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## The ICCTE Journal

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### Professional Preparation in a Caring Christian Institution: Experiences of Holistic Change in the Lives of Students who do not Profess Christian Faith

Ruth Smith, Bethlehem Tertiary Institute

#### Abstract

Many Christian tertiary educators deeply long to see holistic transformation in students' lives. This qualitative study grew out of the desire to discover whether students who are not Christ-followers, but who apply to study within an overtly Christian context, experience such change. This second of two articles investigates what specific changes respondents observed in relationship to God, Christian faith, others, and self, linking to the institutional vision of being transformational and relational, as well as when in relation to their program, and through what means any changes occurred. It also discusses recommendations from the participants on how to enable non-Christ-followers to participate more meaningfully in a Christ-centered educational context, facilitating a study experience that is more enriching, positive, and transformative.

#### Introduction

Many Christian tertiary educators share a passion to see holistic transformation in students' lives. In a previous article (Smith, 2014), the author investigated reasons why students choose specific tertiary institutions, including why someone who does not self-describe as a Christian might opt to study in an overtly Christian institution. It detailed applicants' original expectations, the positives and challenges of their lived experiences, and initial self-perceptions of holistic change. It also raised key considerations for Christian educators in relation to a more meaningful welcoming of students who do not follow Christ. This article investigates what specific changes respondents observed in relationship to God, Christian faith, others, and self, as well as the timing and through what means any changes occurred. It also records recommendations from the participants on how to enable non-Christ-followers to participate more meaningfully in a Christ-centered educational

context, facilitating a study experience that is more enriching, positive, and transformative.

#### The Literature

Educators' desire to see holistic change in students' lives is not new: "Teaching is an engagement between teachers and students; and its goal is always to bring about some change in students" (Wolterstorff, 2004, p. 10). Within this transformative engagement is the presence of mystery, as Vogel (1991) noted, "Human transformation is ...both work and gift. It cannot be understood without allowing for mystery even as we seek to understand the processes that foster it" (p. 50). Accepting this, there is nevertheless substantial agreement in the literature regarding catalysts for change.

While Christian educators may desire to see students develop in their understandings of Christian faith, they should be cautious of assuming this can be achieved by merely increasing students' exposure to the Bible. As Vogel (1991) warned, "We must avoid the trap of assuming that *learning about* is the same as *encountering* the living God" (pp. 80-81). Our role as educators may primarily be to help create spaces where God himself can speak and move, and prayerfully trust that he will. At times, we may need to step aside to get out of God's way, even allowing our students the ultimate freedom to make different choices from those we prefer or believe are best for them, affording them the liberty to "receive, explore, question, challenge, accept, hold in abeyance, or reject all that we suggest" (Vogel, 1991, p. 117, emphasis added). Having said that, Scripture affirms that the good news of salvation through Christ is potent, that it is in fact "the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16, New International Version). The author of 2 Timothy 3:16 claimed, "Every Scripture passage is inspired by God. All of them are useful for teaching,

pointing out errors, correcting people, and training them for a life that has God's approval" (God's Word Translation). We can be confident that exposure to God's life-giving words within our programs will have potency to uncover the deep places of our students' hearts: "For the word of God is alive and powerful...It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires" (Hebrews 4:12, New Living Translation). While seeking to avoid Bible-bashing, we nonetheless recognize that its truth can be the ultimate life-changer for all.

Students may enter Christian institutions with fallacious ideas about God and Christian faith. Daloz (1999) encouraged Christian educators to invite all students – whether self-describing Christians or not - to "let air under [their] assumptions" (p. 221). Stratman (2013) noted that this can at times be as challenging for the educator as the student, though argued that the end result is worth it: "Teachers sometimes struggle to allow students to be confused, uncomfortable, or even lost when they explore new ideas. But these times of confusion and wandering can be the most beneficial for student learning" (p. 33).

Such invitations, however, would almost certainly be ineffective unless educators embody another key theme in the literature, namely the provision of genuinely welcoming space, including for those different from us. Glerup (2012) maintained, "To receive the stranger is to receive the Lord"... [we should] "welcome the stranger in loving response to God's hospitality toward [us]" (p. 71). Peterson (2012) and Jobe (2012) argued that our welcome can create an opportunity for others to find God. God's undeserved kindness to us must flow on into gracious interactions with others: "Just as the grace of God creates space where spiritual transformation can transpire, in ministry we create space for that grace to be extended to others" (Jobe, 2012, p. 31). There is, of course, a difference between merely permitting those who are not professing Christians to enrol at a Christ-centered institution, and truly welcoming them as an integral part of the community. Abadeer (2009) noted that when people are "invited but not welcomed" (p. 195) into an institution, any minority grouping may experience a sense of isolation and alienation. While his focus is on ethnically-diverse groupings, the same could be said for faith-related diversity also. Fubara, Gardner, and Wolff (2011)

