

encounter

The changing face of Distance Learning

Charles Erlam
Director - Distance Learning

Distance Learning has seen seismic change in recent years. Before the days of computers, email and the internet, distance learning was usually called "Correspondence Study" because the post was the primary means of communication between student and teacher. Before it became Laidlaw College, the Bible College of New Zealand developed a correspondence school, the Extension Studies Department, in the early 1980s. Its purpose was to help people access quality Bible study, even if they were not able to attend the residential campus in Auckland. Students usually met in groups all around New Zealand, with a local leader to guide them, and all study was based around paper workbooks. This system largely followed the Theological Education by Extension (TEE) model which had been developed for training church leaders in developing countries around the world.

The personal computer and internet technologies which developed quickly throughout the 1990s opened new windows of opportunity for distance learning, not only in terms of the flow of information, but also in terms of

the ability to communicate across distances. So, in 2002, a new initiative was developed within the renamed Centre for Distance Learning (CDL) to provide high quality degree-level study by distance learning, based around these new technologies.

Today Laidlaw College offers two diploma and two degree programmes through distance learning, with over 50 courses to choose from. Students interact with one another and with their tutors by means of online discussion forums, audio and video conferencing, and, of course, email. They can access books and journal articles online, and submit all their assessment tasks online. Well and truly gone are the days of relying on snail mail to communicate! In keeping with our increasingly media-oriented culture,

most of our distance learning courses now include video content and often link to a rich variety of online resources.

In the 'old days' people would choose to study by distance primarily because they lived too far away from a Bible College of NZ campus. Today, many of our students choose distance learning because of the flexibility it offers them – they are able to study when and where it suits them. The majority of our distance learning students work part-time or full-time, and fit their studies into their spare time. As our world becomes increasingly connected through technology, we at Laidlaw seek to harness technology to keep our theological education as flexible and effective as it can be, for the sake of our students and the glory of God.



North & South

A desire for more spiritual feeding saw Vinise Moananu pick up biblical studies, first attending the Wellington Pacific Bible College and now studying by distance learning with Laidlaw College. Vinise's in it for the long haul – she's been plugging away at one course per semester towards her Diploma in Christian Studies since 2013.



Vinise Moananu

Work and family responsibilities keep Vinise in her home city of Wellington. She works as a Senior Test Analyst for the Capital and Coast District Health Board, a DHB she's worked for in various roles for 20 years. She has currently taken a year off to care for her mother who is suffering from dementia. Vinise's an elder in the Pacific Islanders' Presbyterian Church

in Newtown and this year became a lay preacher - the first woman in her church to hold this role.

She's found her studies a rewarding experience – loved learning about the drama of Scripture and seeing the connections between the Old and New Testaments. She now finds herself listening to sermons and thinking “where does that fit into the bigger picture?” Forum posts by other students have opened her mind to fresh ideas. Her tutors are supportive, and she enjoys meeting informally with some other Wellingtonians studying Laidlaw course by distance learning.

Over 70 kilometres south of Vinise, Kit Demmocks serves as a youth pastor at St Ninians Presbyterian Church in Blenheim. He's one of a number of Presbyterian youth interns working for 10-12 hours a week in youth ministry, studying towards a Bachelor of Ministries degree, and incorporating some Presbyterian-specific studies into that degree. Kit's been studying fulltime since 2014 and is into his final semester.

Kit came to faith while attending the youth group he is now running. A few of his mates convinced their “angry atheist friend” to come along, and he's outlasted them all, still involved with



Kit Demmocks

the youth group 11 years later. Given his unchurched background, he wanted to be better equipped theologically. Kit's church were keen not to lose him and offered to pay for his studies if he'd stay and study by distance learning. He enjoys being a part of a cohort of Presbyterian interns and has particularly loved the exegetical courses, with his 1 Corinthians course being a highlight.

Vinise and Kit are two examples of around 350 students, scattered around New Zealand and stretching as far as a Kiwi missionary in Uganda, who have entered Laidlaw's “virtual classrooms”. They both agree that studying by distance takes good time management and self-discipline, but the hard work is worth it!

LIDLAW SUMMER SEMESTER COURSES

DISTANCE LEARNING

(Late November 2016 – early February 2017)

| | |
|--------------|--|
| 111.615 SS | Biblical Interpretation |
| 115.515 SS | Biblical Theology |
| 307.6/715 SS | History of Christianity in New Zealand |
| 401.515 SS | Formation |
| 511.6/715 SS | Pastoral Care in Community |

Enquiries to: distancelearning@laidlaw.ac.nz

POSTGRADUATE BLOCK COURSE

7 & 28 November – 2 December 2016

R404.830 Narrative Approaches to Spiritual Care
(Lecturer: David Crawley)

Enquiries to: lgs@laidlaw.ac.nz

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Leaving a Legacy

I threw my cap into the air...what a moment! I have been studying with Laidlaw College as a distance learning student for 12 years...and I FINALLY have my Bachelor of Ministries degree! I recently received a terminal cancer prognosis, and have been told I have less than six months to live. Laidlaw College sped up my graduation processing, and I was capped at a special ceremony here at my home with family and friends, on 18 April. Some of Laidlaw's distance learning staff took time out from a conference to be at this event.

So what about my degree? Was that all for nothing? No, my distance learning study through Laidlaw College has enabled me to process and put into practice what I have been learning as I go. My faith and theology has been honed throughout my studies. Initially I spent time understanding the Bible story and its context, and then put what I learnt into developing some evangelistic resource materials. During my years of study, and with



Annemarie Dawson

the support of my local church, I have produced resources for a NZ evangelistic organisation called Outreach2day. These resources include training workbooks, minibooks and flipcharts for visual presentations of the Gospel in a non-confrontational manner. Teams of people throughout NZ now share the Gospel using these resources.

