

Institute for Christian Teaching  
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## **Fostering and Assessing Faith Development in the Adventist Classroom**

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### **Introduction**

Christian institutions seek to make education a wholistic experience where their entire curricular and co-curricular life is viewed from a Biblical perspective. It is vital that core issues of faith be identified and that these be examined in the context of the experience in the classroom.

A question that is being increasingly asked of teachers and Christian institutions inquires if faith development is taking place. Are schools nurturing faith? Does the classroom contribute to the development of Christian values? These questions are difficult to answer unless there is some yardstick to measure it. Without some method to measure the various aspects of faith it is difficult to determine if it is happening and if and how it could be nurtured better.

Adventist schools often express their mission as providing not only quality academic training, social, physical and relational development, but beyond this, doing it in the context of the Christian, biblical faith. A personal, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, character development, Adventist values and biblical faith are expressions often used to describe core goals for the schools. How do we know if these are improved by the educational process? Have the students developed in these areas as a result of their experience at the institutions? Have the students' faith been nurtured in each discipline and learning experience?

Some instruments are being developed that look at a broad spectrum of faith indicators, values and religious practice. These are being used with varying levels of enthusiasm. The information gained from these is a growing source of valuable insight that is helping those institutions understand their students better. It also provides direction for programs and activities that are aimed toward improving areas identified as being weak.

Research has identified indicators that measure the strength of values held by students but until recently little or no attempt has been made to actually measure faith development in a classroom setting. Teachers seem eager to have their students growing in faith but are sometimes unsure if and how much of it is happening in their classroom and learning experiences.

### **Perspectives on Faith Development**

Gillespie (1988) has looked at how faith develops at different ages and different stages of life. He traces what faith means to a person at these different ages. The look points out the importance of recognizing these developmental differences in the work of nurturing faith.

Roy (1998) identifies faith in terms of relationship: a) God's relationship to us; b) our relationship to God and finally c) our relationship with others. Hill (1998) suggests seven principles of faith: a) worldview; b) choices and priorities; c) experience; d) spirituality; 3) trust and commitment; e) modeling; d) climate.

Faith development can be viewed from many perspectives. One might consider the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) as developmental stages. Paul speaks about his joy in the Thessalonika church because "your faith groweth exceedingly" (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

### **Purpose of Essay**

It might be helpful to consider how faith can be fostered and assessed not only on the institution level or from the perspective of the individual but in the dynamics of the classroom setting. The author is not aware of any attempt to assess faith development in the classroom setting.

Faith has many sides and can be defined and described in many ways. The purpose of this essay is to look at five aspects or dimensions of faith. These dimensions are not intended to be comprehensive, but only to serve as a reference point from which to draw questions and to help explore the process of fostering faith in secondary and tertiary classes. The five dimensions of faith are: a) religious knowledge, b) relationship and modeling, c) spiritual experience, d) valuing and finally, e) worldview. They have been adapted from the sources cited above.

These dimensions of faith can be seen as progressing from one dimension to the next in model of faith development. Religious knowledge of God, the Bible stories and beliefs, testimonies of church members and learning how to pray and have personal devotions may form a foundation of faith. This may be reinforced by relationships with godly people and a growing relationship with God. Faith modeled in the life of a parent or teacher may continue to foster it in the individual. This may progress to where there is a personal spiritual experience with God. The spiritual experience may be expressed in various activities of worship and witness, which also foster faith. As the knowledge, relationships, and experience grow they affect the things a person holds dear, and values are formed, expressing and reinforcing faith. Finally it all comes together to affect everything that is thought and done. Patterns develop that form explanations of why things are the way they are and give purpose and meaning to life's experiences. Altogether, it forms a worldview as an expression of faith.

But faith doesn't always grow that way. Faith may start with a relationship or a spiritual experience. The order is not important, although some progression may be seen. It can be noted that one dimension may overlap the other. These dimensions do not usually occur in isolation. It is often many factor all working together that build faith over time.

Students will respond in different ways as the Holy Spirit touches their lives through the classroom experience. Some will enter a class with an abundant knowledge of God. They may have years of experience in a church setting but still lack a deep spiritual experience. Others may come with necessary information about God and salvation and even a spiritual experience that has drawn them close to God, but have not yet developed lasting Christian values that they are willing to affirm publicly and act

upon in their lives. This is not unlike the challenge teachers face in meeting the various learning levels of students in the academic fields.

As the teacher becomes aware of the levels of faith development in each student, various individualized approaches can be used. This may seem very secular and even mechanical at first but with the guidance of the Holy Spirit it can become the "science of salvation".

