

T o w a r d
→ **Spiritual
Assessment**
*in Seventh-day
Adventist Colleges and
Universities*

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The publication of Elder Robert Folkenberg's Total Commitment document has resulted in a significant level of activity in Adventist educational institutions. The document calls for a total commitment by all institutions and their staffs to fulfill the mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Its basic premise appears to be that the church's major institutions were sacrificially developed to meet very specific mission objectives.

Specifically, the document calls for each church institution to develop

- Mission-directed spiritual objectives,
- A plan to reach those objectives,
- A program for measuring how well those objectives are achieved, and
- A plan for using the assessment to improve the achievement of those objectives.

tives.

The specific elements of the objectives, as well as how they are to be put into practice in Adventist institutions of higher learning, are not specified by the Total Commitment document. This is left to the faculty, administration, and boards of each school. However, the document implicitly suggests that developing spiritual objectives would in itself help clarify the objectives of the church's various institutions of higher learning and tell the constituent public what the institutions are trying to achieve in spiritual development.

Perhaps at first, academics and administrators viewed the document as just another administrative missive directed at spiritual reform, just another attempt to convince church members that high-level administrators were addressing allegations about institutional problems. However, this document turned out to be a call to action that Adventist institutions are expected to follow up and implement. In March 1997, a conference at Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, California, brought together Adventist college and university presidents and board chairper-

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sons from around the world. At that conference, it was made clear that the development of spiritual goals and an assessment plan would be a high priority for the world church.

Adventist schools are at varying stages in developing and implementing spiritual goals, as well as the assessment process. The call for assessment and the reality of implementing it have provoked a wide variety of responses. Among the two most commonly heard criticisms are that true spirituality is too subjective to be objectively defined or monitored, and that this process is part of an administrative attempt to identify and remove errant administrators and teachers.

As Adventist colleges and universities examine their response to the Total Commitment document and begin to develop spiritual objectives and assessment plans, a number of issues must be further explored:

The Distinct Roles of Scholars and Administrators

Seventh-day Adventists are highly committed to college/university education, often at considerable sacrifice. This is somewhat unusual among conservative religious groups. Our institutions of higher learning were originally founded to train ministers, teachers, physicians, and nurses for a rapidly expanding church. However, today the

large majority of Adventist college and university graduates do not work for the church. They need strong, accredited educational programs to prepare for employment and service in a wide variety of professions.

For universities and programs to be accredited, it is generally necessary to employ faculty with doctoral degrees who actively participate in their disciplines and professions. This includes pushing forward the knowledge and challenging the assumptions of those disciplines. This can bring academics into tension with their conservative religious system, which operates the college or university. The church is committed to the primacy of already-discovered truth and believes the goal of higher education is to effectively teach students the surety of that truth. While the Adventist Church has always held that theology and science/scholarship, rightly understood, are compatible, there is considerable evidence that “rightly understood” means as defined by church administrators, not by church scholars and scientists.

Administrators and scientists/scholars have distinctly different roles. A primary task of administration is to manage and defend the traditional beliefs held by systems and organizations. On the other hand, scholars seek not only to transmit the present reality, but also to challenge and transcend it to achieve new levels of knowledge and understanding. This has been the role of universities since their founding. Nearly all of the great Protestant Reformers were university professors. Their opponents in the search for what Adventists would likely regard as new truth were church administrators. Both were playing their traditional roles.

On the other hand, academics must resist the temptation to isolate themselves in an ivory tower with their colleagues and to engage in conversation with non-academics from a position of distant (perhaps at times even arrogant) expertise, rather than respectful mutual conversation. In our society, academics can pursue ideas without usually having to deal with their practical consequences. This enables a society to ex-

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amine and freely debate a wide variety of ideas.

However, administrators generally do not see themselves as free to examine or promote such a broad spectrum of ideas. They traditionally are more concerned with managing the existing system and achieving its organizational mission.

Because of their very different views and roles in society, academics have often distanced themselves from administrators and their constituencies. The result has been severe threats to consistent support for higher education—not only in the church, but also in society in general. In somewhat stereotypical fashion, administrators may regard academics and scholars as having limited sensitivity to how their ideas are perceived by key publics or the consequences of their scholarship for the employing organization.

