

Ten Things Faculty Can Do to Nurture College Students Spiritually

All disciplines are not created equal when it comes to providing opportunities for integrating faith and learning. Literature, history, religion, philosophy—these seem like naturals. In mathematics, computer science, engineering, and statistics, it often seems more challenging to bring faith into the classroom without a sense of artificiality. Because of the unequal opportunities inherent in the academic disciplines, I have been collecting, from the literature and my own research, ways that every faculty member—regardless of discipline—can nurture college students’ spiritual growth. Here, in an unranked order, are 10 opportunities every teacher can use:

1. Teach Within a Christian Worldview.

For more than 20 years, Steven Garber, as a professor and campus minister, taught college students in secular as well as Christ-centered institutions, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. As he kept in contact with the students, he observed a disturbing process. Some were able to make and keep the connection between beliefs and behavior, but others “little by little disconnected their beliefs from their behaviors.” In order to find out what made alumni stay faithful to their Christian commitments 20 or more years after graduating from college, Garber conducted a number of interviews. He found that the ones who maintained their commitment had three things in common. During their young adult years, they had:

- A. formed a worldview that could account for truth amidst the challenge of relativism in a culture increasingly marked by secularization and pluralism;
- B. found a mentor whose life “pictured” to them the possibility of living with and in that worldview; and
- C. forged friendships [after college] with a community of people who shared their values and convictions.¹

Two of these characteristics are included in this list of 10 things faculty can do to nurture students spiritually.

Worldview is the meta-narrative by which we understand ourselves and our world. It is formed by cul-

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BY JANE THAYER

ture, parents, the media—indeed, by everything with which we interact. Until their college years, few young people critically examine their worldview. Because most cultures do not foster a Christian worldview, faculty members need to help students evaluate their assumptions and explore the Christian value system. Teachers do not automatically think of themselves as purveyors of worldview; however, whether implicitly or explicitly, they are constantly adding bits and pieces to their students' perspective on life.

In a presentation to Andrews University faculty in 2003, Steven Garber asked two simple questions that can help build and strengthen a Christian worldview. Faculty should ask themselves the first question as they prepare their courses: “How does, or how can, this subject glorify God?” Teachers should keep asking students the second question in various ways: “What are you going to do with

what you are learning in this class?”² These simple questions can lead to life-changing answers for both teachers and students.

Garber says we can assess whether church-owned colleges nurture a Christian worldview if we ask students when they enter our school, “What do you love?” and repeat the question when they leave. He says, “It is in that question and the spiritual dynamics implicit in its answer that belief and behavior are woven together.”³

Every academic discipline has the potential for helping students create a Christian worldview that can be applied in real life. Anyone wanting guidance in how to teach his or her subject in a faith-developing way can consult the *Christ in the Classroom* series. Copies can be found in the library of every Adventist college in the world. This

30-volume series, a legacy of Humberto Rasi, contains the scholarly products of faculty who participated in the Integration of Faith and Learning Seminars.

2. Be a Mentor to Some Students and a Christian Model to All Students.

Editors of a theme issue of the *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* on mentoring⁴ invited six well-known psychologists, with a graduate student they had mentored, to tell about their relationship. The resulting essays reveal the joys and costs. Unfortunately, true mentoring relationships are rarely experienced by most students, especially on the undergraduate level, because of time demands and the student/faculty ratio.

Teachers can, however, provide every student with a Christian model. In my recent open-ended survey of 259 Andrews University students, I asked them to name a faculty member who had spir-



Drs. Meredith Jones Gray (far left) and Bruce Closser (second from right) interact with students in the Commons Area outside the Andrews University English Department.

itually nurtured them, and to tell how he or she had done so. The number one method, reported by just over 20 percent, was “by being a Christian model.”⁵ The students reported:

“In Dr. C’s doctrines class, he not only showed old teaching in new light, but by looking on the man himself, you can see those teachings exemplified and thus have a role model to strive towards.”
Female senior.

“Both of these individuals [husband and wife faculty members] are models of Christianity and of a Christian family.”
Female junior.

