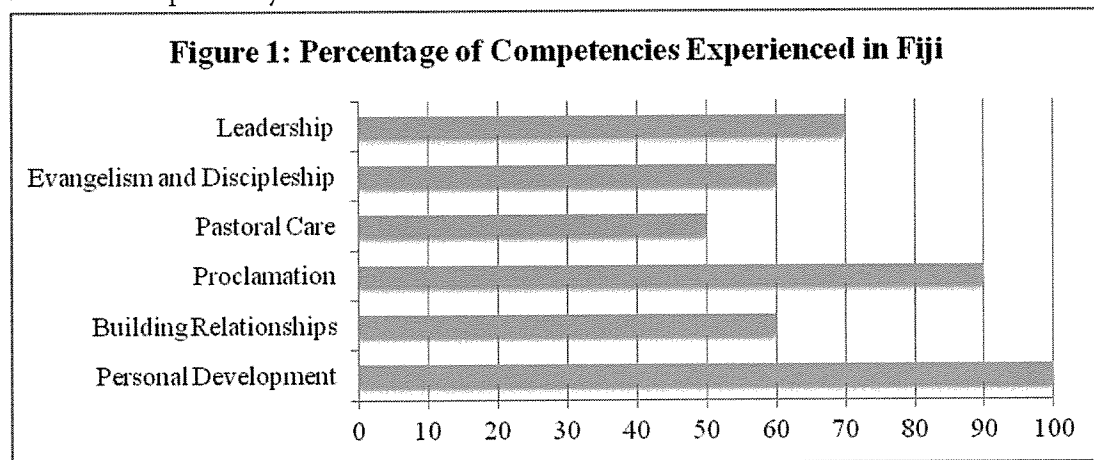
Avondale College of Higher Education ministerial training involves six areas of ministry formation.² In these six areas, 54 competencies are targeted. Students engage in these competencies in their eight semesters of training. An ideal capstone event would see these competencies being extended and the students' skills maturing as they immerse themselves in active ministry. It was hoped that the MIE would enable the formation of fresh paradigms and learning.

1 One example is the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Virginia.

2 See Figure 1: Personal development, relationships, pastoral care, proclamation, evangelism & discipleship and leadership.

Avondale and Adventist church leaders in Fiji began planning for this MIE eight months before the students arrived. During this time they prayed as communities for the success of the MIE. The ten Avondale student participants were selected from amongst 3rd and 4th year Bachelor of Ministry and Theology students from a group that volunteered. Only three of those who wished to go were left behind because of the financial limitations and limited English proficiency. The preparation of students for the MIE involved attendance at a cross-cultural orientation seminar. Some of this was conducted by a Fijian pastor, now working near Avondale College of Higher Education. In addition, regular prayer sessions were held over a three month period.

Figure 1 below shows the percentages of competencies from each area of ministry. What areas of ministry would the MIE impact? Which ones would be weakest and which ones strongest? The figure below shows how the areas of Personal Development and Proclamation were the areas most impacted by the MIE.



Students completed the survey within one month of their return. The results indicate that a high level of skill maturation, spiritual impact and readiness for ministry resulted. Avondale lecturers learnt new ways to improve these events. Students want more involvement in ministry, individual opportunities for leadership and intentional times for reflection to maximize their transformative experience.