encouraged Christian communities to do all they can to help each student feel at home and appreciated: "The university ought to exert extra efforts to ensure that all of its constituencies feel equally welcomed, supported, and valued" (p. 123). Call (2011) too, noted that hospitality will involve the utilization of resources on others' behalf. One aspect of this hospitable stance will be shown in respect for others and their views. Burwell and Huyser (2013) described the classroom educator as a "good host ...valuing students and the perspective they bring to the classroom by being attentive and listening" (p. 13). Ebersole and Woods (2001), Fleischer (2006), and Vogel (1991) agreed on the importance of respectful interaction even when our own opinions differ from those expressed: "We must respect persons even (especially) when we disagree with their views" (Vogel, 1991, p. 324). She spoke strongly against any agenda to control or force change in students: "When we are truly in touch with God...there must be a commitment to *working to liberate* rather than oppress, *to love* rather than change, *to serve* rather than control" (ibid, p. 102). Nouwen (1996) agreed:

Hospitality means primarily the creation of free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend.... Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines. (p. 221) Another aspect of showing hospitality to the non-Christian student will be shown in our open-hearted acceptance and understanding of them, including their spiritual starting point. Crabb (2012) reminded us that we need to accept "people where they are, not where you want them to be..." (p. 79), contrary to the legendary Irish response to travellers seeking directions of, "If I was going there, I wouldn't start from here!" Jobe (2012) challenged us to welcome students unconditionally: "Welcoming ... without qualification, loving ... without condition" (p. 30). Daloz (1999) encouraged educators "to find ways to honor the longings of the spirit as fully as those of the intellect" (p. 130). In doing this, we need to guard against labelling or categorising others in either our hearts or our actions, as both Johnson (2012) and Labberton (2012) warned: "When we stop and consider things, most of us realize we don't know

another's heart... we truly do not know or see another as they really are. But all the time we act as if we do" (Labberton, 2012, p. 43).

This deep-hearted acceptance of others, however, does not disregard areas of difference, but navigates them with a Christ-like mix of grace and truth.

When students feel they are in a safe space, they can accept challenge more easily. Caring educators do not have to give assent to everything their students submit. As Vogel (2000) argued,

"Teachers...of adult learners increase their effectiveness when they hold challenge and support in creative tension so that learners feel safe enough to risk examining assumptions and entertaining some alternate possibilities for ways to do and be" (p. 20). Elsewhere she argued that educators need to be "loving enough to nudge and confront as well as to support and comfort" (Vogel, 1991, p. 105).

Call (2011) also observed that hospitality "is not for the faint of heart. It can ... allow for more conflict, more outbursts, more politically incorrect comments, and more anxiety" (p. 66). Acceptance and challenge are like two wings of a bird – both are needed to make flight possible. Nouwen (1996) agreed: "Receptivity without confrontation leads to a bland neutrality that serves nobody.

Confrontation without receptivity leads to an oppressive aggression which hurts everybody" (p. 240). As well as these foundational attitudes undergirding holistic transformation, other catalysts for change mentioned in the literature include faculty modelling Christ-like attitudes, the potential for transformation in students' involvement with each other, the effectiveness of searching questions, genuine, thoughtful debate and dialogue, and deep listening, all within a genuinely nurturing environment (Fubara, Gardner, & Wolff, 2011; Palmer, 1998/1999; Sheskey, 2010; Vogel, 2008).

Authentic relationships with faculty and fellow-students are considered in the literature to be key to faith-linked transformational experiences (Celic & Matthes, 2016). Educators' lives and example can serve as compelling models of what is being taught, while incongruence may repel. As Banks (1999) put it, "Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed" (p. 172).

Being in a Christ-centered environment with the inevitable challenges to belief and ideology that will occur may prove more problematic than anticipated for non-Christian students, and faculty need to be

warmly nurturing in their interactions (Fleischer, 2006). Vogel (2000) likened the educator's role to that of a caring midwife, assisting in birthing "new ideas, new skills, new metaphors, and new ways of being and doing" (p. 24). Students, too, can be part of this transformative process for each other as they gain confidence in sharing more honestly and deeply (Esselman, 2004), and take part in what Nouwen (1996) described as the "relentless care" (p. 180) of our fellow human beings.

