By Peter Laughlin

**There is uncertainty in a whole range of areas, most of which are beyond the control of the institution themselves–Government regulations, future student numbers, increasing costs of education just to name a few.**

Change is also inevitable: the rapid shift to online meetings and classes due to COVID is just one example of the many demands that institutions face that require them to be both agile and flexible. But whilst uncertainty and change are often seen as challenges to effective operation, they are not necessarily negative.

On the contrary, they also provide new opportunities and a chance for innovation within the sector. Teaching today’s students for tomorrow’s ministry with yesterday’s means has always been a recipe for producing irrelevant graduates and frustrated congregations.

But innovative and contextual education practices that integrate a practical model of ministry within a strong theological and biblical framework yield graduates that shine.

Graduates, of course, first start out as new students. And here change is also being seen in the demographics of new students that are entering into theological institutions.

Available statistics about those entering theological training in the US (which is being more or less mirrored here) reveals a very interesting shift in the kinds of students taking up study and their reason for doing so.

Of the 6900 students who were surveyed as they commenced theological study during the survey period:

• 47% are older than 35 and 50% are married;

• The primary reason why students choose to commence theology study is because they have experienced a call from God on their lives;

• Almost all students said that personal referral (from a pastor or friend) was how they ultimately decided on which institution to attend;

• 55% of students have already served in local church leadership positions in the 5 years prior  
to starting study. 93% have leadership experience in some context;

• 81% are working while studying;

• 81% do not expect to enter into a local church pastoral ministry when they complete their study.

Some of these statistics are to be expected, for example, people generally do not choose to do a theological degree unless they  
have experienced some call from God on their lives, which reminds us again of how important it is as a Christian community to be constantly challenging our congregations to listen for God’s call.

But to see that almost 50% of students are older than 35 and have had some local church leadership experience before commencing study reveals that it is not just our young people who need to be challenged concerning their future but those who are already working in full-time capacities and are serving our churches in some way.

Particularly striking is the fact that 81% of students do not expect to enter into a local church pastoral ministry role when they complete their study.

Almost a third are looking to enter specialised ministry roles (such as chaplaincy, counselling, youth ministry, worship ministries etc.).

And the remainder indicate their interest lies in missions, teaching or they are as yet undecided. If these statistics are mirrored only partially here (and all evidence suggest that they are) then it reveals a strong desire amongst future graduates to work outside of the traditional pastoral ministry roles.

This will no doubt prove to be a challenge for the Christian church in the years ahead but it also provides encouragement to see that, more than ever, God is calling people to do ministry ‘outside of the box’ and over time this may very well prove to be exactly what the Church needs.

Please continue to pray for ACOM as we seek to fulfil God’s call for us in preparing people for work in His Kingdom. In this fast changing and uncertain environment, we need above all to be listening to what God is wanting to do through us.

Pray that we will have attentive spirits and open hearts.

– Associate Professor Peter Laughlin is Academic Dean at ACOM