

# Nurturing Faith in the Christian School

BY GEORGE AKERS

*Nurturing faith in every aspect of the program is everybody's business at a Christian school.*

**S**chool watching" is one of my hobbies. I have been known to exit an interstate highway just to check out that little church college or prep school advertised on the highway billboard, to see if the place is living up to its pretensions.

My approach is simple: I genially announce that I'm a stranger passing through, intrigued by the sign advertising their school. I ask the first four people I meet on campus (I try to select two adults and two students): "What kind of an institution is this, anyway? Is this some kind of a special school?" The follow-up queries are equally revealing: "And what do you do here? Why did you choose to study (teach/work) here?"

If the interviewee turns out to be a parent, I adapt the question: "Tell me, why would you put out all those hard-earned dollars when you've already paid taxes and could obtain a good education for your child at the public school around the corner?"

What I am seeking, of course, is some evidence that students, faculty, and staff—or school patrons—are really in touch with the distinctive mission of the institution and can, in their own way, articulate its organizing principle. I want them to identify what it is about their school that is worthy of sacrifice.

This diversionary pastime has afforded me some delightful (and on reflection, some very sobering) interviews at schools of almost every religious and educational flavor. By my ostensibly curious and disarming tourist inquiry, I get to feel the pulse of a school and tap into its self-identity. Rarely do I hear a well-rehearsed public relations pitch.

One visiting accrediting committee at a private secular academy stopped students in the hallway and asked them, "What is the principal purpose of this school?" Almost every reply was a variation on the theme, "This school cares, most of all, about what kind of person I am becoming." Although admittedly not an overtly religious response, it certainly was a strong and commendably ethical one, appropriate to the school's mission. Conscious character building was obviously not a peripheral or casual matter. It was embraced as a cherished identifier, even

by the students. Youngsters often have an uncanny way of sensing what's important to faculty members.

I was the Friday evening speaker at one of our academies a few years ago. After vespers, I was invited to join the students at their "Afterglow" in one of the school barns.

Detained at the dorm for a brief counseling session, I arrived after the group was well into its traditional format of religious choruses and personal testimonies, with a lot of laughter and happy tears. I thought to myself, "I wish every parent in this conference could see and hear what I'm privileged to be witnessing tonight. They'd never regret a single sacrificial cent they've laid out to have their children imbibe of this faith-nurturing youth fellowship!"

But the best was yet to come—and quite a surprise. Several of the older students stepped forward with their instruments—a guitar, banjo, and harmonica, if I remember correctly. The senior class president addressed me. "Prof Akers, we want to play our class song for you." Years of academy deaning, teaching, and administration instinctively kicked in, and I thought, "Uh-oh, here we go with a typical whoop-de-do, narcissistic pep song. 'Watch out world, here we come; we are the greatest (etc.)!'"

I wondered, "Where's the faculty sponsor? How did I get caught in this turn of events? Obviously they are performing for me and will expect an affirmation for this secular rendition when they're finished, which I cannot extend. What shall I do?"

My apprehensive self-dialogue was cut short by an awareness that the music

was being sung and played well, in obvious good taste, and clearly reverential. No campfire ditty, this one. I looked into young faces radiating wholesomeness and devotion. The end of the first verse spoke of trials being God's special tool to make us strong. But when they

rolled into verse three, it really spoke to my heart:

*I thank God for the mountains  
And I thank Him for the valleys,  
I thank Him for the storms He  
brought me through,  
For if I'd never had a problem  
I wouldn't know that He could solve  
them,  
I'd never know what faith in God  
could do.  
(Chorus) Through it all, Through it  
all,  
Oh I've learned to trust in Jesus,  
I've learned to trust in God,  
Through it all, Through it all,*

*I've learned to depend upon His  
Word.<sup>1</sup>*

What a testimony for the molding influence and spiritual impact of Christian schools! That a senior class would deliberately choose a musical faith statement to declare to the world its central values, something so unthinkably "uncool" in today's youth culture, said a lot about the general ambiance of that school. Indeed, it was a highly symbolic statement about the cumulative effect of the home-church-school partnership during those young people's critical, formative years.

As I drove home through a blizzard that night, I reflected on my experience with those teenagers. They were making a powerful statement about who was at the center of their lives. And it was not some cold, intellectual assent; they were experiencing God in a very personal covenantal relationship that would see them through the storms of life ahead. Their faith life had been carefully nurtured and was now flourishing. And isn't that what most parents intensely desire for their children when they send them to our schools? Are we not the ones recognized as spiritual mediators for an encounter with the divine (understanding, of course, that this is all under the operation of the Holy Spirit with whom we cooperate).

Yes, *nurturing faith* in every aspect of the program is everybody's business at a Christian school, if the place is to be effective. It's not just the task of the Bible teacher or campus pastor/chaplain. (Students expect them to do it; they figure that's what they get paid for.)

