

WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

Students Give Their Perspectives

It was an ironic coincidence of timing. Just a month before the release of General Conference President Folkenberg's "Total Commitment" document, I had been talking to the 25 students in my freshman Honors Communication Skills class at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, about words and their meanings. I mentioned that the meaning of a word lies in the connotation that an individual gives to it. By way of illustration, I said, "Take the word *spirituality*, for instance. It has as many meanings as there are people using the word. Yet we use it as if it means the same thing for everyone."

We also talked about personal priorities—that we live in an upside-down world where relationships and spiritual things take a back seat to other, more pressing priorities in our lives. For their reflection paper assignment, I asked the students to define the word *spirituality* and to reflect on how spirituality and a relationship with God fit into their college life priorities.

The papers my students wrote made such an impression on me that before I handed them back with my comments, I made a copy of each one for my file. It was sometime later when the university's academic departments were asked to discuss the General Conference's Total Commitment document in their staff meetings that I remembered the papers. In response to the document, faculty members were asked to make recommendations to the dean of their school.

Deans would, in turn, collectively make recommendations to the president so that our campus could develop a plan to assess the spirituality of our students.

BY CAROLE LUKE KILCHER

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I wondered aloud to my faculty peers, "How can anyone measure spirituality if the word means different things to different people? How can anyone measure whether someone is totally committed to anything when *totally* and *committed* can also mean so

many different things?”

I still wonder. But, more than that, I have not read anything on the subject from a student perspective. I have been told that institutions are free to craft their own response to the Total Commitment concept and that some schools have even chosen people to write assessment instruments. Schools of higher education are assembling teams to begin the assessment process. I wonder if students are on these teams? Are we not missing something if we don't get deep inside our students' thinking and feelings on this subject before we go too far in the assessment process?

I recently revisited my students' papers to share with a wider audience. To ensure student privacy, their names are not being used. What is important are the "word pictures" that they painted. This article will include some quotations from the students' papers about spirituality and how God fit into their personal priorities.

Defining Spirituality

Several students felt that being spiritual was directly related to having a relationship with God. Others gave the following word pictures:

- "To me, the word *spirituality* has a stereotypical but pious and superficial ring to it. I immediately picture a hypocritical Bible thumper."

- "To me, being spiritual means believing in a higher power. I consider Native American beliefs and New Age beliefs a form of spirituality."

- "It has been a struggle for me to create a clear picture in my mind of what spirituality is. As a third-generation-plus Adventist, I have been pushed with all the rules and regulations. My father is very legalistic and now that my parents are divorced, I am seeing a new form of Christianity in my mother's home."

- "Whenever I hear the word *spiritual* applied to a person, I think 'fanatic.' Such people eat really healthy and have no understanding of the world because their heads are stuck up in the clouds."

- "It's been a long time since I've even thought of the word."

- "To me, being spiritual means that I communicate with God about everything but does not mean being perfect."

- "I am continually developing my

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view of God and what it means to be spiritual, but God is not first priority in my life."

- "*Spiritual* is not an adjective used to describe someone who is highly religious. In fact, I believe that the two realms of spirituality and religiosity often oppose each other."

- "To me, being spiritual is simply when a person acknowledges that life is more than what can be seen. It is the unseen. With a person who is spiritual, life isn't their god; God is their life."

- "I consider myself to be a growing spiritual person. I do all the generic duties of church going, Bible reading, etc., but I am continually expanding my relationship with God."

- "Spirituality does not have to be announced and declared for all to see and

comment on. Rather, it would be primarily a private matter with oneself and with the Father."

- "Spirituality to me is the type of spirit that blows you over when you walk in the door of a black church. Hopefully, one day I will feel that way."

- "I think spirituality has more to do with being close to God and making Him first than with how much talking about Him you do or how many Bible verses you know."

- "The term *spiritual* to me has always been closely associated with reverence. If a certain situation causes me to react with reverence, it is what I call a spiritual experience."

Although my students didn't share a common definition of the word *spirituality*, the majority expressed some regret that, due to various types of pressure on them to succeed in college, they were not able to make God first in their lives. As I compared their personal priorities, getting top grades appeared to be the number one concern. Only five of the 25 students felt that having a personal friendship with Jesus was of the utmost importance. Each of those five, however, did imply that when God was first in his or her life, everything else fell into place.

Pressures on Students

So, what were students' top concerns? Pressures to achieve success seemed to

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take first priority. The following comments reveal the different types of pressures to achieve success that students mentioned in their papers:

Pressure to Make Good Grades

- “At the top of my list is to make good grades. How else is medical school or whatever graduate program going to look at me? I am a statistic, a number to them.”

- “I would like to say that the highest priority in my life is my developing relationship with God. But this priority is under constant attack. I find myself consumed with learning/studying.”

Self-Imposed Pressures

- “For as long as I can remember, nothing less than an ‘A’ has been acceptable as a grade in my eyes. I know that it is not healthy for me to think this way, but I have been doing it since elementary school and by now it is a learned habit.”