Good teaching process and questioning skills are also seen as catalysts in holistic transformation, scaffolding student learning, and the process of discovery (Vogel, 2000). She maintained that the process of thoughtful engagement with ideas within the course material facilitated by penetrating questions is more important than any definitive answer. She argued, "Sharing does not mean giving others our answers... The final product is not so valuable as the process that leads us through the desert and to the oasis" (Vogel, 1991, p. 117).

Genuine, reflective discussion is also seen as key in both face-to-face and online contexts. Vogel (1991) described dialogue as "a primary tool for transformative education" (p. 90), though she cautioned that debate must be conducted inside "safe space where personal attacks are called out of bounds" (pp. 325-326). Online discussions - which often last longer and go deeper than their face-to-face counterparts - also have a part to play. Steele (2004), for example, maintained, "The threaded discussion can be an effective tool for helping students to process information, ... debate ideas, ... teach and learn from one another, and - sometimes - to grow in faith" (pp. 505-506). Daloz (1999) saw the educator as responsible for the provision of this safe learning space, "where students ... talk freely without embarrassment, think aloud without being put down, and experiment with sometimes frightening ideas" (p. 106).

Our purpose in discussion and dialogue, whether face-to-face or online should be to explore issues and beliefs more than to proselytize. "When we engage others in order to understand better their commitments and decisions, rather than to persuade them to believe as we do, there is the potential for everyone to gain a better understanding of the issues" (Vogel, 2000, p. 22). Daloz (1999) encouraged educators to give "ample opportunity" (p. 120) for class discussion and debate, including

role-playing positions not personally held. Robbin (1999) posited that academic freedom may in fact be greater in Christian contexts than elsewhere because of the conviction that “all truth is God's truth” (p. 102). We have nothing to fear in exploring other possibilities.

Part of this genuine dialogue and investigation will include careful listening, a further aspect of our welcome. “Hospitality that does not include listening is not true hospitality” (McHugh, 2012, p. 57). Palmer (1999) and Daloz (1999) also noted the need for this - “actually trying to enter the world of the other person, see through his or her eyes as clearly as possible, without making assumptions or judgments - just plain 'get' their world as they see it” (Daloz, 1999, p. 114). Such care-filled listening takes time to develop. As Nouwen (1996) rather humorously posited, it is “not a technique that can be applied as a monkey wrench to nuts and bolts” (p. 237). Considering when holistic transformation may occur within a program of study, Vogel (1991) reminded us that this is a continuing process that may escape early notice by educators and students alike. Daloz (1999) suggested that our professional lives often contain “crucial turning points” (p. 21), and that change occurs in bursts: “Development seems to happen not in a gradual and linear way but in distinct and recognizable leaps” (Daloz (1999), p. 23).

## **Method**

Bethlehem Tertiary Institute (BTI), the institution where this study originated, is a Christian private training provider in New Zealand that offers undergraduate degree programs in teacher education, counselling and social work, a graduate program in secondary teaching, and a masters in professional practice. Since the percentage of enrolled students who are not Christ-followers is small, I felt it important to throw the net as widely as possible. I sought potential participants by putting invitations on our institution's alumni Facebook page, emailing all in the alumni database, and putting messages into the online communication centers for current students. Participation was sought from those involved at any point in the institution's existence. I hoped this might give some sense of longitude, presenting slices of experience which, while faculty members and programs have changed over time, could

indicate a sense of continuity of our vision and the extent to which it is being realized. Institutional ethics approval for this phenomenological study was applied for and granted. For ethical reasons the invitation to participate excluded any students I currently teach or am likely to teach during their period of study. For reasons of confidentiality, the findings were collated by a member of our Support Services team. Communication explained to potential participants that their choice to respond would be taken as informed consent.

The study used a Google forms survey of 20 questions, estimated to take about 30 minutes to complete. This survey investigated the felt experiences and reflections of current students and graduates who did not view themselves as Christ-followers at the start of their program. Questions included a mix of standard demographic markers, Likert scale questions, tick-box option questions, and opportunities to give more detailed answers in an un-prescribed way. They were informed both by the author's previous research (Smith, 2009), and literature linked to tertiary study and holistic transformation. Overall, the desire was to explore questions relating to holistic change as or if experienced by those not espousing Christian faith. Respondents were asked to identify the initial factors that were influential in their choice to apply to come, and to explain more fully if any Christian aspects contributed to this. Several Likert scale questions asked participants to identify the level to which they felt this institution had influenced their faith journey, the extent to which their understanding of God or Christian faith had changed, and their view of the difficulty of the experience. They were asked to identify what they anticipated before starting in terms of the Christian ethos of the institution, and both the special and the daunting aspects they experienced initially and also later. Questions also covered whether participants believed they had changed holistically during their period of study and, if so, where in their programs this occurred, as well as what they believed were the key contributors to this change. They were also asked whether they would choose to study at the institution again in the light of what they now knew. All 788 alumni on the database at the time were approached, as well as current students. In the end, 23 responded who clearly met the criteria

representing onsite, online, and mixed-mode (i.e., studying some papers face-to-face, and others online) students from all the undergraduate programs we offer.