Inviting students to your home,

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to humbly confess one’s wrongdoing without glorifying the sin or calling undue attention to oneself. Here’s how he does it:

“Pride is a persistent problem for people who strive for spiritual growth.

“Once in a while I go on a diet. At those times, if I am in a restaurant, watching people eat, I find certain thoughts involuntarily running through my mind. ‘How can people eat this stuff? How can they treat their bodies this way? Don’t they know this junk is lethal? Have they no discipline, no self-restraint? Are these the ones, then, of whom St. Paul wrote, “Their end, is destruction; their god is the belly?”’

“I get these thoughts even though—or perhaps more precisely, because—these people are eating the same things I ate yesterday before my diet began and will be eating again next week after I have given it up.”⁶

4. Teach Vocation as a Call to Participate With God.

Vocation is more than a career. I used to think of Christian vocation as a call to service. However, after hearing Claudia Beversluis, dean for instruction at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, describe vocation as a “call on a student’s whole life,” I realized that my view was far too narrow. Calvin College obtained a Lilly grant that helped professors be more intentional in their teaching about vocation.⁷ Some schools feature writing across the curriculum; Calvin College makes vocation central to all curricula. Every student studies *Engaging God’s World*, by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., to understand the Christian view of vocation.

Beversluis said that faculty and administrators at Calvin College consider vocation the middle chapter of God’s working in the world. She explained this by talking with passion about the Great Controversy, a story that I thought Adventists “owned”! I’ve never heard an Adventist so boldly build a rationale for vocation on that metanarrative. She said that Chapter 1 is about God and Creation; Chapter 2 about the Fall and sin; and Chapter 3 is about God’s redemption.⁸ “Our classrooms should be bathed with gratitude,” Beversluis said, because Chapter 3 shows us that God works ac-



At the Physics on Rye Friday evening events, students enjoy music, a full-course meal, and discussion about important real-life issues.

working with them and participating in extracurricular activities and in sports—these all demonstrate how to live Christianity. Students need to see how beliefs can be lived out in every aspect of life. Of course, being a Christian model is a risky responsibility, since all too often the label does not fit our thoughts or behavior. But being a Christian means being a model. As we seek to follow His example, we can say to students, “Follow me as I follow Christ.” This brings us to the next item:

3. Tell Them Your Story.

Students want to hear your personal experiences. However, you and your stories must have authenticity. Students are willing to learn from your mistakes as well as your clever responses to their questions. Most of the recent theories on dealing with young postmodern adults emphasize the need to be vulnerable. While admitting our less-than-perfect side, we need not dwell on the “juicy details” of our sins. In *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*, John Ortberg demonstrates how

tively in the world.⁹ Calvin faculty teach their students to participate with God in the work of redeeming not only individuals, but also whole systems. Surely, partnering with God for such noble causes should give young adults a vision for vocation. As Sharon Parks, a researcher in young adult faith development, says, “The formation of a worthy Dream is the critical task of young adult faith.”¹⁰

Because the Fall has affected every academic discipline and profession, each faculty member needs to teach vocation as a call to participate with God in His redemptive work. “Never before in the human life cycle (and never again) is there the same developmental readiness for asking big questions and forming worthy dreams.”¹¹

5. Create a Nurturing Departmental Community.

Parks says that to develop faith, young adults need not only a dream, but also a community. “The young adult imagination is appropriately dependent upon a network of belonging that can confirm a worthy, ‘owned’ faith.”¹² Academic departments provide a natural structure in which to support students in their quest for meaning, purpose, and faith.

Every academic discipline has the potential for helping students create a Christian worldview that can be applied in real life.

In 2002, Sahmyook University in South Korea had 5,500 students, and 400 faculty and staff in 40 departments. To care for this many students, the chaplains decided to organize university departments as churches, with departmental students and faculty as members. A pastor or Bible instructor is appointed for each department. The departments sponsor many kinds of religious activities and programs, including a weekly Sabbath school.¹³

Since 1991, at Andrews University, two or more times a semester, Robert and Lillis Kingman hold a “Physics on Rye” supper and vespers for 20 to 40 physics and math students and their friends.¹⁴ After a full-course meal prepared by Mrs. Kingman and served on china with real silverware, a speaker presents a topic or personal testimony. A question-and-answer session follows.

