

“If You Can’t Measure It, It Didn’t Happen!”

Spiritual Assessment in the Adventist School

By V. BAILEY GILLESPIE

I remember a phrase that one of my graduate-level professors used when talking about educational and spiritual assessment. He said, “If you can’t see it, it probably didn’t happen!”

We asked, “Aren’t there educational outcomes or kinds of content that defy evaluation? Ones that can’t be seen?”

The professor simply repeated his adage: “If you can’t see it and you can’t evaluate it, it probably didn’t happen!” Thus, a simplistic but inclusive primer on evaluation or assessment was born in my mind.

Every organization has goals, whether or not they are stated in a formal way. The specifics may vary, but doubtless everyone would agree that: “The underlying goal of any organization is to improve effectiveness.”¹ To achieve their goals and make necessary adjustments, organizations need to assess how well they are doing. This is as true in private Christian education as in a huge multinational corporation.

Delegates to a recent meeting of the Seventh-day Adventist world church issued this challenge:

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The time has come for the Church as a whole to ask and answer the hard questions about how the Church is relating to the guiding principle of the Gospel Commission. How can the guiding principle be actualized in the lives of members, pastors, and congregations? How can they measure their progress in fulfilling the Gospel Commission? How can the Church’s universities, colleges and academies, health-food factories, high-tech health-care institutions, clinics, publishing houses, and media centers develop accountability based on the Gospel Commission?²

Since that statement appeared in the first paragraph of the “Total Commitment to God” document, discussion and action have occurred throughout the church in an attempt to understand and address this concern and challenge. Almost three years ago, what was then the Board of Higher Education of the North American Division asked the John Hancock Center at La Sierra University in Riverside, California, to organize and publish an initial project to clarify the process of assessment or “audit” of

higher education in the Adventist Church. Discussions about the document's purpose and function were lengthy and detailed. The interaction between college presidents, educators, church administrators, and theologians produced a mission statement for Adventist higher education and three volumes entitled *North American Division Board of Higher Education College and University Audit*. These volumes contained a clarification of the evaluation process in higher education, along with an invitation from the General Conference and North American Division to engage in an assessment process, a rationale for the audit, and a detailed resource manual that identified assessment tools and instruments.

Practical suggestions were offered to help institutions of higher learning examine what they are doing, how they are doing it, and to help them analyze the challenges they discover in the areas of knowledge, skills, values, mature faith, and other institutional issues as these relate to their mission statement.

After examining these issues, the schools would then develop action plans and share them with sister institutions. Our school, La Sierra University, piloted this project, along with Oakwood College in Huntsville, Alabama.

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What we have learned can help others who desire to focus more precisely on what they are doing and how their mission affects the lives of their students.

Assessment Is Not a New Idea

Assessment occurs all the time, in all sorts of situations. Even when we are not intentionally involved in assessment, we regularly ask assessment-type questions. Looking back on any school year, we ponder, "Did my students learn anything?" When board members ask how things are progressing, we wonder, "Is my school moving in the right direction?" At parent-teacher conferences, parents ask, "Can Johnny read any better now?" Clearly, assessment is a pervasive and ongoing endeavor.

The questions listed above include the most obvious kinds of evaluation-type concerns. The answers to these questions often give us ideas about ways to formulate activities and programs that can yield significant results. The tough questions lie in the personal

and spiritual realms: "Does our school reflect the character of God in all of its activities?" "Do my students have a rich, growing faith?" "Are we learning to be grace-oriented?" "Does the climate in our school nurture faith?"

Because these questions do not have easy answers, one usually begins the process of understanding by asking more questions. For example: "What kinds of attitudes and actions would demonstrate a grace orientation?" "How does a school reflect its mission?" or "Can faith maturity really be understood?" The subjectivity of personal and religious life makes developing accurate and meaningful measurement tools extremely challenging.

The "Total Commitment" document calls on us to broaden the scope of formal evaluation. Denominational schools are to develop spiritual-assessment models that move them and their students closer to the "ideal" of Adventist educational practice. What was done intuitively before needs to be more purposeful if we want to find out "whether it happened or not."

What Does It Mean to Have a Rich, Mature Faith?