For over six years on the second Saturday of each month we have held regular outreaches here in Hamilton at the Frankton Market, using large flipcharts and handheld minibooks. People come up and ask, "What's this?" We say, "It's a presentation based on the Ten

Commandments – would you like to have a go?" It's so easy to share the Gospel with these resources, particularly if you are a shy retiring introvert like me! Now I have had to hand over the baton of leadership in Hamilton, but the ministry continues on.

Both God and my study at Laidlaw have watered my faith and made it fruitful. I finally have my BMin! But, even better, I am holding on to the hand of Jesus. This Jesus who came, who died, who rose, who is alive today; this same Jesus holds my hand as I walk from this life through the valley of the shadow of death to the next life.

Thanks Laidlaw College for partnering together with me in my quest to fulfil the Great Commission.

Postscript: Annemarie Dawson wrote these words two weeks before she went to be with her Lord on 7 May 2016. Through the evangelism resources she has developed, she leaves a legacy that will live on and continue to bless others. You can view the resources on the Outreach2day website, <http://outreach2day.org>

Sharing the Journey

An integral part of Laidlaw's Distance Learning courses are the tutors. This year 11 tutors are supporting students through their courses – there to help students understand, and engage with, the content of the course; to encourage, to correct, to mark assignments and to facilitate class discussion in their 'virtual classroom'.

Judith Brown is a lay minister at Titirangi Presbyterian, a half time position she commenced in April 2015. She's been a Distance Learning tutor for the last eight years, though her association with Laidlaw stretches back to 2003 when she started tutoring Old and New Testament

classes on the Henderson campus, and later taught some theology papers. Teaching was not a life goal – surrounded by teachers in her family, she'd always declared she'd never be a teacher ... but, "guess what I now love doing?"!

It's the love of theology which drives her passion for teaching. She gave her life to Christ at age 10 at a Christian Youth Camp in Southland, but "drift occurred". In her late 20s she realised that "the world in which there's a God is the one I belong in, and I'm not happy to be outside of that". That reconnection with God led her to study theology at Otago University, a second degree to her first in political studies. She went on to do a Masters and then a Doctorate in theology.

Judith loves that she can stay with the subject and tutor theology. Her "Introduction to Theology" course is



Judith Brown

compulsory for all distance learning students and her clear favourite, as she had some input into it herself! "I don't have to worry about going in a direction that the writer of the course didn't intend". It's a real joy when the lights go on, and students suddenly "get it" and their faith life is enriched.

That's a sentiment other tutors echo. It's a great privilege to be able to walk with students in their faith journeys!

Living in the “In Between” From inclusion to belonging

Immanuel Koks

Recently I was talking with Paul, a Groundsperson here at the Henderson campus, about a charismatic ministry that he is involved with. The conversation got me thinking about how much I missed sharing in prayer ministry together with friends in my Pentecostal church in Vancouver, Canada. It was a rich experience of the Spirit; being real with each other about the challenges of life as disciples in a broken world while ministering together in expectation that the Spirit is at work in our lives.

The pastoral team had benefited from a broad theological education, so they held the confidence of the Spirit's work within a sound biblical and theological framework of now...but...not yet. We lived and believed that the Spirit powerfully works *both* to bring healing and restoration to life now, *and* that he brings comfort, peace, and presence in the hardest places and the roughest of times as we wait on him to complete his restoring work.

I have to admit, when I first started attending this church I had my guard up. I had heard many stories of people with disabilities being told to “expect” their healing, only to crash with disappointment. As a person with a disability myself, there was no way that I wanted to be on the emotional rollercoaster of people always praying

for my healing in this way. I wanted community, a place where people would get to know *me*, not the disabled guy who's waiting for God to heal him. I needed a church *home* where I could stand shoulder to shoulder with fellow pilgrims in the mission of God. They were not perfect – their record for physical accessibility was not glowing. After meeting in terraced lecture theatres, they moved into an old picture theatre with a downstairs toilet. The church embraced me for who I was and what I had to give. Nevertheless, while we did not presume to know how God was at work, I was not allowed the comfort of not expecting God to change my life in any way. No, in the personal powerful presence of the Spirit, God is at work and, invariably, that is disruptive.

The reason the church struggles to see the work of God, in all aspect of life with a disability, is that it often adopts the “medical model” of disability. Disability, it is believed, is a problem with the individual's body that must be medically fixed and if it can't, then that disability defines the services that the person requires. When this model gets imported into a church setting, the disability defines the person and healing is primarily how God works with them. The most important thing to pray for becomes “healing cure”.

At first glance, how the church focuses on disability has much to do with the way it reads scripture, and understands the theology of the tradition. However, many disability theologians are going back to the Bible and tradition and asking whether our standard readings of these texts are the most liberating for people with disabilities and those who work with us.



Immanuel Koks

If you want to think more about this important topic, Laidlaw has a distance course *Theology and Experience of Disability* which will unpack all of the themes in this article as well as how they impact your experience. It will run again in Semester Two of 2017. To find out more contact distancelearning@laidlaw.ac.nz or phone 09 836 7836.

Immanuel Koks has taught on campus and as a distance tutor, since 2013. Alongside of his theological interests, Immanuel has studied disability for many years. He is a member of the College's Disability Advisory Group and, in the first semester of 2016, he tutored Theology and Experience of Disability for the first time. He is also doing his PhD through Otago looking at a disability theology of hope.

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