Each year, a theme is selected (e.g., The Outrageous Jesus: How Will You Answer His Call?; God in Relationships; Pathways to Integrity; Out of Darkness Into Light). Speakers are chosen from various disciplines across the university.

“So often we talk about a faith that does not match the real world,” says Kingman, professor emeritus and former chair of the physics department. “We bring people who talk about faith and the real world. This is an opportunity to build a Christian worldview.”

In the Kingmans’ guest book, one student, now completing a residency in medicine, wrote:

“As I come to this last Vespers [sic] on Rye and look back on my AU experience, I see how much these have meant to me. I learned a lot of ‘stuff’ in my classes, but it was sitting in your living room that I learned about thinking and a spiritual walk in a complicated world. Interacting with older people I admire and respect is a privilege most students don’t have. It has been the most formative 22 hours of my life.”

6. Explore Ethical Issues in Their Professions.

The recent colossal ethical failures by the leaders of giant American corporations are an outrage. Yet how many of us would want the spotlight to shine on our own income tax forms? Too often, people behave ethically because they lack an opportunity to do otherwise. How can we prepare our students to choose the high road when tempted to behave unethically to make money or gain power? There is a great need to teach professional ethics to our students. But how? What methodologies are effective? Because of the disconnect between knowledge and behavior, even if students know what is right, they may not do it.

In teaching ethics, two basic approaches should be combined: “principle ethics,” which emphasizes rational, objective, professional principles, and “virtue ethics,” which emphasizes character development.¹⁵ One approach teaches the “rules,” the other empowers the will. If an ethics course is not required for each major, the department faculty need to decide which courses will address ethical principles in professions related to their



At an ice rink in South Bend, Indiana, Dr. Gordon Atkins, professor of biology and director of the Honors Program, plays goalie for the Andrews University Cardinals hockey team. This also gives him the opportunity to interact informally with the athletes and fans.

discipline. In addition, the entire culture of a Christian campus should support character development. This will help to ensure a connection between knowing and doing.

The basic methodology for teaching principle ethics is the case study, which requires students to know and use ethical principles and critical thinking to determine the best course of action. A set of generic questions can be used to turn news stories, journal articles, and even students' own experiences into case studies. (For sample questions, see Nickols & Belliston.¹⁶)

7. Organize or Participate in Activities Outside of Class.

Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, college impact authorities, state that "one of the most persistent and least assailable assumptions in higher education has been that of the educational/developmental importance of informal student-faculty relationships beyond the classroom."¹⁷ On a Christian campus, opportunities abound for such relationships.

Student visits to a teacher's office can enhance affective learning. (This area seems to benefit more from outside-of-class contact than does cognitive learning.¹⁸) Researchers Clark, Walker, and Keith conclude that to have an impact in this area, faculty must at least announce and keep regular office hours.¹⁹

Inviting students to your home, working with them and participating in extracurricular activities and in sports—these all demonstrate how to live Christianity.

Beyond planned events, faculty can create informal opportunities for developing relationships. Inviting students to your home is a simple way to do this. Each summer, the director of one of the graduate programs at Andrews University invites students and advisors to her home for an annual supper and a "Blessing of the Students" ceremony. At the end of the evening, the students gather around, and the advisors take turns praying for each of their advisees by name.

Some students might never come voluntarily to a religious meeting or a faculty member's home, but may be reached through extracurricular activities such as sports, music, and drama. Participating in sports with students does not have to be limited to young faculty members. Being a coach, a referee, even

just a faithful spectator who attends games, knows students' names, and cheers for them, demonstrates to students that you value them and their talents, and are there for them when they are struggling academically or are going through difficult times.