The faith experience is rich, complex, and many-textured. It includes

what people believe, how that belief affects their values and life choice, what personal surety and internal sense of well-being their faith provides, along with the behaviors that nurture that experience—prayer, Bible study, meditation, sharing, outreach, etc. The faith experience has a global aspect, too. People of mature faith advocate social and global change to bring about greater social justice, and their loving service to humanity is consistent, passionate, and active. This broad understanding of faith can be more focused and specific as one targets various age groups.

Research on faith development shows us how faith, values, and commitments are nurtured. Concerns about the various facets of the religious life emerge as serious questions. James Michael Lee, an innovative religious educator, suggests that there may be as many as nine separate “contents” that blend into five distinct groupings. All of these need to be explored in order to understand how faith and commitment are nurtured and developed. They include the following:

(1) The first content is that of *outcome*. This product of the educational question is obvious. (2) Next is *process*, which includes the way one learns

about religious things. (3) There is also *knowledge* content (cognitive) and its other side, (4) *affective* content, which deals with one’s feelings about life, religion, and learning itself. (5) Within the educational experience, there is also *verbal* content—things that are expressed linguistically, and (6) *nonverbal* content, too. These would include such things as tone and pitch of voice, emotion, and any attitude that might be communicated without using language. (7) Lee suggests that there is also a *conscious* content—whatever you want to teach, and its opposite, (8) the *unconscious* content, information that is outside of one’s awareness, or what is “incidentally” taught. (9) Finally, there is a *lifestyle* content that is part of the learning experience. This includes “the way in which a person organizes his self-system and lives out his life.”⁷ Lee says, “In encountering the Bible one is repeatedly struck by the fact that it is a thoroughly lifestyle-oriented book. . . . in terms of what it states, in terms of what it advocates, and in terms of the eternally living form of its revelatory character.”⁴

Lee believes that we must master these contents and build a ministry that impacts all of these areas in order for

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comprehensive, positive growth in people’s religious lives to occur.

How Do We Do It?

While religious faith and life are personal matters, there have been many attempts to explore faith in its many dimensions, including its external and intrinsic, personal and devotional, prosocial and community aspects.⁵

Most people who see themselves as professional assessors argue that a number of major principles must be considered, regardless of the “content” of the evaluation.

The primary goals of education assessment can be summarized as follows:

- To include as many people as possible who are involved with students,

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learn as much as possible about what we are doing so we can do it better in the future.

Of course, assessment and auditing of educational endeavors provide a number of incidental benefits. For example, during the Valuegenesis research team sessions, our committee was particularly discouraged to discover that the climate issues in congregational life were evaluated quite harshly for Adventist churches (in contrast to the scores of youth in the Southern Baptist Convention, who took part in a similar evaluation). I remember the pall that fell over the group when we learned that only 27 percent of the Seventh-day Adventist students in our schools saw their local congregations as “warm.” Low marks were also given to the “thinking climate” in most local congregations.

The meeting adjourned for about a half hour. We paced the hallways and talked quietly as we looked at the snowy fields outside of the hotel that February in Minneapolis. When we regrouped to look carefully at the data we had collected from more than 15,000 sixth- to 12th-graders in our school system, we realized that we faced an incredible challenge. We could fixate on the negative data and become depressed, or we could use it to enact serious plans to make the climates of Adventist churches more youth-friendly. What was first viewed as a “bad” data set became the means of creative change for many congregations in the North American Division and in schools across the division.

Evaluations are like that. When we get negative results, this challenges us to make things better. When the report seems good, we can share it with students, faculty, parents, and constituen-

programs, and activities in order to provide evidence of program quality, document changes in the quality, and establish a longitudinal database to use in measuring student progress.

- To measure the skills, knowledge, commitments, and accomplishments specified in each part of the mission statement in order to make things better and more focused.

- To establish an ongoing process of assessment, designed and implemented by the students, faculty, and staff in keeping with their role and the school’s mission statement, and to assist the departments charged with fulfilling the task of mission.

- To use the assessment to examine the methods used and the appropriateness of the assessment process itself (this aspect of assessment is always ongoing).