Qualitative research does not encourage definitive claims, though it is hoped readers will find points of resonance relevant to their own situations. No formal analytical tool was used, in line with Gadamer's warnings (as cited in Sharkey, 2001) regarding reliance on pre-set standardized interpretative methods. Instead, all responses were closely and carefully examined line by line, and word by word, with key themes identified.

### Findings

Participants in the study noted various areas of life transformation that included evolving understandings of God and Christian faith, changes in the ways they related to others, and growth in their understanding of themselves. Changes linked with God included first-ever or influential encounters with Scripture, having previously-held misconceptions of God or Christian faith challenged and replaced with fresh learnings, drawing personally closer to God, and feeling comfortable engaging in spiritual conversations. Key changes in the ways they related to others included self-observed higher levels of respectfulness, acceptance and understanding, and curbing gossip. In relation to themselves, participants noted increasing self-confidence, a greater willingness to explore aspects of themselves or their behavior that they had previously avoided, and a liberating relinquishing of the fear of being judged.

Participants identified times within or after their study program when change had occurred, and a variety of catalysts that included one-to-one interactions with faculty and fellow-students, hospitable attitudes, the course content and readings from some papers, discussions in class, online or even at home, and one or two particular institutional events. Also mentioned was the overall environment of the institute.

### Changes Noticed in Understandings of God and Christian Faith

Of the 23 respondents in this study, 17 acknowledged the institution had influenced their faith journey and their understandings of God and or Christian faith in a positive way, 10 of them

significantly so. Five participants felt their faith journey was not affected at all, while one felt there had been negative change. For at least one respondent, studying at this institution was their first-ever encounter with Scripture: "It got me to open a Bible" (R.1 = Respondent 1). Another noted that the inclusion of Scripture within the program had influenced growth (R.14).

Several mentioned how much they had learned that was new. One, (R.6), put it this way: "I was always a very spiritual individual who had never been exposed to the Christian faith, and now that I have, I am finding the journey enlightening in so many ways." This participant was motivated to learn more about God and Christian faith through attending Alpha (a DVD-based course introducing the basics of the Christian faith), which was found helpful. A number of participants remarked that their study programs challenged previously-held views and misconceptions of God or Christian faith, bringing a measure of healing. "Being at BTI "gave me ... understanding of how Christianity can look in practice beyond the stereotypical view I had previously held" (R.11). Another commented:

I left the church as a young person and ... had forgotten most of the teachings.... doing this course gave me the opportunity to have another look. I had different eyes this time, not the bored young person's eyes.... I was delighted that Christianity had some beautiful messages, teachings etc. that I did not know it had.... I was surprised at how deep and meaningful it was. (R.14)

Respondent 23 acknowledged that it gave me a deeper understanding of what being a Christian actually meant, and learning to understand that Jesus did not want to harm me but wanted to love me and give me an opportunity to learn to trust in Him.... putting my trust in Jesus helped me to start to heal. Some participants came from Christian backgrounds which they had for various reasons rejected. One mentioned how (s)he came closer to God through BTI, and began attending church more regularly, something (s)he had previously only done for "the social aspects of meeting people." In contrast, (s)he now felt "hungry to know God more" (R.10). Respondent 14 acknowledged a new, more open stance to Christian faith: "I am more open to re-discover my Christian roots, I have my daughter in a Christian school, I am going to church

occasionally... I would now describe myself as spiritual.” Another acknowledged feeling more comfortable engaging in spiritual conversations (R.3).

### **Changes Noticed in Relation to Others**

Seventeen participants felt their understanding of and relationships with others positively changed through their time at BTI, with eleven considering this to be to a significant degree. Several spoke of higher levels of respectfulness, acceptance and understanding of others. One felt (s)he had gained “an open and honest acceptance of others and their faith and beliefs” (R.23). Another self-described as “less critical... more compassionate... I have more respect... accept differences” (R.14), while a third noted an improved relationship with his/her Christian mother (R.3).