8. Practice Prayerful Teaching.

In an informal hallway gathering of colleagues discussing their school's course-evaluation form, one teacher remarked, "Students always rated me low on spirituality, so I decided to do an experiment. One semester, I started praying at the beginning of each class, and at the end of the semester, the students ranked me higher on spirituality than they ever had before." Does this mean that praying before each class spiritually nurtures students? Not necessarily. In a study of Andrews University students, we found that students did use "prayer before class" as an indicator of a teacher's spirituality, but only if it was also accompanied by the teacher's showing "care and concern for students."²⁰

Prayerful teaching involves much more than saying a quick prayer in class. In fact, "it is quite possible for a prayerful teacher to never pray orally in class," and for an insecure teacher to "flood a course publicly with prayer."²¹ Prayerful teaching is a wholistic approach to education "whereby the learner, teacher, content, and teaching methods are informed by an on-going dialogue with God."²² Every aspect of the teacher's work should be lifted up in prayer so that his or her teaching becomes an offering to God.

College students deeply appreciate teachers praying for them individually. Students who come to your office typically are burdened by a variety of concerns. They are worried about interpersonal relationships, finances, and the future. If they share their worries, or you sense their pain, ask for permission to pray for them. Just make sure that you are talking to God and not being manipulative.²³ The prayer should focus on God's loving character, not on the qualities of the student or on advice you would like to give.

By praying for your students privately outside of class, you minimize the risks associated with public prayer. Although



Showing care-and-concern means providing both academic and spiritual assistance. Here, an advisor coordinator, student intervention coordinator, and student tutor meet together at the Andrews University Student Success Center to plan ways to help students with a variety of challenges.

he was talking about counselors and clients, the following statement by McMinn is valid, I believe, for teachers and students: "If, as Christian [teachers], we are committed to the health of our [students] and we believe in the power of prayer, then we have a spiritual obligation to pray faithfully for those in our care. These prayers of petition are to be persistent and regular, an essential part of the disciplines exercised by the spiritually vibrant [teacher]."²⁴

9. Demonstrate Care and Concern for Your Students.

Alyce Oosterhuis's study of the influence of a Christian liberal-arts education on faith maturity found faculty to be the single most important influence.²⁵ Characteristics that made the difference were competence, compassion, and personal warmth.

Andrews University conducted two studies on faculty spirituality, one in 1999,²⁶ the other in 2003.²⁷ In open-ended questions about faculty members' spirituality and their nurturing of student spirituality, students responded that one of the most important factors was "care-and-concern for students." When describing faculty who demonstrated care-and-concern, students cited the following traits (in unranked order):

- display patience in the classroom;
- are approachable; show genuine concern; unconditionally accept students; help students; listen to students;
- check to see how students are doing;
- take a personal interest in students;
- are generous;
- pray for students;
- see them as persons, not just students;
- provide support;
- intervene on behalf of students to solve problems; and
- demonstrate Christian love for students.

In a variety of studies on teacher effectiveness, the care-and-concern criterion almost always ranks very high. Researchers believe that it is a relational quality, rather than a personality trait, and can therefore be learned and developed.²⁸

10. Keep Growing in Your Own Spiritual Life.

At the beginning of every commercial flight, the attendants demonstrate safety procedures. Passengers are told to place the oxygen mask over their own face before helping a child. This seems self-serving. But on reflection, one can see the wisdom of the order. Without oxygen, you can't help someone else. In the same way, the teacher cannot guide students to a vibrant Christian life if his or her relationship with God is "languishing."

After His resurrection, Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?" When Peter each time answered, "Yes," Jesus responded, "Feed my sheep" or "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15-19).

Before we can love Christ, we have to experience His love for us. In his excellent book *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*, David Benner writes, "It is the experience of love that is transformational. You simply cannot bask in divine love and not be affected."²⁹ The same is true for students. They cannot bask in the divine love that you pass on to them without being transformed.

These, then, are 10 things that all faculty can do to nurture college students spiritually. Try them, adapt them to your own style, and watch what happens! ✍



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