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The Challenge of Spiritual Assessment

The spiritual life of the Adventist school is important to the church. It is of vital concern to the board, administrator, faculty and staff. Spirituality is rooted in the Adventist philosophy of education as an essential element of what schools should be and do. Initially, this concern was simply addressed by separate Bible classes; however, more recent concepts of integration of faith and learning have clarified the necessity of its pervasiveness throughout the curriculum.

Some institutions have done better than others in creating a spiritual atmosphere on campus. The questions can be asked: "Will my child grow spiritually as a result of attending the school?" "Will he learn the teachings, history, and practices of our faith?" "Will she be inspired to carry out the mission of the church through witness and service in her career?"

Concerned that Adventist education was not fully addressing its religious mission, the General Conference issued a document titled "Total Commitment." It called for every institution to systematically address how it was fulfilling the mission of the church.

Educators have long recognized that learning is most likely to happen when it is targeted with clear behavioral objectives and action plans. Unfortunately, the spiritual life of the campus and the integration of faith in the curriculum have not always been approached as deliberately as other learning objectives. The "Total Commitment" document called on educators to do just that.

Spiritual master plans are now required of all the Adventist schools. This was done more enthusiastically and successfully by some than others. Often the plans simply centered on the religious programs and classes of the school. Evaluations of the success of such plans often are limited to participation levels or baptismal counts.

Monitoring the academic progress of students is considered an essential task of student advisors. Academic records are compared to graduation requirements for each student and they are guided in their plans for academic and career success. But it seems that academic advisement has received more systematic attention than spiritual advisement. Fortunately, there is a growing interest in methods of addressing spiritual growth on the personal, individual level.

Measuring the spirituality of a person is no easy task, maybe impossible. It is full of philosophical and practical difficulties. Assessment instruments that have been developed or are being developed have at least two sides: spirituality and religiosity. One has to do with a person's spiritual experience and

relationship with God and the other with the practices and beliefs of their religion.

While it may be impossible to measure what is in a person's heart, there are indicators that can point in that direction. Spiritual indicators can be measured, but there is the danger of assuming that these indicators are actual spirituality. There is also danger in taking the indicators as a do-it-yourself list of how to improve your spiritual or religious life without recognizing that it is God alone who gives spiritual growth.

Notwithstanding these dangers, measuring spirituality and faith development is vitally important to Adventist education. When an institution displays as great an interest and effort in the personal spiritual development of its students as it does in academic progress, it will better achieve its philosophy and mission. This means that assessing and tracking students' spiritual development should be given considerably more attention than it has been given in the past.

Developing instruments for this task is a worthy effort. Measuring their effectiveness in identifying personal needs is essential. Adventist schools typically have not only Adventist students but other Christians and non-Christians attending. It should be the desire of schools to nurture spiritual growth in every student, including those of other religious backgrounds. Instruments or questions that may be effective with one group may be meaningless to another. Different cultures may respond differently to questions and instruments, which makes the task even more challenging.

Schools must be interested in going beyond the measurement of individual spirituality and faith. They must be interested in growth and improvement. Going the next step and developing strategies for faith development that address measured student needs is as important as assessing them. Parallel with assessment must be personal and institutional opportunities and activities that can nurture specific needs that have been identified in the assessment process. Failure to adequately provide these opportunities and activities makes the spiritual assessment of limited value. This must be part of the interpretation and advisement planned for such instruments.

The church has already learned a great deal from research on church values held by Adventist youth in the *Valuegenesis* studies. Adventist education and the church has responded and subsequent assessment has shown considerable improvement in some areas. Every Adventist educational institution must join in the task of identifying spiritual and faith development needs on the personal and the school-wide level. They must address these needs with strategies and programs that bring measurable improvement.

This is why this topic is so worthy of attention by Adventist educators.

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International Forum