One respondent highlighted how the lack of gossip within the institution had positively affected his/her professional practice:

The anti-gossip culture really proved to me how important it is to maintain a professional standard of conduct. I took this with me in my own teaching practice and over the years have been complimented by numerous colleagues on my professionalism. (R.11)

### **Changes Noticed in Relation to Self**

Twenty participants felt their understanding of themselves grew during their time at BTI, 14 of them to a significant extent. “I grew up physically, mentally and spiritually in those three years – more than any other periods of my life” (R.10). Other changes noted included increasing self-confidence (Rs.10, 21), becoming kinder - “I feel I became a better person... more sensitive to others and more inclined to do small kindnesses” (R.8), and being more willing to explore aspects of themselves or their behavior that they had previously avoided: “peeling many layers... made me a better person, better mum and a better student” (R.12). One participant found that letting go of the fear of being judged by others for “not behaving ‘right’” was liberating (R.4), while another (R.10) commented that people (s)he knew had stopped them in the street to enquire what had happened to him/her since the change was so obvious.

### **When Did the Noticed Changes Occur?**

The study sought to identify when in relation to their period of study participants felt the most significant changes had occurred. Fifteen of the 23 participants felt their first year had been particularly significant, with 12 observing ongoing change in years two and three, and five recognizing that holistic growth had been sustained since leaving. One respondent identified the single most significant transformative event occurring in the third year when (s)he accepted God into his/her life: “It wasn’t until my third year of study when I really began to know God and accepted him into my life” (R.10). One, who came to appreciate (s)he had altered more than realised at the time, shared this story:

I didn’t realise how much BTI had influenced me until the day after it had all ended. I sat on my deck with no lectures to go to and thought, here I go again out into the real world. It’s time to make a choice for myself... I asked God to direct my path. The next evening the phone rang and a ... school asked me to go for an interview. I got the job, and the journey began. (R.3)

### **What Acted as Catalysts for Change?**

A number of key catalysts for change were identified from a previous study (Smith, 2009) that explored contributing factors to holistic transformation among graduates from one of our blended programs. Participants in the current study could choose as many as they felt applied to them, and identify any others. One-to-one interactions with faculty were identified as the most significant catalyst for holistic change (21 from a possible 23). Other transformational contributors included one-to-one interactions with particular students (19 respondents), the course content of specific papers (17 respondents), hospitable attitudes encountered (15 respondents), in-class or online discussions or activities (13 respondents), course readings (11 respondents), particular named papers (9 respondents), specific events at the institution (8 respondents), and discussions around course material at home (4 respondents). One participant also mentioned the teaching Practicum, and another a service experience overseas as influential in his/her holistic development.

#### **One-to-one interactions with faculty.**

Respondents wrote eloquently about how different

members of the academic staff had significantly touched their lives. Influential qualities or traits cited included “caring” (R.2); “gracious” (Rs.3,4); “supportive” (Rs.7, 10); “amazingly good, kind, humble people” (R.8); “committed...colourful” (R.9); “encouraging” (R.13); “welcoming, helpful...represented hospitality, warmth” (R.14); “walked the talk” (R.14); “so real and approachable” (R.15); “genuine” (R.17); “honest” (R.17); “committed to your success” (R.17); “on the whole non-judgmental” (R.17); “put me at ease” (R.21); and “patient” (R.23).

Also appreciated was faculty’s open-hearted acceptance of where these non-believing students were at in their journey. “Lecturers... are very open minded people who understand and accept who you are and encourage the Christian faith with gentle, genuine hearts” (R.6). The most frequently cited reason for this perceived level of influence in participants’ growth was the fact that they felt faculty in some way reflected or represented Christ to them. One wrote, “The way Jesus would walk, talk and view life... I see the staff at BTI ... walk this life with us.... It is preached and practised daily” (R.12). “The lecturers ... regularly shared and reflected their faith which was seen in their supportive, Christ-like actions” agreed another (R.10). “Lecturer A was so passionate and caring... so genuine... she was a great ambassador for the Christian faith” (R.1).

Two respondents also mentioned how their interactions with faculty had enhanced their sense of self-efficacy: Lecturer B “gave me so much encouragement and praise that I started believing in myself in a whole new light” (R.11). Others commented on how educators had engaged with them in deep ways, including leading one through a transformative “guided exploration of self” (R.22), and encouraging another to reflect on their beliefs: “They forced me to look deeper” (R.19).

### **One-to-one interactions with particular students.**

The second most influential catalyst for holistic transformation identified related to interactions with other students, even when not all were positive. Qualities which respondents identified as most helpful included fellow-students being “supportive and non-judgmental” (R.21); “open-minded, curious” (R.17); “led...by their example” (R.19); as well as “the lack of lewd talk that I had been exposed to in other study situations” (R.1).

