The ultimate goal of theological education is to form students, not just to inform them, Principal, Brian Rosner writes. Ridley College is committed to rigorous study and high academic standards. On that score we have a lot in common with many institutions of higher education. However, our commitment to thought leadership is only part of the story.

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The ultimate goal of theological education is to form students, not just to inform them. We want our students to develop Christ-like character, a global vision for the gospel of Jesus Christ and a heart to serve the church. Serious engagement with contemporary culture is also essential. And students need to learn both confidence and humility in handling God’s word.

Along with study and assessment tasks, faculty, staff and students at Ridley eat together, pray together, and act in love towards one another. Studying in community goes a long way to ensuring that we do more than simply offer degrees. We encourage students to learn in an environment of respect, support and integrity, where people from a variety of backgrounds and churches are welcome and can establish networks for ministry in the future. The hope is to equip men and women well for God’s mission in a rapidly changing and increasingly complex world.

At the heart of the campus and college life is the chapel. Every day there are classes, faculty and students pressing pause on their studies and gathering to reflect on the point of it all. We remember that the goal of theological study is not to figure out God and to find the right words, but to be lost for words in worship and praise: “To know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ... which surpasses knowledge” (Ephesians 3:17-21). In all our study we gladly give ourselves to describing God’s work in redemption, while also “giving thanks to God for his indescribable gift” (2 Corinthians 9:15).

As Paul puts it, “the renewed mind” is meant to lead to “transformed behaviour,” with the aim of proving that God’s will for all of us is “good, pleasing and perfect” (Romans 12:2). We seek by God’s grace to “proclaim Christ, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28).

This Ridley Report focuses on this goal of student formation. The three main articles explore the topic. In the first, Kai Tham, a recent graduate, reflects on his experience of formation at college. Second, Ridley’s educational designer, Diane Hockridge, considers the question of formation for those students who study with us online. And finally, Rhys Bezzant, dean of one of our learning communities, reports on the student mission to Tasmania.
FOR THE CALENDAR

May 29 - 30  
‘Known By God’  
Ridley/Gordon-Cornwell Theology Conference

June 22  
‘The Lost World of Genesis 1’  
Lecture by John Walton

August 24 - 28  
Jonathan Edwards Congress

August 25 - 27  
‘A Passion for Truth’  
Annual Preachers’ Conference

September 11  
Ridley / ISCAST Lecture

October 12  
Marketplace Institute Lecture  
Lecture by Robert Banks

October 23  
Annual Dinner at Melbourne Zoo

Please check the Ridley website for times and locations:  
www.ridley.edu.au/events

STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Kai Tham  |  Ridley Graduand

Speak, Teach and Love with Intention

Recent Graduand, Kai Tham, shares his reflections on how he was formed for mission and ministry at Ridley College.

Studying at Ridley has been phenomenal. More than that — it has been life-changing.

In my first year, a lecturer bought me coffee, sat me down and asked, “So Kai, why are you here at Ridley?” With fire in my belly, I confidently said, “I love and want to preach the gospel.” He looked at me with a serious smile on his face and said, “But Kai. This is not a Billy Graham era. No one hires preachers anymore.” I was shocked, “Why not? Isn’t it all about preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ?” That’s not the end of the story. Throughout my time at Ridley, this lecturer continued to invest generously and intentionally in my life, sharpening me in areas of theology, pastoral care, and relationship.

Ridley’s foundational strength is not its world-class theological teaching (as good as this is), but the spiritual formation it offers. From chapel three times a week to numerous prayer groups, Ridley not only talks the talk but walks the walk. Ridley has helped me to love God more, and even more, so much more, to see and know that God loves me. To quote our Principal’s mantra, we are ‘known by God’. Mind-blowing. Everyday.

I have been at Ridley for four years full time. In that time, I have seen and studied under old and new lecturers. Each of them has a unique teaching style, but whether through mentoring or lecturing, all of them speak, teach, and love with intention. I have lost count of the times when a lecturer displayed that touch of generosity over a cup of coffee or that touch of care with their listening ears and attentive hearts when I stopped by their offices.

Sitting and hearing God’s Word preached in chapel three times a week convinced me of the power of God’s Word. There’s not a time when I was not impacted by this faithful preaching, week in, week out. I still miss this and envy the students who get to enjoy it now. I remember when Brian, our Principal, preached a sermon on Romans during a valedictory service. It was a sunny day with the chapel full to overflowing so that chairs had to be placed outside. I sat outside, listening to him preach, and it hit me as clearly as the sun on my face. I am created for the glory of God! This continues to be the light of my life and mission.

I can give no higher praise to the Ridley community than to compare it to the community that Jesus envisioned, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). From registrars to librarians, lecturers to students, Ridley people love one another.

On one occasion I broke down in tears in front of the registrars, nearing burnout. I felt they genuinely cared for me then and all through my student career. Ruth, our librarian, was a constant encouragement as she spurred me on in my essay writing even when I was ready to give up. My fellow students, who remain dear friends, sacrificed their time to teach me how to improve my reading and writing.

Oh the stream of stories of grace, love, and life at Ridley! Words and time would fail me if I were to go on. Today, I can still say with renewed passion and conviction: “I love and want to preach the gospel”.