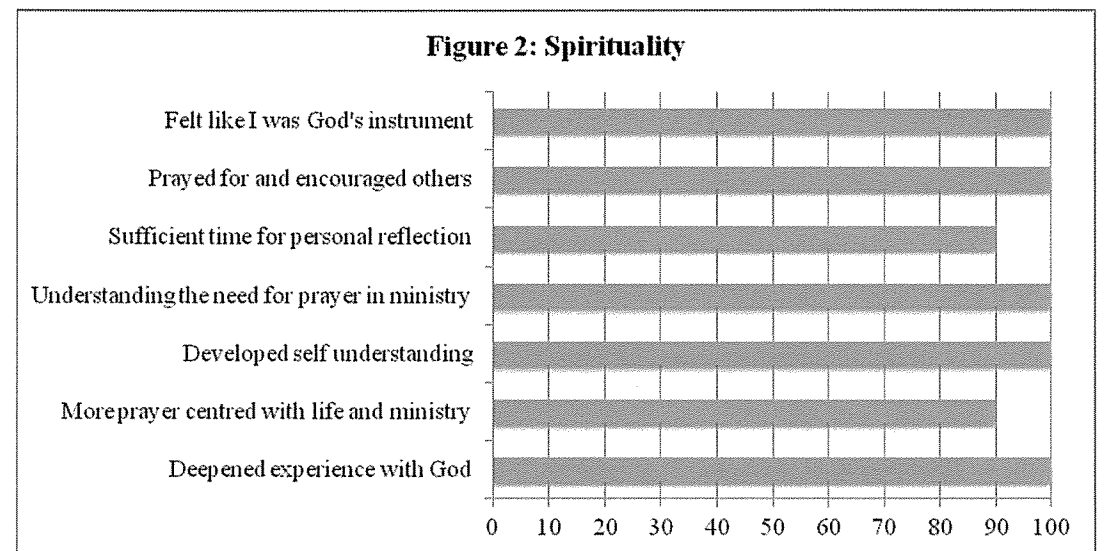
Servant and / or Guest

The time in Fiji was designed as an active ministry MIE in contrast to those that are more reflective. It is therefore surprising and significant that 100% of the personal development competencies were experienced by the students. They spent up to 4 hours preaching across the 18 days. By serving others through the Word they needed to spend time engaged with the local culture with enthusiasm and sensitivity. Learning how best to engage with others necessitated a critique of their own bias and values. This gave relevance and form to their presence within the immersion. Their involvement in servant roles did not hinder the students' engagement in personal growth.

Purely reflective MIEs have their advantages but these Avondale students personally grew by their service to others. It is vital that this generation experience meaningful service as learning. The nursing model from the 1990s literature shows us the transformative influence of service.

Impact on Personal Spirituality

It was inspiring to see the impact of the spiritual Fijian people on the Avondale students participating in the MIE. Their generosity of spirit awakened spiritual sensitivities within our students. One student stated, "It was worth the whole trip, to see and understand personally the need for prayer in our ministry, the need to deepen our experience with God and to pray for and encourage others."³ Of the 70 responses on spirituality, only two were not optimal responses (see Figure 2). Students felt they were God's instruments. They developed their self-understanding and encountered the great need to rely more on God. This impact flowed through to the student-led morning worships which were full of challenge, encouragement and personal testimony. God "showed up" each night to convict hearts as He used these students in their ministry to others. It indeed was a sacred encounter when they could encounter the blessing of God upon them. This was an experience that truly transformed the students and left them feeling they were ready to be used again. It is expected that the MIE will be a source of rich encouragement and formation in the lives of these students for their future years of ministry.



Relational Skill Development

The questions on relational skills included "respect for others," "attitude to local leadership" and their "relationships with each other." Eighty-four of the students' responses (from a maximum of ninety) in this area of relational skills were positive. The students mixed well with local members, pastors and attenders. It was encouraging to see the good relationships developing within the team and with others.

Our ministerial students took seriously their opportunities to mentor younger church members. At Navua, formal training was conducted. The Fijian Adventist youth movement ensured that youth camped at the church for two months prior to opening night. Each day these youth went visiting and praying for the people they hoped would attend the meetings. The sacrifice, enthusiasm and devotion of these youth acted as a catalyst for Avondale students to deepen their commitment to God and His mission. They realised that they were receiving more than they were giving.

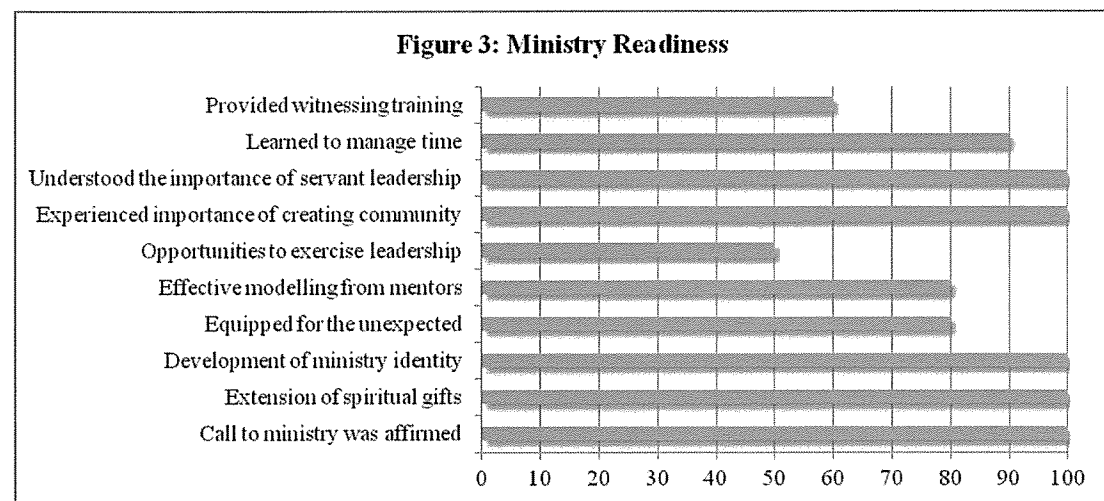
Fijian hospitality overwhelmed the students' capacity to respond with service. Their generosity of spirit in relationships, the gifts of food, sharing of their homes and heart impacted students

³ Taken from a student reflection paper.

deeply. This formed openness to a learning of God’s activity in the lives of others.⁴ Students became the recipients of God’s blessings through the Fijians’ hospitality and graciousness. In return, students modelled a more relational approach than the local culture was using. Fiji Adventism was still using the missionaries’ 1950s approach. In the light of the students’ ministry, this older approach was seen to be lacking. Local members and leaders were pleased to see another model.