Several commented appreciatively about other students’ openness to dialogue about faith differences. The elephant in the room was clearly acknowledged in a positive way. One valued the mix of support and challenge (s)he received from others (R.10), while another wrote: “I have an open respectful attitude to faith and...am deeply spiritual. Engaging with fellow students, who were respectful of my spirituality allowed me to explore my beliefs and theirs more fully” (R.18). The ability to have open discussions about how “each of our faith [sic] work for us” (R.17) was seen as important. One respondent shared an example that had been particularly meaningful where a Christian student had involved their church prayer group on behalf of two friends:

I ... asked for prayer with regards to close people in my life who are struggling... a lesbian couple ...and the prayer team at K’s church had no problem. This act has restored something within me, making my heart feel good about this faith. (R.6)

Not all encounters with other students were so positive, however. What participants appeared to find most off-putting were what they perceived to be narrow-minded, extreme, or dogmatic opinions. One wrote, “Some students were extremely insecure in their faith and found any difference of opinion threatening” (R.4); [I found] “some dogmatic viewpoints ... [were] very disturbing and discouraging” (R.5); “the extremity of some did hinder the journey” (R.13). Two respondents mentioned struggling with the faith claims made by Christian classmates when they observed inconsistencies in their lives: “There are so many types of Christian faith... I find that some of the held beliefs, particularly by fellow students, do not seem to be enhancing their lives” (R.22). “I did think ... ‘what God wants me to do/told me to do’ seemed to be an excuse for what they wanted to do” (R.1). Respondents found the sense of disconnect between talk and walk upsetting.

**Hospitable attitudes encountered.** Respondents identified a number of caring qualities which had either helped or hindered them on their journey towards change and growth. Noted as helpful were “consistency” (R.10); “honesty and integrity” (R.11); “faith, compassion, hospitality and helpfulness” (R.14); “friendliness, caring and warmth” (R.22), and attitudes that were “respectful,



open and accepting” (R.18). Gracious, non-pressurizing acceptance of where these participants were at in their journey of faith as they “struggled to make sense of everything” (R.23) was noted and valued. One wrote, “I was welcomed and not pressured to change” (R.1), while another celebrated, “I was never judged” (R.21). Attitudes deemed to be unhelpful included any attempt to proselytize (R.7), and a perceived lack of openness to the views of others (R.2).

**The course content of specific papers, and course readings.** Some of the content in different papers taken was perceived to be important in the journey of change. Material that specifically related to faith was mentioned as helpful (R.19), as well as a paper that specifically covered some of the foundational aspects of Christian faith. One respondent noted that “both sides of the coin” were included in their readings (R.8), while others valued the opportunity to consider “long and hard” (R.19) why they believed what they did (R.17). One participant described how what (s)he had learned about Jesus as a master teacher had influenced their own practice: “I learned that Jesus was a pretty amazing teacher and his humility and passion influenced...my own ideas about teaching” (R.8).

**Discussions around course material and content at home.** Four of the study respondents identified discussing course material and content with those at home as a catalyst for change. One found it helpful to be able to put “ideas out to the people who know me best” (R.7), while another appreciated those at home as safety valves when they needed to vent (R.19).

**In-class or online discussions or activities.** Several participants acknowledged in-class or online discussions and activities as very helpful in their holistic development, valuing discussions that promoted growth (R.6). One mentioned an assignment where they had argued a point relating to gender issues from the Bible that they felt was opposite to their own. “I thought it enlightened ... and challenged me” (R.1). Another, who alleged they had not moved in their faith position overall, still acknowledged that class discussions had helped aid “understanding of not only ... what I believe but why I believe it” (R.18).

Five respondents specifically mentioned discussions online as catalysts for change. One noted that these were never judgmental (R.6), while another found

them helpful since classmates were “willing to share their thoughts and reasons for their beliefs” (R.14). One participant appreciated that online discussions lasted longer, certainly more than any in-class equivalent, which they felt had “deepened thinking” and provided “a safe way to voice ourselves” (R.18). This perception of safety, perhaps enhanced by not having to face each other in a classroom and everyone having time to give a more considered response, may have contributed to their “non-threatening” (R.23) nature.

**Particular events at the institution.** This institution organizes few specific events for students, but some were mentioned in the study. The undergraduate teacher education programs include required time in service mission. One participant went to Tonga to help in a school, an experience which (s)he felt had had a profoundly positive impact (R.12). Orientation Camp in year one was named by another respondent as significant in his/her journey of change, as well as the opportunity to live as part of the family of a faculty member, where (s)he was regularly prayed for (R.14). This participant became a Christian during his/her time at the institution. However, the same camp that this participant found helpful was viewed negatively by another because of the praying and singing that it included. (S)he commented that it “made me feel segregated and I felt pressured to take part in something that felt very alien and wrong to me” (R.11).