It is a tragic situation for a Christian campus to be divided between sacred and secular domains, as though these were separate, water-tight compartments. In too many Christian schools, the curriculum is no different from the conventional secular school (except for required religion classes). Religious activities such as daily worships, chapels, weekend services, and weeks of spiritual devotion are merely tacked on. In such schools religious and spiritual concerns are kept out of the studies, ostensibly to preserve "academic respectability." This creates a dualism, sponsored by the school itself, that sends a strong signal to the youth about the place of religion. It says, in effect: "You may separate the secular and sacred in your life, just as we prudently manage it here at the school." Such a message has deep sociological and spiritual implications. It constitutes an appalling abdication of faculty responsibility.

How much of an influence could one teacher have in a secularized Christian school? Don't ever underestimate the explosive time-bomb power of a non-clergy type who can make casual but authentic spiritual observations—who speaks as freely and naturally about the supernatural as about natural events like the weather. Multiply that by an entire faculty, and you have an exponential effect because it becomes a team effort. It is this intentional pervasiveness of mission and seamless consistency of purpose that gives a Christian school its peculiar potency, its life-changing power. No dualisms, bifurcations, or fractures of reality. If they saw this wholeness, most Adventist parents would sacrifice almost everything to ensure that their children were trained in the "nurture and admonition of the Lord." This is our sacred trust as Christian teachers.

True, parents do expect us to provide a first-class education in the conventional secular sense, while at the same time ensuring a thorough religious training. The Valuegenesis research results make that unmistakably clear. This is no either-or choice in Adventist education, academics versus religious training. We must have them both, and at their best!

Recognizing the magnitude of the

deeply spiritual work and influence of the Christian teacher, the General Conference a few years back retitled the teacher's credential, "Minister of Education." Whatever the subject matter, Christian teachers are pastors first and foremost. Their sanctuary is the classroom, their pulpit is the teaching lectern, their parishioners are students. What a privilege and honor to guide students in the classroom, to fraternize with them on campus, to interface at close range a few hours a day to influence them for God—through teaching, companionship, conversation, and general life-style.

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This brings us to an extremely important point in the integration of faith and learning: the psychological climate of the classroom. Central to this is the teacher's relationship with students. IFL will be effective only if the teacher truly loves students and respects their individuality as Jesus always did, treating each one with the utmost courtesy and gentleness. The most adept, technically skillful integration of the religious perspective into learning will fall flat without a genuinely caring teacher. A cold, exacting attitude toward students can be lethal—completely neutralizing or even reversing the effect of Christian education. Indeed, agape love is foundational to all integration of faith and learning.

As I read the religious education literature of other churches, I sense that we are not alone in recognizing that professionalization, though an imperative, may be bought at a dear price. It

makes us downplay the pastoral and prophetic nature of our calling, and tends to blunt our sense of spiritual mission. When Ellen White said, "A Christian influence should pervade our schools..."<sup>2</sup> she was talking about what we now call the integration of faith and learning. She meant that the spiritual factor should tie together the whole operation of Christian education, whether it occurs in a one-room church school, an academy, or a college. She meant that *everything* that goes on at the school must promote and reinforce the Christian worldview.

We are finally beginning to realize that the integration of faith and learning exists not in programs and materials, but in people. It is more than merely laminating a religious perspective onto traditional secular subject matter. That can come off as terribly contrived, superficial, and phony—or even as a strained effort at intellectualism. Either way, students instinctively see this as inauthentic because it fails to tie everything together in a credible, unified whole. Only teaching within a distinctively Christian worldview and frame of reference can accomplish our objectives. Religiously designed curricular maps and learning resource materials are impressive—even indispensable—but in the end, *integration happens through the efforts of the teacher*. He or she is the critical catalyst. When the teacher walks into the classroom and closes the door, he or she is the curriculum because the learning is mediated largely through his or her frame of reference and worldview. The teacher becomes the grand interpreter, the "meaning-maker." Information is inert until someone gives it human and spiritual meaning. That's why it is critical that the teacher's life and views be thoroughly Christian.

This modeling is both overt and subtle, for what the teacher is silent about, and what he or she is "turned on" to, speak powerfully to students about what is worth talking about and what students ought to consider important. So even silence becomes a message. It says: "Trust me, kids. I wouldn't waste your time with non-essentials or irrelevancies; I talk only about what you're *really* going to need in life." This message reg-

isters deep down in a young person's psyche. And the subliminal response is likely to be this: "If my hero, who is really 'with it,' who is so knowledgeable and 'cool,' doesn't feel the need to center everything in his or her life on God (saving religion for Sabbath), and is generally turned off to organized religion, why should I give it a second thought?" Sobering to consider, isn't it?

The Christian teacher, then, brings to his or her calling two very special kinds of expertise, unlike the secular teacher who deals only with subject matter:

1. The ability to love youth as Christ does. This parental, pastoral view of the student must flavor every student-teacher contact.