Expectations of Parents, Teachers, and Fellow Students

One student noted: “The expectations that some teachers, classmates, and parents place upon honors students puts the student in a position where he must work endlessly to achieve these high goals or wallow in self-pity and misery should he

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fail. Although it might be true that some students react positively, overall this pressure harms the student mentally and physically.”

One student recounted her introduction to another class that year, in which the faculty member told his honors students: “We love you like your mother, but unlike her, we can disown you if you don't live up to our standards.”

A female student remarked about the pressures she sensed from professors: “I feel that the teachers are looking at me with expectations of brilliancy and intel-

ligence that I sometimes don't feel I have.”

Pressures Associated With Ethnicity

“I realized when I entered university that I had to measure up to my fellow ethnic classmates who all seem to be headed to the medical field,” reported a female student. “I am goaded to lean toward a high-paying job with power and authority, and I feel that if I don't accomplish this, then my entire life has been a waste.”

Institutional Pressures

“In my opinion, our school system puts too much pressure on students to perform well academically,” one class member commented. “I've been in this system since seventh grade and it bothers me that academics are the only achievements that are fully recognized and respected. Even talented musicians, artists, or athletes get little respect if their talent isn't accompanied by exceptional grades in the sciences and other concrete subjects.”

One student asked, “Can learning and intelligence really be measured by grades?” Another commented, “As I get older, my perception is that learning and grades aren't always synonymous.”

Society's Definition of Success

A female student said she felt a lot of social pressure to succeed. She wrote that until society comes to value something other than “success,” this will be a significant source of pressure on students, who are impacted by society's messages.

A male class member thought society teaches students that their worth depends upon their success in school, a situation that has resulted in thousands of college suicides.

Workaholism

“Workaholism is a disease that a lot of honors students have,” suggested a male student. “We should not become a slave to goals.”

A female student agreed. “I have become a workaholic, finding the grade I receive is never high enough. I wonder if it is really worth the effort to wear cords on graduation day?”

A male student who admitted to having miscued priorities but said he wanted to place God first, bemoaned the fact that he gave so much of his energy to school

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that he had nothing left for the more important aspects of life.

In summarizing, one student wrote: "The emphasis in college should be on self—on self-discovery, realizing knowledge is power, that education is important but that grades aren't everything."

Based upon these students' written comments, what can we learn about the spiritual assessment of college-age young people? While 25 papers may not be representative of a total population or even of every honors student at a given university, the messages these young people send are worth noting, as schools of higher education decide how to assess their students' spirituality. The class members who participated in this writing assignment responded openly; their comments were not shaped by any document or assessment program.

One thing is certain: The words *spiritual* or *spirituality*, when used in the context of quantifiable measurements, need to be given a definition or not measured at all. The terms created a wide spectrum of word pictures in just one free-response assignment about the significance of the word for a small group of students.

Most students do not necessarily equate being spiritual with having a desire for Jesus to be their Best Friend and placing Him at the top of their priority list. Students entering college bring with them a good deal of baggage from past experiences. They have a strong need to

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prove that they are capable of succeeding in college. The most acceptable way to do that, they think, is not to place Jesus first above all else in their lives, but to give priority to their GPA. Pressure to achieve comes from within as well as from parents, peers, faculty, administrators, graduate school recruiters, and society, who all send the message that good grades are the key to success. Would we attract the same types of students if we sent out new messages where success and acceptance into the university was based on Jesus' place in one's priorities?

What about students' role models on campus? Do they see faculty and administrators living a balanced life? Do they see mostly "business as usual" and the scramble to achieve accreditation, to grow departments and schools, to obtain the most grant monies, or do the best re-

search? Does this type of work crowd out spending time with students? What about faculty workloads? Is the mission statement of the school put into practice at the teaching level? Do faculty have time to be involved in areas of their students' lives other than the academic challenges they give them each day?

Many of my first-year honors students expressed a desire to make God their number one priority. But they were baffled. It seemed impossible for that to happen while they were scrambling to obtain top grades. Yet, any of us who has taught more than a year in higher education realizes that tremendous mental, spiritual, and physical growth occurs in our students between the time when they enter our classrooms as freshmen to when we shake their hands in the graduation line-up. By the end of college, irrespective of GPA, many have had experiences over which they have had little control. They have suffered the loss of a loved one, gone through the break-up of a love relationship or a parental divorce. Others encounter crises when they work with patients or clients during clinical or intern experiences. They realize then that their GPAs don't matter when it comes to being involved in the life of a child or a dying adult. Still others spend a year experiencing other cultures and lifestyles while studying abroad or serving as student missionaries. Upon returning to school, they view life in a different context. College life, then, is a process of growth and change that helps students come to grips with their own core values and personal priorities.

The jury is still out as to the effect of the Total Commitment document on institutions of higher education. But it is my best guess that listening to students, including them on the assessment teams, and holding focus groups with various ages and grade levels might contribute significantly to the success of any student spiritual-assessment process. ✍

At the time the assignment was made to the first-year honors students, Carole Luke Kilcher was Associate Professor of Communication at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. She is currently taking a year's leave of absence to pursue her writing and research interests.