Hopefully, in more reflective moments, scholars and administrators recognize that they both are necessary in a dynamic, open church or society. With-

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out the challenge of research and scholarship, any organization or society is likely to become a rigid, tradition-bound bureaucracy incapable of meeting new challenges. Without administrative attention to maintaining the various components of a society or organization, worthy objectives cannot be achieved, and conflict and disintegration often occur. Since both scholarly/academic and administrative roles are necessary to meet the needs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I offer the following issues for consideration by both groups:

The Grassroots Interest in Spiritual Development and Assessment

The Total Commitment document represents not only an administrative but also—more importantly—a broad grassroots interest in and concern about the church's institutions. Colleges and universities must seriously consider the issues raised and address the various aspects of spirituality—from its definition to how an institution can play a role in its development in students.

In addition, colleges and universities can engage in public dialogue about their mission goals, procedures for achieving those goals, and the evaluation process. While it is important that

these procedures be reflective of the faculty and ethos of each institution, the process probably needs to include a number of elements. For example, it is important to integrate measurements of spiritual development into an academic assessment plan. Further, it is crucial to recognize that a college or university is just one element in a student's development and that there is a wide range of cultural, theological, and behavioral diversity in the Adventist student body. Finally, a number of important methodological issues must be addressed, including the specific elements to be measured and how the data will be used. Each of these issues is an important part of developing, implementing, and using a spiritual assessment plan.

Spiritual Assessment as Part of a Wholistic Program

For education, this is surely the age of assessment. Professional program accreditation has demanded it for many years. More recently, general accrediting bodies have expected schools to provide

- A clear definition of institutional goals,
- The means to be used to achieve those goals,
- Assessment plans to measure the extent to which the goals are met, and

- The institution's plans for using the assessment information to correct any problems or further develop its program.

This suggests that the development of spiritual goals, as well as their implementation and assessment, should take place within the framework of an institution's overall academic goals, implementation, and assessment. It is important for institutions to take a wholistic approach to integrating spiritual development goals into their overall institutional mission and program.

While many in academia may argue that spiritual development is too subjective to measure, the same could be said about any area of human development. It is true that measuring spiritual development presents many challenges and difficulties. These must not be minimized. However, many scholars have devoted their careers to examining the issue and developing some useful approaches that should be examined. A variety of academic and professional journals have printed a reasonably extensive literature base on spiritual development and assessment. These include the *Journal of Spiritual Formation* and *Religious Education*. In the *Journal of Spiritual Formation*, Woods offers a wholistic schema that examines stages of development that draws on biblical paradigms and research about human development.¹

The College/University—Just One Element in Its Students' Spiritual Development

Spiritual growth takes place in a wholistic environment and is affected by everything that goes on—not only at the college/university, but also within the church, the family, peer groups, and society. Most Adventist institutions of higher learning were established far from urban areas. It was thought this would protect students from worldly and corrupting influences and would enable the institutions and their faculty to have more control over the intellectual and spiritual development of the students.

However, changes in the 20th century have made it impossible for any in-

stitution to exercise exclusive or even dominant control over the development of students. There is no rural isolation. Modern media and the World Wide Web make even the most isolated locations a core part of modern (or post-modern) cultural dissemination and leveling. At times, parents, church administrators, and other constituencies may expect the school to counteract cultural trends (in terms of dress, attitudes, and behavior), even though they have been unable to do so. Thus, any spiritual assessment must recognize that the institution is but one variable (although an important one) in a complex host of influences on the development of young adults.

Student Diversity in Adventist Higher Education

The Seventh-day Adventist Church expends a considerable amount of energy attempting to limit theological diversity. However, students attending Adventist schools are diverse in many ways—culturally, behaviorally, and theologically. Today's student body has great differences in age, ethnicity, family background (divorce), residence, and religious beliefs. The classroom has come to reflect this diversity. Older adults are returning to campus to complete degrees, to train for new careers, or for enrichment. The classroom also reflects the "browning" of Adventism. Ethnic culture plays a significant role in spiritual development, attitudes, and behaviors.

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Today's students come from varied family backgrounds. As teachers, we see many who are dealing with significant family stress and trauma—ranging from divorce to abuse. Adventist families are not isolated from the general social trends that have affected modern society.