2. The ability to model before students the process of "thinking Christianly." This is a prophetic function—it means passing everything under Christian critique; contrasting the contemporary perspective with the eternal. It's thinking in the cosmic, eternal dimension, endeavoring to examine everything from Heaven's point of view. (Isn't that what growing in grace is all about?)

This can even occur as a teacher thinks out loud before his or her students, as they wrestle together with the heavy issues, balancing rationality with revelation. It includes overseeing and coaching students as they practice this new behavior. It can also include authentic personal disclosure, open discussions of ways the teacher has integrated faith and learning into his or her professional life, as well as personal struggles overcome through a relationship with Christ. This is *modeling* faith, a very personalized aspect of IFL ministry.

A primary consideration in any line of study, at whatever level, is that *knowledge doesn't float free; it's always anchored to some basic notion about reality*. Such a presupposition assumes faith in something. In a Christian school, it is the teacher who helps the student connect with, and filter, ideas within a Christian worldview. This requires the utilization of *scriptural principles* as a stimulus and benchmark. In the highest sense, this is real integration of faith and learning—and it is one of the finest approaches

available to foster critical thinking.

Accordingly, Christian teachers who are serious about integrating faith and learning must study how to become more sensitive to, and more skilled in relating subject matter to, contemporary ethical, moral, and spiritual issues. In the Sodom II world that students are en-

seems like a tall order, God has promised special assistance to give us credibility and unction.

There are three kinds of faith that we want to see harmoniously integrated in the Christian school: doctrinal faith (correct theology, Bible-based), ecclesiastical faith (being part of the family of

tering, in an age of almost universal apostasy, we must equip young people to think clearly about what they believe, and stand staunchly for it—alone if necessary. They need to learn and practice these skills now in our schools.

Integration of faith and learning is not just the latest buzzword in Christian education. No, it is the *very essence* of religious education, as old as the notion itself (read Deuteronomy 6:3-7 to see what God told Moses to relay to the people regarding the totality and consistency of parental and pedagogical example).

What should really stagger us is the realization that this aspect of Christian education is "caught" more than it is taught. Our highest duty and privilege, then, is to model this in our own lives, and make it irresistibly persuasive and compelling to our students. Although it

God on earth), and experiential faith (a personal trusting relationship with our Lord). We must affirm all three at every opportunity. As the Apostle Paul might say of such a trinity, "and the greatest of these is *experience*." That's why the little chorus the seniors sang for me that night was so on-target; it testified that we can safely trust God to be in charge of all that He permits to come our way.

Today this aspect of Christian education seems especially timely, as we look out over a deeply troubled world soon to meet its Maker. These young people with whom God has given us the privilege to work are candidates for immortal honors. However, they are also likely to face a time of trouble such as humanity has never experienced. They're going to need a special personal, experiential walk with their Lord to get "through it all."

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The war is real. Organizing our classrooms and campuses to cultivate and reinforce the faith life of our students throughout every facet of the school must be our primary mission in Adventist education.

Maybe it would be a good idea to hold a faculty meeting soon at your institution, a soul-searching session devoted to this one concern: "Is faith nurture truly a pervasive characteristic of our school? Do we have any institutional dualism going on here? If so, what first steps should we take to reverse this situation?"

I'm sure that the Unseen Watchers will be taking careful notes that day, and will do some otherworldly prompting. God will bless our prayerful efforts to make our schools all that He wants them to be. ☺

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "Through It All" by Andrae Crouch. © Copyright 1971 by Manna Music, Inc., 35255 Brooten Road, Pacific City, OR 97135. International Copyright Secured. All Rights Reserved. Used by Permission.
2. Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1923), p. 473.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 526, 527.

*must be greatly changed before it can give the right mold to our institutions. It is only when intellectual and moral powers are combined . . . that the standard of the word of God is reached.*<sup>3</sup>

Incidentally, if you haven't read *The Great Controversy* in a long time, I'd strongly recommend that you peruse the last eight chapters some Sabbath afternoon. These prophecies portray closing events into which our students are likely soon to be propelled. The arresting chapter, "The Scriptures a Safeguard," has a clear message: Only those whose minds are fortified with the Word of God, saturated with its *divine principles*, tenaciously embraced in the face of terrible delusions, will survive the last crisis.

And that's our assignment, dear colleagues. It is the nicest work ever given to human beings, to teach our students how to live by faith, by a simple "thus saith the Lord."

These heavy-duty spiritual survival skills must be built into young lives now, in our classes, on our campuses. Someday our students will rise up and call us blessed because we did not fail them in this crucial preparation period.

The devil is not working part time, and he's not allowing his message to get partitioned off in a corner somewhere by erudite rationalizations. His strategy is total saturation. We can do no less.

In prophetic vision the servant of the Lord saw our time and had a special message for us. If it had a ring of urgency in 1908, referring to crisis-oriented education, it is even more appropriate now:

*In the night season these words were spoken to me: "Charge the teachers in our schools to prepare the students for what is coming upon the world."*

Ellen White follows that statement with an IFL application:

*The character of the education given*