As these dimensions of faith are considered, it might be helpful to have these dimensions expressed in the form of questions that might be asked by a student or a teacher about the faith experience in the classroom. The questions need not provide a comprehensive assessment but rather a form of self-analysis for teacher development. The questions might be used as simply a focus to stimulate teacher reflection about faith development in their class. Some teachers may even find it useful to have their students answer the questions as a form of feedback. Teachers may want to write their own questions that relate to their specific class. Ideally, the teacher would construct questions that would assist them in examining their success in not only nurturing general faith development but in integrating faith into their specific subject.

Beyond these dimensions of faith the whole atmosphere of the classroom can affect the faith development process. The class organization, teaching skills, professionalism and justice, as well as the friendliness of the teacher provide a climate wherein the dimensions of faith can thrive or decline.

### **Limitations and Concerns**

Spiritual or values assessment is often met with a great deal of unease as are most forms of assessment that may directly or indirectly reflect on an institution's or teacher's performance or success. Student assessment of the teaching process may engender even greater anxiety. There are serious concerns about the assessment process, particularly as it relates to what will be done with the findings. McBride (1998, 24-29) summarizes it this way:

Perhaps the major concern of faculty is how the data will be used. Will the analysis focus on individual faculty members, departments, or institutions? Will the data be used to force out teachers or other staff? Will it be published in church papers to compare institutions? Will some colleges/universities begin marketing themselves in terms of their "greater spiritual growth" in comparison to the other, "lesser" schools?

Methods of faith development, which might be an outgrowth of the findings of the assessment process may be unique to each institution. Culture, student faith backgrounds, family settings, and church experience among other things will affect how teachers are able to nurture faith in their students.

Terms like spirituality, Adventist values, character and faith may be understood differently from one student to the next. When these terms are used for obtaining student feedback they may need to be

defined or reworded to relate them to adolescent students. It must also be noted that each person enters the classroom at a different place in their spiritual growth.

The sample questions that follow have not been tested. There is no way to confirm their validity or reliability at this point. It might be a potential research project. It may also be impossible to compare the results from different classes. Rasi (1998) indicates that not all academic and professional disciplines lend themselves equally to bringing together faith and learning.

One must be careful not to judge the results from student answers as being conclusive data about faith development in the class. On the other hand, student answers can provide some useful insights that may help the teacher form strategies and plans for nurturing faith. Some questions may seem better suited for one class than for another.

### **Faith Dimensions and Sample Questions**

The five dimensions of faith are given below with a short summary statement expressing the core meaning. Following each summary statement are questions that are a sample of the type that might be formed to examine the various facets of faith under these general headings. It might be too much to ask students to answer all of these questions. A few questions could be chosen or composed from each dimension to draw out student feedback. In addition, blanks should be provided for general comments.

#### **Religious Knowledge**

Mature faith must have a basic foundation in information about God and His revelation. To know God is to love and trust Him. Prime source for knowing God is the Bible. Secondary sources are from special people through whom God speaks, such as Ellen G. White, and to a lesser degree through such things as preaching, teaching, parenting and reading and spiritual conversations. Knowledge of God's grace and His unconditional love form the footings for faith. The teacher can contribute to the knowledge of faith by conveying Bible truth integrated into the subject.

Questions on religious knowledge as a dimension of faith in the classroom.

Has your experience in this class helped you:

- Know God better through activities or experiences planned for the class?
- Build your faith on what God has revealed in the Bible?
- Understand God and His plans for this world?
- Know what the death of Jesus has to do with your life?
- Better understand the Adventist beliefs in a way that has drawn you closer to God?
- Turn to the Bible as a trustworthy guide for life?

- Identify passage from the Scriptures that show God's wisdom and love in the context of the subject?
- Understand and accept that God loves you no matter who you are or what you have done?
- Learn more about personal devotion, prayer, witnessing and worship?
- Please share your comments about what this class has done for your religious knowledge?

### **Relationships and Modeling**

Faith is established on a relationship with God and is expressed and strengthened in relationship to others. People often experience conversion through the friendship and influence of a person that is modeling Christ's character. Faith is also nurtured in the community of believers. The teacher can build personal relationships with the students that can influence them for eternity. The climate of the class can draw students together and foster faith. A teacher's leadership, example and friendship will help build the student's faith.

Questions on relationships and modeling as a dimension of faith in the classroom.

Do you feel that:

1. Your relationship with your teacher has helped you grow in faith?
2. In your relationship with your teacher there is acceptance and trust?
3. You trust your teacher because he/she affirms you with smiles, praise, caring looks?
4. Your teacher is a Godly person because you have experienced from him/her caring acceptance, empathy, and love?
5. The climate or atmosphere of the class contributes to your Christian life?
6. Your teacher is like Jesus in some of the things she/he says or does?
7. There are positive things about your teacher that you see as a pattern for your life?
8. You can identify with your teacher's way of dealing with spiritual things?
9. This class drew you into a community of believers giving mutual support and love?
10. Please share your comments about what effect the relationships and modeling you have observed or experienced in this class have had on your faith development.