Like colleges/universities in general, our institutions are seeing an increase in non-residential students. Living off campus significantly decreases the possibility for institutional supervision and influence on students' lives. Many of our professional programs attract non-Adventist students (as well as non-Ad-

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ventist teachers). This diversity in religious backgrounds makes the institutional impact on spiritual development more complex.

Finally, while the church may take an official position of theological unity, the views that students express in the classroom often show significant diversity on such issues as the ordination of women, the meaning of the Sabbath, Creation, and the atonement, as well as toward substance use and other behavioral standards. Diversity of belief exists among the individuals, families, and subcultures that constitute the church. The young to older adults who occupy our classrooms make those differences clear in their class discussions. This diversity makes it very difficult for an institution to have a significant, uniform, and focused impact on its student's spiritual development.

Student Development Does Occur

Amidst all these cautions, it is also important to recognize that student development *does* occur—including spiritual development. Students *do* actually mature and begin to show remarkable insight into a host of topics.

Through their faculty and staff and their policies, Adventist colleges and universities can play a significant role in that development. It seems reasonable

for our higher education constituency to expect that this will occur. This includes parents who send their children at a significant sacrifice, churches that give generously to support Christian education, and individual students who often work long hours to pay for their education.

Elements of Spiritual Development to Consider

Although each institution should go through its own process of developing spiritual goals, the results should have some similarities. This includes knowledge-based objectives such as Adventist historical beliefs and their basis, which may be the easiest to measure. While some would argue that knowledge forms the core of what should be taught, research on spiritual development shows that this is the lowest and most simplistic level of spiritual development.

Other elements might include a focus on personal faith development—from accepting Christ to a personal prayer life and a relationship with the Lord. Additional elements could include how a Christian acts in a human community and in relationship to others. Church organizational goals should be considered, including the development of a positive attitude toward staying in

the church and volunteering for its activities. What to include in the goals and how to achieve them probably need to be developed through dialogue—both within the faculty and between the faculty, administrators, and relevant constituencies.

Research Design and Analysis

Great care must be taken in selecting the methodology to be used in spiritual assessment. While details should be developed at each institution, preference should be given to a longitudinal design. Freshmen and new students can be measured as they enter the institution. This will provide baseline data that can be compared with information collected at some later point. Baseline data should include not only whatever spiritual development assessment will be used, but also basic socio-demographic and behavioral data that will help researchers interpret the responses.

Follow-up data should be collected at the end of each year or at graduation, as well as some years after students leave school. Research and experience show that there can be considerable difference between short- and long-term development. At certain stages of development, the same events may have a vastly different impact. Information may be dramatically reinterpreted at a

later stage.² The teachers that students evaluated most harshly may become the ones that they feel most positive about five years later—at a different stage in their development.

Those doing data analysis should avoid the temptation to draw simplistic conclusions, since data can be easily distorted and misused. Complex statistical techniques should be used to analyze trends in the data relating to specific spiritual elements and background characteristics of students. It is also important to remember, as noted earlier, that these data do not represent the results of some carefully controlled experimental design, but rather a real-life experience with numerous uncontrolled experiential variables that affect the student's development.

It should also be remembered that students do make individual choices. There is no simple mathematical formula that says if we say and do these things, this is what students will believe and how they will behave. Human experience teaches us that this simply is not true.

Use of the Data

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? All of these questions are important and should be addressed if any type of spiritual development/assessment program is to gain acceptance and support at our institutions.

Summary and Conclusion

It does not require extensive research to conclude that there are tensions between church membership/leadership and the church's institutions of higher learning. By its very nature, higher education is likely to be always in tension with existing systems and theologies. Since human beings and systems generally are loyal to and comfort-

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able with current understanding, they will likely feel some discomfort with individuals and institutions that challenge the status quo.

Unfortunately, in many cases, those on different sides of these issues often talk past each other. The current interest in spiritual development and assessment could provide an important opportunity for academics and church constituencies and administrators to engage in respectful dialogue on the nature and complexities of spiritual development in an increasingly culturally and behaviorally diverse church.

One of the strengths of Christianity has been its support of higher education, which has enabled the church to adapt to a rapidly changing culture. While there are significant dangers in the spiritual development/assessment processes being proposed by church leaders, if everyone can avoid the temptation to dogmatism, there are also significant opportunities for achieving an understanding of differences and a recommitment to mutual goals. ✍

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It is important to remember that spiritual development does occur while students are enrolled in our schools.

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