The Christ-Centered, Character-Driven School

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T raditionally, the teaching of values and morality has been seen as the responsibility of the family, with support from the church. However, C. Ellis Nelson says to place the entire burden "for moral training on the home is to fool ourselves. For Christian parents the place to establish moral standards is the church."[1]

The Valuegenesis study identified three environments in which faith and values can be taught and nurtured. "Seventh-day Adventists can draw on three environments in their attempt to nurture faith, values, and commitment in the young generation: family, congregation, and school. When all three are working together in harmony the effect on faith maturity and denominational loyalty is maximized."[2] Obviously, any one of the three working alone is at a disadvantage. The dilemma for educators is that much of the responsibility for the moral development of our youth is, by default, being passed to the schools. This is not surprising, since practically speaking, youth spend the majority of their time either at school or in school-related activities. This reinforces the imperative for our educators to develop new paradigms to meet the challenge.

A Portland Adventist Academy mission project in Borneo.

We need to become more intentional about moral education and character development, moving away from the current paradigm of passively assuming that this training takes place automatically in Seventh-day Adventist schools. In colloquial terms, the new paradigm says that morality and character are taught rather than caught. This does not suggest abandoning our current focus on religious experience and teaching doctrines, academic excellence, athletic development, or social experience. We do need a new focal point so that every school endeavor will intentionally

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promote morality and character development.

Ellen White stated: *True education does not ignore the value of scientific knowledge or literary acquirements; but above information it values power; above power, goodness; above intellectual acquirements, character. The world does not so much need men of great intellect as of noble character. It needs men in whom ability is controlled by steadfast principle.*[3] For Christian educators, the mandate is clear: We are to train young women and men with strong moral fiber who will make good decisions, not only in times of crisis, but also in their daily lives.

Character has had, and continues to have, numerous definitions. But its fundamental and consistent core elements include internal principle or motivation, attitudes, and behavior. One thing is clear—character is what is on the inside. It is the internal principles, values, and attitudes that inform behavior—what one sees on the outside. (See 1 Samuel 16:7 and Luke 6:43-45.)

Character consists of three fundamental parts: *faith*, *truth*, and *conscience*. A brief definition of each follows:

Faith

Faith involves both content and process. George Knight says: "Belief, trust, relationship, and commitment are four aspects of faith, with commitment forming the apex of what faith is all about."[4] Content involves belief systems and doctrine, while process (trust, relationship building, familiarity, and commitment) requires a decision to do or to act based upon internalized belief.

Faith grows and develops over time, according to the Valuegenesis study:

[F]aith maturity is not simply a set of right beliefs. Rather, it is conceived more as a way of life, as a set of priorities, dispositions, and behaviors which evidence that faith is deep, vibrant, and life-changing. . . . A person of mature faith experiences both a life-transforming relationship with a loving God—the vertical *theme—and a consistent devotion to serving others—the* horizontal *theme.*[5]

The researchers thus identified a

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step beyond belief, also alluded to by Knight: Faith is not merely a belief in a divine Being or a mental assent to a set of religious doctrines (the vertical aspect). It must be accompanied by action based upon one's beliefs or doctrines (the horizontal aspect).

Truth

The second tenet is *truth*. Truth tells us what God is like. According to Arthur Holmes:

[T]o say that all truth is God's truth . . . does not mean that all truth is either contained in the Bible or deducible from what we find there. Historic Christianity has believed in the truthfulness of Scripture, yet not as an exhaustive revelation of everything men can know or want to know as true, but rather as a sufficient rule for faith and conduct.[6]

If faith is the desire to know God and to develop a relationship with Him, then pursuing truth means finding out what He is like and incorporating those traits into our lives. This must occur in an organized way that encompasses all of our activities, not just the overtly spiritual ones. As we pursue truth and apply it in our lives, we desire to be more like Christ. Truth then tells us what God requires of us.

Conscience

The third and final tenet of character is *conscience*. A mature conscience consists of three components, as defined by Meadow and Kahoe:

First, moral choices must be truly personal, proceeding from one's own moral convictions. This means not acting from "extrinsic motives, or under the domination of extrinsic sources, such as fear, desire of reward, conformity to social pressures or even to authority and law as merely external norms." Second, mature conscience is based on what works best for the common good—beyond the limits of oneself, family, and community (religious or national) to humanity and the cosmos as a whole. And third, mature conscience is based on practical, prudent judgment of what behavior is most appropriate at any given time, place, and circumstance.[7]

In short, conscience is the intrinsic moral values and traits that evolve from our pursuit of truth in response to faith. It is the "still, small voice" that gives direction and impetus to the Christian life.

As Ellen White has stated: "The ideal of Christian character is Christlikeness."[8] These traits must be intentionally developed. White identified the process of character development in the story of Joseph:

[C]haracter is not inherited. It cannot be bought. Moral excellence and fine mental qualities are not the result of accident. The most precious gifts are of no value unless they are improved. The formation of a noble character is the work of a lifetime and must be the result of diligent and persevering effort. God give opportunities; success depends upon the use made of them.[9]

Being Intentional About Character Development

At Portland Adventist Academy in

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Oregon, we have become intentional about character development. As Paul stated in Philippians 3:12 to 15, we are not all God wants us to be, but we are on the way. Here is the story of our journey thus far:

First, we recognized that character must be developed within a spiritual environment. According to Donna Habenicht, "Crucial to character development is our ability to trust God to develop His likeness in us because Christian character cannot be developed by our efforts alone. Character can only be truly developed in a spiritual context because the spiritual dimension affects all other dimensions. . . . [it] is central to the development of character."[10] With this in mind, we set out to develop a spiritual environment that would nurture character development.