### **Spirituality and Experience**

Being spiritual and experiencing God's presence, being close to Him and feeling the Holy Spirit working on the heart is a vital part of the faith experience. There will be an opening of one's heart in prayer to God as to a friend. Faith also includes an aspect of experience and doing Service, witnessing and religious activities not only provide an expression of faith, they also contribute to faith development.

Service is living out God's will. A person with a mature faith will experience a sense of personal well-being, security and peace in Christ.

Along with the spiritual experience there are religious practices such as worship, tithing, communion, and baptism and religious occasions that can be deep expressions of faith and can build faith. But in themselves they may not be spiritual if the person's heart is not in it.

The teacher can provide an atmosphere where the Holy Spirit works on the hearts of the students and draws them close to God. The teacher will seek ways to get students to participate and have a genuine spiritual experience in religious programs and activities of the church. Through sincere prayer and conversations with the students they may have opportunity to help develop their faith.

Questions on spirituality and experience as a dimension of faith in the classroom

Has your experience in this class helped you:

- Feel that Jesus is close to you?
- Appreciate that Jesus is a friend who loves you?
- Feel that you are growing spiritually?
- Feel the presence or realness of God?
- See in nature, beauty or design that turned your thoughts to God?
- Pray in a deeper, more meaningful way?
- Sense God's guidance in your daily life?
- Have a feeling of security and peace in Jesus?
- Enjoy the assurance of salvation in Jesus?
- Feel the release of the burden of sin in your life?
- Please share your comments about what this class has done for your religious knowledge

### **Values and Choices**

Values are beliefs we hold especially dear. We prize them and publicly affirm them after we have chosen them freely (from alternatives considering the consequences). Values are an important part of faith because they are what we consider of great merit or worth. Values are so important that we not only believe in them, but we act on them. Teachers can build students' faith by helping them develop Christian values in the learning process.

Questions on values and choices as a dimension of faith in the classroom

Has the experience of this class helped you:

- Making value judgments on things affecting your life?
- Consider what affect the subject or important issues have on your life?
- Make decisions to do something or make a change affecting your spiritual life?

- Come to appreciate in a significant way a belief, standard or value because the teacher intentionally advocated it?
- Change your position on some negative things because the teacher promoted and affirmed a positive perspective?
- Determine what value to place on things affecting your life
- Make a commitment to live out God's will?
- Meet real needs in your life?
- Learn things you now consider major principles that will affect your life?
- Find something especially fulfilling or rewarding that has made you come to prize it highly
- See in people, actions you recognize as important and right, that inspired you to do the same?
- Work out how you felt about religious issues?
- Please share your comments about what this class has done for your values and choices.

### **Worldview**

A person's worldview is how a person makes sense of life. It is seeing patterns. For example Is the world a creation of god or a result of chance? Are we here to serve God and bless others or live to get the best for ourselves? A Christian worldview is a culmination of all the dimensions of faith. The knowledge of God through His revelation, values, spiritual and religious experiences, and relationships all come together to help form a view of life and the world we live in. A worldview is a perspective on life that molds and drives the motives and actions. This picture of how Christians see things is an expression of faith. Hill (1998) puts it this way:

For Christian it is vital to see patterns, which make up the bigger picture (Gestalt). Everything we learn is a part of a larger whole, rarely considered in isolation from the bigger picture. Behind everything is God's pattern-God's word, God's creation, God's presence, God's love, but also good and evil, values which make up what is real.

The teacher can help students build their faith by helping them clarify their worldview as they answer the important questions of life.

Questions on worldview as a dimension of faith in the classroom

Has your experience in this class helped you:

- Clarify your thinking about such things as: what is important in life, why people act evil, and how to achieve the good life?
- Be able to express in a simple way, such as in a story, your understanding of how life began?
- Be able to explain what gives meaning and purpose to life?

- Discover values and standards for your life that will affect the way you live your life and what things you will do and will not do.
- Make sense out of the complicated situations of life?
- See how the subject of this class fits into a pattern for understanding the whole world and God's part in it.
- Answer big questions of life such as who I am, where I came from, where I am going, why there are problems in the world and what are the solutions?
- Please share your comments about what this class has done for your worldview.

### **Conclusion**

Adventist education is giving increasing emphasis to the assessment of faith and Christian values in the youth, and in our educational institutions. The Total Commitment emphasis of the General Conference has inspired many schools to examine their methods and achievements in the realm of faith development. The Value Genesis project has opened our eyes to the thinking and values of Adventist youth and challenged the church to seek ways to address their needs.

Expressing basic dimensions of faith in question form may be helpful for teachers as they examine their teaching strategies in the light of their spiritual mission. Hopefully, it will make faith easier to foster and assess. Using these questions as a student survey of faith in the classroom can also provide valuable insights to the teacher wishing for frank feedback.

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