Ministry Readiness

Students’ sense of their call to ministry and their development of a ministry identity were all rated by the students at 100% positive (see Figure 3). They felt that their spiritual giftedness had been extended. They understood better the importance of servant leadership. Student focus on creating community and its importance for a vitalised ministry also received one hundred percent positive response. Eighty percent of students felt that they were equipped for the “unexpected” in ministry and that the mentors in their lives had effectively modelled ministry. Nine out of ten students realised that they had learnt to manage their time better. However, only 50% felt that they had been given opportunity to exercise leadership in the two weeks of the evangelism initiative. That can be addressed in future planning so that each student has more to do that would meet their expectations of a leadership role.



All ten students recommended that this be an annual event offered to all our ministry students. They had seen and endorsed the relevance of their training in their Ministry course. One hundred percent of students indicated this experience had built their confidence in what they had to share with others and had better prepared them for ministry.

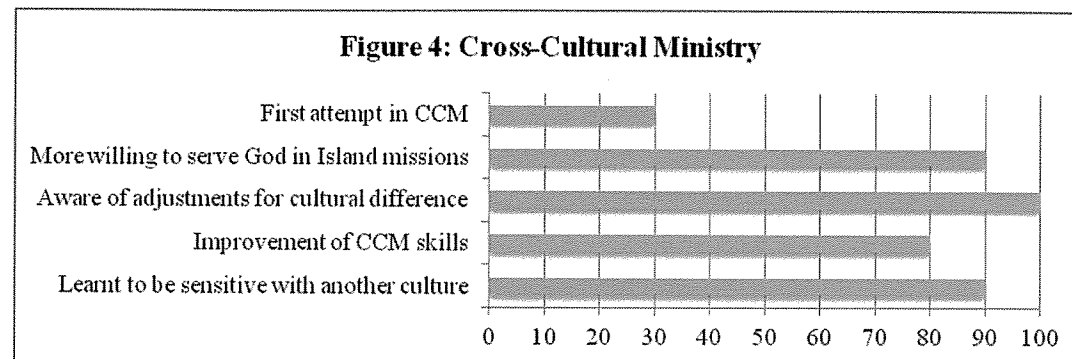
Cross-cultural Ministry Skills

Eighty percent of students felt that their cross-cultural ministry skills had grown and 90% felt that they had learnt to be more sensitive in another culture.⁵ Ninety percent of the students were now more willing to serve God in the Island Mission fields despite the fact that 30% of the students had had no previous cross-cultural ministry experience. All the students also reported that they had an increased passion for the lost.

4 Joseph S. Tortorici and Shenandoah M. Gale, “Intercultural Immersions and Cultural Competency: Preparing Seminarians to Minister in Today’s Global Reality,” *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry* 32 (2012), 209-220, accessed August 3, 2013, <http://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/viewFile/167/166>.

5 Tortorici and Gale, “Intercultural Immersions and Cultural Competency,” 216. Wesley’s students experienced similar outcomes. This transformative learning is the basis of building cultural competency.

In this cross-cultural immersion, students were in a hothouse of personal development and skill maturation in preparation for lifelong learning and ministry. The new ministry context enabled students to experience competencies not previously developed.



Organization of the MIE

In this series, students were impressed with the great food and accommodation and were 100% satisfied in that area. One in five students felt that their personal finances had been negatively impacted. Eighty percent of the students were satisfied with the level of their involvement in financial management the MIE. One student felt that the planning of the program could have been improved and that the mentoring by Avondale’s team leader could also have been stronger.

Conclusion

The trend towards an increasing cultural diversity within Australia accompanied by a reduced percentage of Anglo-Australians requires that more cross-cultural learning be incorporated into Australian theological education. Cross-cultural learning would enhance the effectiveness of our graduates and equip them for the ministry they will face. The Avondale data confirms that MIEs can be transforming curricula.

This Mission Immersion Experience placed our students in an entirely new and challenging context. It served as a capstone event coming at least one semester prior to their graduation. The students’ time in Fiji provided opportunity for Avondale ministry students to focus on the needs of the lost and on what they can do to reach others for Christ. It involved them in ministry outreach and relationships that stretched and nurtured their giftedness. The Fiji experience bound them together as a group and enriched their readiness for ministry. They developed a deeper passion for prayer and the need for the Holy Spirit in their lives. Cross-cultural ministry increased their levels of confidence as ministers and nurtured their ministerial identity.

Participants’ unanimous recommendation that all students receive such an experience must be noted and actions taken to use further opportunities for student empowerment through MIE. Avondale is seeking ways to ensure that intercultural immersion is a consistent part of the ministerial students’ preparation for ministry. Going forward, Avondale needs to provide a greater inter-cultural immersion experience for all its students and by this means extend our students’ spirituality and their giftedness for new and challenging contexts.

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