To my brothers and sisters at Ridley, I say this: I love you and thank you.
Rich and Authentic Educational Experiences

Educational Designer, Diane Hockridge explains the research and approach to ensure Ridley Online students are supported and mentored.

One of the exciting things about expanding our online learning offerings is the opportunity to re-think our approach to spiritual formation and to try out new things. Since it’s now possible for students to complete whole degrees online we have been thinking about how we can ensure our online courses provide good preparation for Christian ministry and support the development of mature Christian character and spiritual formation. A small team has been working on developing our approach, asking such questions as: What do we mean by spiritual formation? How are people actually formed? What are the dynamics and indicators of formation? And how can we address these in online courses?

Recent research presented at the Australian College of Theology Conference on Spiritual Formation shows that students attribute their spiritual formation learning to a wide variety of experiences, in formal and informal learning contexts, on and off campus. Research also indicates that formation isn’t necessarily dependent on an on-campus or classroom experience and that the formational dynamics of theological education actually lie in the process of study itself. So we are developing a multi-pronged approach to support spiritual formation for our online students which includes specific curriculum elements and also embeds teaching and learning approaches conducive to formation in the whole course structure.

Our approach involves three strands: guided practice, guided coursework and mentored experience of ministry. Students completing a whole degree online are expected to complete a unit in Guided Spiritual Formation with a mentor, which is taken over 4 semesters. The year-long Supervised Field Education unit is also highly recommended. In Guided Spiritual Formation the focus is on helping students to develop a growing self-awareness of their identity in Christ.

Beginning with an exploration of what it means to be known by God, and to know God, students work with personal mentors to develop individual learning goals, keeping a journal, engaging in spiritual practices, developing skills in reflective practice, and meeting regularly with their mentor. The latter part of the GSF unit guides students to explore Christian identity in terms of belonging to and serving God’s people, including reflection on gifting, calling and vocation.

In the online Field Education unit students are supervised in their choice of ministry practice, which will often be within their current church context. We aim to use students’ actual life and ministry settings for learning as much as possible, an approach which is also recommended in recent research published in the Christian Education Journal into theological distance education. Supervised Field Education provides opportunities for hands-on learning, practice and reinforcement of practical ministry skills and leadership qualities.

In this first semester of offering the newly developed online units we are pleased to have 8-10 students enrolled in both the Guided Spiritual Formation and the Supervised Field Education units, both of which are being coordinated by Graham Stanton, with the support of Richard Trist and Diane Hockridge.

The third strand of our approach involves intentionally designing all our online subjects with features that will allow, foster, and encourage personal and ministry formation. These include opportunities for practice, helping students to reflect on and in practice, interaction and collaboration with peers, exposure to other perspectives, encouragement of active learning, questioning, critical reading and analysis, and an emphasis on developing self-awareness and establishing helpful processes and practices for Christian life and ministry.

We expect that our three-stranded approach will provide a balance of rich and authentic educational experiences and place students in contexts where they can be supported and mentored and have the opportunity to learn in ways that are spiritually and personally formative.
From my perspective as a teacher, the best experience of all was to see students outside our natural habitat, growing in confidence and skills, and working out the next step in their ministry vocations. There is nothing quite like a new environment to show up our strengths and weaknesses, to test how robust our emotional intelligence is, or to realise how our way of doing things at home isn’t the only way.

It is one thing to be able to pray with students at Ridley’s daily Chapel, or to discuss lectures with them over lunch, but it is quite another to share an experience of travel, to work together in a church, and to begin conversations which carry over into regular life again in Melbourne. Formation for service is an integral part of being trained for mission and ministry. Transformational leaders need transformational experiences. A missions road-trip is great place to start.

This year, the Missional Leadership cohort travelled to Tasmania, to give testimonies (a dying art in many churches), preach sermons, and attend prayer meetings, Sunday services, small groups and a Passover meal. They acted in puppet plays, attended a camp for international students, delivered devotions, and participated in seminars for those interested in theological education. They also walked up to the lookout over Wineglass Bay.

Learning in a new context provided students with the opportunity to assess their understanding of ministry and expand their skills in a different environment. One student who is most familiar with tertiary student ministry where you can expect a quick take-up of ideas, expressed how much she had valued the patient teaching of a rector in a Bible study. Another student, terrified of public speaking, faced her fears and gave her testimony in Bellerive at a Maundy Thursday service to one hundred people. A couple of students in Sorell were most impressed by the way the rector had developed context specific plans for the various centres of the parish.

The small group ministry in Kingston was noted as worthy of emulation by another student. One newly married couple enjoyed long conversations about marriage and ministry with their ordained host. We were all most encouraged by the hospitality of the parishes, by their fresh ways of reaching out to the community, and by the growth in clarity and energy in the Diocese of Tasmania under the leadership of Bishop John Harrower.

We were generously supported in our road-trip by the Bush Church Aid Society, whose own ministry in Tasmania has been longstanding. Half the team were hosted by St Barnabas’ Newnham in Launceston, where support from BCA for the ministry of Andy Goodacre has seen a fresh commitment to reach out to the university and to neighbouring suburbs, where disadvantage is commonplace. In exploring the benefits of more intentional missional communities, as a parish, Barney’s is providing hope that mission in post-Christian Australia is not only a future possibility, but also a present reality.