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Praying Professors Help Students Spiritually

I selected 45 students at Andrews University to participate in an informal E-mail poll. Some were from the honors class who participated in the spirituality discussion. Others I selected at random. Students were promised anonymity. Of the 45, 31 students responded. I asked them to react honestly to the following question:

During your college experience, what have your teachers done that has assisted in your spiritual development?

The majority who responded felt that the most important thing a teacher could do to enhance a student's spiritual development was to set a good example by the way he or she deals with people and by making Christian principles practical for everyday living.

A 19-year-old sophomore biology major appreciated teachers' sharing their personal testimony of how God is good to them. A 20-year-old education major put it this way: "I can listen to wonderful-sounding statements from professors and not be moved by a word of it because their actions speak differently. The teacher who is friendly to me and a genuine Christian in all aspects of his or her life impacts me the most." Two things have to come together to get a 21-year-old English major's attention: "(1) Teachers have to be completely honest about their own spiritual walk—admit that they are imperfect, that they have problems, but are still trying. They need to practice what they preach, and if they fall short, they need to be open to correction. (2) Teachers need to show interest in their students' lives. Without a relationship with the students, the teacher's example, as good as it may be, is meaningless."

A physical therapy M.A. student felt that she has been able to develop her own spirituality through the examples of her teachers in their day-to-day life and their willingness to listen and to share letters/notes of encouragement and WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) bracelets.

A 21-year-old psychology major appreciated her professors' demonstrating by both application and example that Christ can be a part of one's professional life. A 22-year-old marketing major recalls: "The personal stories of some of my business professors have encouraged me and strengthened my values. Teachers like this have demonstrated in words

and actions what it means to be a working/teaching Christian."

Students also felt a deep respect for teachers who were willing to put thought into a short devotional or who had prayer before class and tests, as well as in their office during one-on-one sharing when a student had a need. A 20-year-old computer engineering technology major said: "It just makes me happy to know that we have invited God to be with us in the class." A 19-year-old biology major pointed out that, since science teachers have so much to cover, "the fact that teachers took the time to pray and to read a Bible text has strengthened my spirituality so much." A 23-year-old animal science major observed: "Even when I disliked the class, I found myself liking the teacher if he or she took the time to share a personal worship talk and pray with us before class. I appreciate teachers that aren't afraid to show us THEIR personal God."

The "praying professors" theme was reiterated in the following comment by a 23-year-old public relations major: "The greatest thing that has been done for me spiritually by teachers is that after every time I dump my grand or minuscule problems on them, they have always told me they would pray for me. See, I don't consider myself as being one highly involved with the church right now, but by having them say they are praying for me, teachers are holding my hand on my way back to finding the church instead of pushing me toward it with a firm hand. I know that someone is on the sidelines cheering me on no matter where I am." Similarly, a 22-year-old digital-imaging technology student tells of professors who have helped her grow spiritually: "When I was struggling with some very serious personal problems, they sat, listened, then prayed with me and for me. They would call occasionally and sometimes I'd get E-mail encouragement."

Not everyone agreed that prayer before class helped their spiritual development. A senior nursing major wondered if sometimes the teachers even remembered immediately afterward what they had prayed! She felt it was a shame to have prayer as a class ritual. A 21-year-old male psychology/business major expressed similar sentiments: "Nothing has helped me spiritually other than prayer

at the beginning of class, but most of my teachers do that just out of routine."

A few students said they appreciated teachers who challenged their thinking and allowed them to ask questions about philosophy, the church, and life in general. A 21-year-old senior communication major said: "Teachers who question what [we] believe are those who help prepare [us] for a world out there where our beliefs WILL be challenged and questioned and where what we live must match what we preach. Thank God for those teachers." A 19-year-old zoology major expands on that thought: "My teachers have prompted me to ask questions regarding my faith. I am encouraged to try to come up with concrete reasons for my beliefs rather than merely accepting blindly what I am told."

A 19-year-old female said she had grown spiritually, thanks to teachers in her science classes: "My science teachers have always given credit to God as Creator of the wonderful body we're learning about. It gives me a greater love for the sciences and for God." Another 19-year-old majoring in math felt encouraged spiritually by teachers who offered support when she was working hard to earn an "A" yet fell short.

One student remembered that during her freshman year, her Foundations of Biology teacher would get so excited over the "cool things we were learning that he would exclaim: 'We should all sing the doxology!!' Teachers like that who have taken the time to show me reasons to praise God have without a doubt taught me the most," she said.

A 22-year-old social work major expressed gratitude for mercy she didn't think she would receive from her teachers. "Because of this," she said, "I was able to see Christ in them!"

Not all students felt that teachers had done anything to help them grow spiritually. A 19-year-old first-year art major gave his honest reply, "Nil as of yet."

An English major who will graduate this year summarized her response to teachers' attempts to enhance students' religious experiences: "I feel that spirituality is a very personal thing. It has to be decided and cultivated by the individual person. I guess people do influence my spirituality, but I have to decide WHAT it is and how to present it to others." — Carol Luke Kilcher