**Other catalysts.** Participants were given opportunity to detail any other aspects of their experience at this institution which they felt had been catalysts for holistic change. Several wrote more globally about aspects of the learning environment as a whole, including the people.

I have learnt more about faith in the time I have been at BTI than all those years I went to church as an adult and child... Faith grows so much because of the environment and people that are placed around me. (R.12)

Another felt that “hanging out with others” had been life-changing (R.14). One, who felt (s)he were unlikely to change in his/her faith stance, still viewed his/her study period as valuable: “I felt it was a privilege to be accommodated as a student... while not being a person of any faith. I in no way regret my decision to attend” (R.16).

## Respondents' Advice to Faculty and Students

The study invited participants to share recommendations to faculty and others to help them relate more fruitfully with students who do not profess Christian faith. Four main recommendations emerged: a) the importance of open-mindedness, b) some possible ways to demonstrate respect regarding this significant area of difference, c) open disclosure about the level of biblical content of the programs at time of interview, and d) providing more opportunities to be supported in biblical literacy and understanding of Christian faith.

**Open-mindedness.** Five respondents voiced their desire to be truly heard by others, and for more in-class opportunities to debate and question Christian faith. One experienced the discomfort of being in a minority grouping for the first time ever: "I felt marginalised and in some instances discriminated against for not being Christian – a real minority experience which was interesting" (R.18).

Participants shared ideas on ways in which faculty and students might demonstrate respect for this significant area of difference between them. One wanted to see "a more positive attitude toward other faiths and beliefs" (R.14), while another wrote succinctly, "No sermons" (R.8). A third wanted worship times to be optional for non-Christian students, saying it was all right to expect them to be respectful, but not to require them to be present (R.11). One respondent requested that the biblical or Christian aspects be removed from graded assignment work since it added another layer of challenge. "Not asking for Christian perspectives in assessment tasks – the pressure of assessments being difficult enough without asking us for a perspective we don't hold, or can't see – but fine in discussions" (R.18).

**Open disclosure of the level of biblical content in the programs at time of interview.** Perhaps linked to the respondents' level of challenge with assessments that required biblical critique, one respondent requested that those interviewing should be more up front with how much "biblical content is in all papers" (R.6).

**Providing more opportunities to be supported in biblical literacy and understandings of Christian faith.** Again, respondents suggested ways in which they felt this perceived gap might be addressed. One requested that faculty not assume that students

were already familiar with the Bible (R.17). Others asked for more opportunities for dialogue, either for faculty to take more time to explain (R.13), or to afford students who disagreed with or didn't understand what was being said the space to pursue this further (R.15). One participant - interestingly not the one who had spent time boarding with a faculty member's family - wondered whether non-Christian students could be offered the chance to "be billeted at a local Christian couple's home" (R.16), something which could provide them with a ready source of knowledge on things related to Christian faith as well as providing at least one model of what grounded Christian life might look like.

## Discussion

This article foregrounds both the lived experiences and views of participants who celebrated the opportunity to share their stories. It clearly demonstrates that there is a great deal more to educating Christianly than increasing the number of Bible verses used in coursework, while still acknowledging the potency of Scripture in changing lives.

## Implications for Faculty

Faculty coming into Christian education can gain helpful insights from what the respondents shared. New educators in Christian settings could be tempted to throw scriptures around freely, sermonize, or assume all students subscribe to a homogenous faith stance. This latter could well not be the case. It is helpful to be reminded that our lives are being closely observed by students to see if there is congruence between the faith we claim, and the lives we live, including our professional lives. It is important that we make no assumptions in terms of students' biblical literacy. Educators need to be alert to their languaging, perhaps including online glossaries for new words including Christian jargon to help those unfamiliar with the faith. We also need to check that our assignment and other teaching and learning expectations are well scaffolded in terms of biblical literacy, with appropriately-skilled staff - whether academic or in the learning support area - available to assist in this way. This would appear to be especially needed for those working with year one students, where the highest level of holistic change was noted. This

will, naturally, have implications for time allocations in faculty work plans – part of the cost of the extra efforts that Fubara, Gardner, and Wolff (2011) argued are necessary to ensure members of any minority grouping feel welcome in our institutions.