- To use student achievement or performance on assessment measures to evaluate programs, and, conversely, to use evidence of nonachievement to chal-

lenge and create change. However, the assessment process is intended to move the institution to better things. If results are used to make students or faculty feel they can’t achieve, or they have not accomplished, or are less than they should be, the purpose of evaluation will have been misused. Assessment should move the institution, its programs, and procedures toward better things, not deter progress or create a means whereby people can be judged. Assessments should simply glean information that will challenge students, faculty, institutions, and institutional personnel to achieve the goals of the institution.

- To consider all assessment measures confidential. The identities of individual people should not be released (faculty, staff, students, parents, etc.), because the primary goal of assessment is to provide direction for future planning, evaluate achievement, and document evidence of change. Everyone gains when assessment is done properly and without pressure. It can help us



cies who need to hear about the effectiveness of our schools.

Five Steps Toward Spiritual Assessment

1. First, look clearly at the concept or idea you want to assess. In educational settings, *we usually begin with our mission statement*. If your school doesn't have one, you have just targeted your first task.

Mission statements should be created by *all those involved in the vision*. Try to involve board members, parents, staff, faculty, students, administration, and conference personnel. All have a stake in the mission of your school. First, ask the principal or board chair to provide sample statements. Your local or union conference office of education should also be able to supply helpful materials in this area.

2. *Use your statement to identify broad areas of vision*. For example, if your mission statement says, "In keeping with the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, our school's aim is to educate students wholistically for productive Christian life in church and society. The truth of God as set forth in Scripture and defined in the person of Jesus Christ informs the life and teaching of our institution,"⁶ this helps you focus on what you want to assess. The broad areas of wholistic education (physical, spiritual, and social), involvement in church and community, and the centrality of the Bible in curriculum, school life, and direction of each institution become crucial elements to examine.

3. After identifying vital elements in your mission statement, *begin to look at the actual practices that target or enrich these basic concepts*. Now you are moving toward specific assessment targets. Your options here are many. For example, you might want to look at your school's religious commitments, the activities that nurture students, the counseling models and availability, and the involvement of local church members, pastors, and youth pastors in the life of the school. Other issues to explore include

- The climate issues that influence your students' religious commitment,
- Student services that touch the

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lives of your youth each day, and

- The skills and academic achievement you want your students to attain in the areas of biblical knowledge, church loyalty, and community involvement.

4. *Use standard evaluative tools, or be creative and invent your own*. There are a number of assessment tools available. Some have had a long history in

the church; others are new and creative.

For example, the John Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry at the La Sierra University School of Religion continues to work with local churches, conferences, and unions in an ongoing Valuegenesis format survey. In a quick but careful way, *Valuegenesis: The Short Form* explores school climate, faith maturity, church loyalty, orthodoxy, religious practice, lifestyle choices, school and congregational attitudes, and parental involvement in the faith development of youth in grades six to 12. Other instruments are available by contacting Roger L. Dudley at Andrews University, who has worked over the years with a number of scholars who have tested various scales that look at spiritual and religious life.

Other helpful tools have been used by Christian groups for some time. *Middle Grades Assessment Program* by Gayle Dorman and Robin Pulver is a comprehensive, school-wide self-assessment and planning tool that guides educators in determining how well their programs are serving the academic and developmental needs of their students.

Developing a spiritual plan, taking action to meet your goals, and using survey methods to identify the “state” of your school, will all enable you to make direct, focused, and targeted action plans.

Voices of Faith; Portrait of Congregational Life has many survey questions that deal with religious issues in the school system.⁷

The Committed-Nominal Religious Attitude Scale by Roger Meyer is available from ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation and Document Reproduction Service.⁸ This questionnaire is designed to assess an individ-

ual's religiosity as committed or nominal. *The Religious Belief Questionnaire* by Max Apfeldorf and Walter Smith, an older assessment, is still available from Tests in Microfiche in Princeton, New Jersey.⁹ This survey looks at an individual's religious beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and practices. Its topics include God, prayer, the Bible, good and evil and their consequences, organized religion, religious practices, and duties of daily living. In addition, there are a number of biblical content and knowledge surveys available, if this is a crucial issue in your school.¹⁰

For further information about educational assessment, contact:

- Clearinghouse for Higher Education Assessment Instruments, 212 Claxton Education Building, College of Education, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996. Telephone: (615) 974-3748.

- ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation and Document Reproduction Service, O'Boyle Hall, Department of Education, the Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 20064. Telephone: (800) 464-3742. Internet: <http://www.eric.net>.

Our church's North American Division Office of Education is preparing

grade/age models of spiritual assessment called "POTENTIALS" for elementary and high school use to help school systems begin an assessment process. These models will encourage institutions to share what works so the entire system can benefit, while helping each school learn to make significant changes that enrich the spiritual growth of its students.

Developing a spiritual plan, taking action to meet your goals, and using survey methods to identify the "state" of your school, will all enable you to make direct, focused, and targeted action plans. These will help you accomplish your mission.

5. *Keep records on your process and plans.* After all, unless you can express your convictions about religious life, commitments, faith, and values in your institution, you won't be able to achieve significant change. And remember that a lot of constituencies want and need to know how you are doing. Too often we hear statements like, "That's a lot of money to pay just to add Bible classes to a public school curriculum," or "I went to public school and I turned out OK." If you can show how spirituality is integrated throughout the environment of the Christian school and con-

tributes to the wholistic development of the student, this will go a long way to validate the value-added educational practice that is provided by the church's school system.

Who Benefits From a Spiritual Plan and Assessment

I have no doubt that a careful, well-thought-out plan for assessing the spiritual life of students in Adventist schools will help us target the areas in our curriculum, student life activities, administrative practices, faculty-student relationships, and worship planning that will ultimately make our schools richer in spiritual value.

Valuegenesis research results reassure us that the faculties in our schools are deeply committed and loyal to the church and that they see their role as evangelistic and formative. Unquestionably, the positive faith maturity scores from our continuing research (scores that have been increasing each year throughout the North American Division and the world field since the original Valuegenesis research project) are due in part to the deep commitment of grace-oriented schools and their devoted faculties and staffs. It is time to

document this growth and share what is working with other schools so we can all come closer to achieving the vision God has for us and our mission in Christian education. ☞

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REFERENCES

1. Peter T. Ewell and Robert P. Lisensky, *Assessing Institutional Effectiveness: Redirecting the Self-Study Process* (Boulder, Colo.: The Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education, 1988), p. 19.
2. *Total Commitment to God: A Declaration of Spiritual Accountability in the Family of Faith*, voted by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists meeting in Costa Rica in the fall of 1996. Unpublished reports (Fall 1996), p. 1.
3. James Michael Lee, *The Content of Religious Instruction: A Social Science Approach* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1985), p. 608.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 638.
5. The Valuegenesis research report includes information about our scale specifically developed to examine this rich texture of the faith experience. The "Faith Maturity Scale" identi-

fies eight areas of faith-life and provides a percentage score for its growth. The long form of Valuegenesis surveys has the complete scale in it (some 38 items that identify and explore this type of faith); the short form of Valuegenesis for use in congregations of 30 or more students or in educational settings is designed for use in grades six to 12, and the new *Valuegenesis: College/University Survey* uses an abbreviated scale to do the same thing. There are a number of other scales available that look at this complex issue of faith life. Contact the Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry at La Sierra University for samples of this scale. Telephone: (800) 785-HCYM or (909) 785-2256.

6. This is a modified mission statement for higher education in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. See Peter D. H. Bath, "The Mission of Adventist Higher Education" (Silver Spring, Md.: NAD Board of Higher Education, 1995), p. 19.

7. This assessment tool may be ordered from Search Institute, Thresher Square West, Suite 210, 700 South Third St., Minneapolis, MN 55415. Telephone: (800) 888-7828.

8. ERIC Clearinghouse on Assessment and Evaluation, O'Boyle Hall, Department of Education, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC 20064. Telephone: (800) 464-3742.

9. Tests in Microfiche, Tests Collection. Educational Service, Princeton, NJ 98541. Telephone: (609) 734-4589.

10. Contact the Hancock Center for Youth and Family Ministry at La Sierra University, Riverside, CA 92515 for a list of Bible knowledge surveys that we have available. Telephone: (800) 785-HCYM, or (909) 785-2256.