Then, we defined spirituality as the umbrella under which all other activities operate. That is, we see the academic disciplines primarily as ways to encourage spiritual growth and to instill principles of character—and secondarily, as methods to teach specific content. Next, our staff created a ministry statement identifying spiritual and relational objectives that we are committed to implement in each discipline. To support this endeavor, all of our staff, over a three-year period, will receive youth ministry training. We thus plan to foster a "ministry first" attitude, which we see as crucial to the entire character-development process.

As part of this process, we concluded that to be a truly spiritual community, we needed to become intentional about worship and small groups. We have incorporated these into our schedule so that we worship corporately seven times a month and participate in small groups at least monthly. Much of our worship is student-driven and student-directed, which we see as a vital part of the character-development process.

Finding a Model

The second step was to find or develop a model that focused on character development. We found this in the Hyde School founded by Joseph Gauld in Bath, Maine. The Hyde School has

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described five principles of character development,[11] which we have modified to fit our needs:

First, *destiny*. Each student has a destiny—a dream or vision filled with hope for their future—and each has been uniquely gifted and empowered by God to fulfill this dream as he or she connects with God.

Second, *humility*. Each person must acknowledge that he or she is a part of God's overall plan. This takes the focus off the individual and places it on the community. Students move toward an "others-centeredness" instead of "ego-centeredness."

Third, *truth* becomes the guiding principle for each person's life. It provides the foundation for the developing conscience, the inner compass that guides decision-making.

Finally, the concept of *brother's keeper*, which suggests that individuals are connected and are accountable to everyone whose lives they touch.

With those principles in place, we needed to give our students some specific goals on which to focus as they began the journey to character development.

Five values are especially important in character development:

• *Integrity*—the determination to be who you say you are and to behave in a moral way.

• *Leadership*—both the ability to take charge of your own decisions and actions, and, when called upon to lead others, to serve in their best interest.

• *Curiosity*—the desire to explore

the world around you, to be a lifelong learner who is passionate about every aspect of life.

• *Courage*—the ability to face your fears with honesty and to take risks in order to grow. It prompts one to become success-oriented rather than failure-avoiding.

• *Concern*—recognizing the impact of one's thoughts and actions on others.

Being sensitive to the needs around you and actively engaged in fulfilling those needs demonstrate the value of concern. This is the framework upon which we as staff and students build character. It encompasses all disciplines and activities.

Evaluation

Evaluation is essential to determine how well we are achieving our goals. The last component of the character development model is a measuring tool identified by the acronym EEMO, and can be used for both individual and corporate evaluation.

• *Excellence* refers to the highest level of development. This is achieved when the student understands the personal obligation to use his or her talents to help the community through mentoring or other activities. At this stage, the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning.

• At the *Effort* stage, students are internally motivated and self-directed. They show an interest in classroom topics and pursue them independently. The teacher functions as a mentor and co-learner, encouraging each student to pursue his or her dreams and goals.

• At the *Motion* stage, students do only what is required to get a grade or to earn extra credit. Motivation may be either punishment or anticipation of reward. The teacher relies on the power of his or her position to direct the student, resulting in a hierarchical relationship that does little to foster character development.

• *Off-track*, the lowest stage, is when students are disengaged and unwilling to respond or take responsibility for their actions. They skip class or are consistently tardy, and often fail to turn in assignments. The teacher's role at this stage is to hold the student responsible,

even when he or she does not appreciate it, recognizing that this is in the student's interest and also fosters character development.

The framework described above gives students, staff, and parents the terminology and perspective to more effectively facilitate character development.

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Over the past several years, we have seen numerous examples of character formation in progress on our campus. As chaplain, I have been involved in several situations in which students, taking the principle of brother's keeper seriously, have sought help for friends involved in self-destructive behavior. This has allowed the staff to get the necessary help and support for these students.

Classroom wall at Portland Adventist Academy.

Another example of how our school has become character-driven was recounted to me by our science teacher. When he handed out exams in one of his classes, one copy inadvertently included the answers. The student who received this test immediately brought it to him, saying that it would not be fair to use this, as it would not measure what he had learned.

One of our seniors took seriously the principles of character development and implemented them in his life. A gifted athlete, this young man had not previously had musical training. Through our worship process, he became interested in leading out in music. We allowed him to develop his interests in a safe, nurturing environment. He worked hard and by the end of the year, he was part of an award-winning worship band and a spiritual leader. He then was able to move to the excellence stage, sharing his gifts with the community by leading worship on our campus. Now at college, he is training others to

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lead out in worship.

Building character is not an easy task. It requires intentional analysis and implementation on the part of educators, parents, and students. It requires love, compassion, time, and a willingness to hold others accountable and to be held accountable. Building people of character is a relational process, rather than simply a matter of teaching certain kinds of content. But it is worth the effort, for its results last throughout eternity. ✐

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