Learning to ask deeper-level questions which open up more personal and spiritual conversations and not just cerebral sharing will be key, along with the creation of a safe environment – whether online or face-to-face – where students can test and share their ideas without fear of ridicule, recrimination, or academic penalty. Faculty themselves need to be comfortable with uncertainty, willing to gently and respectfully partner with students as they explore their core beliefs, not forcing them along tramlines of dogma, but listening with love and being willing at times to challenge wisely, while recognising that God is also an active partner in this process of growth and change. This challenge will not only be directed towards students who do not profess Christian faith. Those who do - but who exhibit harsh, dogmatic or extreme opinions - will need that challenge equally.

### **Implications for Other (Christ-following) Students**

If Christian educators go the extra mile in providing caring space for those not professing Christian faith, we must also seek to ensure that Christ-following students - key stake-holders in overtly Christian institutions - do not feel alienated. It is a challenge, for example, to decide how much time to allow in class for debate and exploration of alternative faith positions as suggested by some respondents. It could be that the student who primarily wants to learn how to be an effective Christian professional finds this irrelevant, annoying and time-wasting, unless they come to see that such conversations will ultimately benefit them also.

As part of their professional preparation Christian students can be encouraged to maximize the opportunity in a safe environment to be open-hearted and open-minded while exploring their own faith journey in more depth. They can learn to share their faith in caring and respectful ways, explaining ideas and experiences in ways that are easy for a novice to follow. They, too, need to be aware their lives are being watched by others, and

learn honest and respectful interaction with those different from themselves.

### **Implications for Assignment and Class Work**

Many of us can think of examples of universities founded on a strongly Christian base that have now lost their Christian distinctive, some even becoming anti-Christian in their stance. Chang (2003) cautioned, “Openness to differences is always in tension with protection of Christian identity and worldviews” (p. 4). Trebilco (2006) also warned against groups who go “too far down the accommodationist path” (p. 38) and lose their original Christian stance. Somewhere there is a tipping point where those of different or no religious persuasion can succeed in changing the Christ-following culture of educational establishments.

While still modelling an ethic of care, there will, I believe, be times when overtly Christian institutions must rebut pressure to delete specific Christian content from its programs. While we may in the end disagree, we do still need to consider the suggestion from one participant that we remove biblical aspects and critique from assessed work, and leave it to class discussions. We will want to explore how this might affect our intentionality to be overtly Christian, and how it might affect those Christ-following students who come into our programs with a specific desire to learn how to work Christianly within their professional lives. If we want to be overtly Christian in our programs, we may well want to challenge students to critique what they read and learn against a biblical backdrop, while certainly providing scaffolding for that process. This, in fairness, certainly needs to be explained to applicants before they commit themselves to a course of study. On the other hand, Reno (2010) reminded us, “Not all scholarship has to crackle with the ardor of faith” (p. 69). Faculty’s choice of reading material can demonstrate awareness of the different faith positions of their students. It will be important to include some that speak deeply to the spirit, and not just the mind. Prayer is vital in making these decisions. How might we judge how much – or little – biblical material is appropriate to include in our courses? Is it at the expense of other needed content? It was interesting to note the differing responses of respondents to specifically Christian

aspects of their program. While one participant felt there was minimal mention of the Bible in his/her experience (R.1), several others spoke appreciatively of their exposure to scripture for the first time. The very thing that one found negative (worship time at an institutional camp), was cited by another respondent as a key component in their growth. We need to be led by the Holy Spirit, both individually and as we work together with colleagues.

### Possibilities for Future Research

Future research linked to this study could include enquiring into the experiences and feelings of Christ-following students regarding having non-Christian contemporaries in their study programs, including if and/or how they see them contributing to their growth in any way. Barton (2012) highlighted this possibility: "I have never been able to look at a 'stranger' without wondering, 'Is this the person that God is going to speak to me through today?'" (p. 89). The experiences of Christian faculty with unbelieving students in their classes could also be researched – how they have sought to make them welcome, particular challenges faced, and ways of working with them that seem to have been appreciated or fruitful.

### Conclusion

It has been encouraging and enlightening to learn of holistic transformation experienced by current and previous non-Christian students at this institution, and to hear in more depth the ways in which they felt they changed in relation to God, others, and themselves. It was interesting to note the timing and variety of factors to which they attributed this change, as well as perceived hindrances in their journey towards God. The role which both faculty and fellow-students potentially play in this is both a challenging responsibility and privilege.

The challenge to live out a Christ-like blend of "grace and truth" (John 1:11, New International Version) is real. Nouwen (1996), with his strong emphasis on recognizing each person as an image-bearer of God encouraged us in the provision of "fearless space" (p. 231) where change can occur. For caring Christian educators with students who do not profess Christian faith in their sphere of influence, this is a challenge with eternal possibilities.

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