



THE GROWING DISCIPLES INVENTORY

Assessing the Spiritual Development Goals of Christian Education

P sychological inventories of personality, interest, abilities, and values inform decisions regarding career direction and personal development. Measures of physical fitness build self-awareness and facilitate realistic individual goal setting for physical wellbeing. Academic assessments provide information to improve teaching and learning.

However, the purpose of Christian education is broader than the transmission of knowledge or the achievement of national or regional educational agendas; rather, it seeks “the whole-person equipping” of students for “knowledgeable and competent discipleship in a hurting world.”¹ Thus, we need effective ways to assess our success in achieving core Christian education goals for both curricular and co-curricular learning.

Schools committed to integrating faith and values will seek to evaluate moral, religious, and spiritual education outcomes as well as academic achievement.² “Where questions about educational mission and values are skipped over, assessment threatens to be an exercise in measuring what’s easy, rather than a process of improving what we really care about.”³

While a variety of norm-referenced measures of religiosity and spirituality exist for adults, in 2009 the author of this article could find no criterion-referenced assessments of adolescent Christian spiritual development utilizing online technology. Personal experience in teaching and leading Adventist schools in several countries, across three divisions, prompted further study of the principles of Adventist education, and whatever could be found on Adventist curriculum and assessments glob-

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ally. The apparent gap between the broad goals set for Christian character and faith development, and how their achievement was assessed, strongly suggested the need for research and practical solutions.

This article (1) defines Christian spiritual development and why it should be assessed; (2) introduces the *Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI)* as a specific tool for evaluating Christian spiritual development; and (3) suggests practical ways to use the *GDI* to facilitate spiritual growth in Christian education.

Discipleship: Lifelong Christian Spiritual Development

Christian spiritual development has been described as a journey,⁴ “an intentional and continual commitment to a lifelong process of growth toward wholeness in Christ.”⁵ *Discipleship* has been defined as the ongoing process of “becoming a complete and competent follower of Jesus Christ.”⁶ Thus, a *growing disciple* is a Christian engaged in the process of lifelong *spiritual development* who in turn mentors or *disciples* other Christians.

The terms *disciple* and *discipleship* are used to capture the Christian perspective on lifelong Christian spiritual development as articulated in the *Together Growing Fruitful Disciples (TGFD)* framework, to which the *Growing Disciples Inventory* (introduced in this article) was aligned. Reading pages 15-23 will provide a helpful overview of the *TGFD* framework, as space does not allow for a complete description here. Throughout this article, the term *Christian spiritual development* is used in place of *discipleship*, for consistency and ease of understanding.

Selecting the Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Curriculum

The absence of assessments that provided opportunities for formative assessment of integrated and cumulative learning throughout Adventist education spurred a search for a curriculum that transcended regional and/or level-specific (e.g., Bible or religion course) curricula. Assessment of class-specific skills, concepts, and understanding are essential, but better tools can provide a more detailed analysis.

Recent research has helped to inform decisions about the development of a valid spiritual growth self-assessment tool. For some time, the study of human development has branched into several rather insular fields (cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development). Faith development studies by Fowler⁷ and Westerhoff,⁸ for example, led to planning for religious education based on the assumption that students develop sequentially through specific stages. More recently, computerized modeling has provided evidence⁹ that human development is more cyclical or web-like, rather than sequential or ladder-like, as postulated by earlier theories. Continuing research on human development has informed the *TGFD* cyclical mode, which recognizes that through life, individual growth deepens

in the same areas of development.

Optimal Christian spiritual development has been described as *holistic growth* toward maturity in beliefs, attitudes, and relational practices.¹⁰ The Adventist view of true education as the “harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers”¹¹ indicates the need for assessments of essential learnings that span sacred-secular curriculum chasms—even in schools committed to Christ-centered education.

Assessing Spiritual Growth?

In the past two decades, several empirical studies have assessed various aspects of Christian spiritual development in Adventist schools.¹² These large studies had an indirect impact on individual students because of organizational change that occurred when educators implemented the recommended changes in their home, church, or school settings. Self-assessment tools can assist both the student and the teacher in Spirit-led planning for lifelong spiritual development.

But is it even possible to assess Christian spiritual development? Gorsuch states that “everything that anyone can communicate to another in any form can be quantitatively analysed.”¹³ While recognizing the complexity of measuring personal spirituality, Moberg¹⁴ argues that the spiritual nature of humanity is just as amenable to study as other attitudes, beliefs, and feelings. Although these cannot be directly observed, they have become acceptable topics for behavioral science research.

The working of the Holy Spirit in a student’s life is not always visible. However, reflective assignments and self-assessments can help both the student and teacher recognize God’s working through the “real-life curriculum”—all that the student experiences daily, both during and beyond schooling.

Although the objectivity of assessing oneself has been questioned, all assessments are imprecise to some degree and represent, at best, estimates of what a learner knows and can do. Tuck¹⁵ argues that examiners, and even teachers who interact with students daily, do not know students as well as students know themselves. Students thus learn more when they understand the criteria and apply them in self-assessment.¹⁶

Aligned to the Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Curriculum

As a brief introduction to the *TGFD* framework to which the *Growing Disciples Inventory* is aligned, it will be helpful to compare several models. Boa’s¹⁷ in-depth exploration of 12 approaches to Christian spirituality builds on the premise that all growing Christians, regardless of temperament and natural aptitude, need a healthy balance of doctrine/knowing, experience/being, and practice/doing. The *TGFD* processes of *Connecting*, *Understanding*, and *Ministering* correspond to Boa’s constructs. Both models correspond with what Rice¹⁸ labels as *Being*, *Believing*, and *Behaving*. Two other Christian education summations of the holistic nature of Christian spiritual devel-

opment use similar three-part models, correlating with the affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains respectively: *educating the head, heart, and hand*,¹⁹ and *helping students know, love, and serve God*.²⁰ While three or four words cannot fully capture a theological construct, each model reflects the essence of the personal processes of the *TGFD* framework structure, as shown in Table 1.

The community process of *Equipping* may appear to overlap with the individual process of *Ministering* or serving. *Equipping* focuses on Christians helping *one another* to grow in the three individual processes of *Connecting*, *Understanding*, and *Ministering*. Of the 86 Bible passages including the phrase *one another* in the New International Version (1984), more than 40 refer to the process of *Equipping*, as these examples demonstrate: encourage and build *one another* (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8; 5:11, Hebrews 3:13); instruct *one another* (Romans 15:14); serve *one another* in love (Galatians 5:13); forgive *one another* (Colossians 3:13); comfort *one another* (2 Corinthians 1:4); and live in harmony with *one another* (Romans 12:16, 1 Peter 3:8).

The alignment of these models supports the *TGFD* four-cyclical processes model. Additional evidence was provided through structural equation modeling to determine the validity of the *Growing Disciples Inventory*.

The Development and Validation of the *Growing Disciples Inventory*

The online *Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI)* was developed and validated using a mixed-methods approach to educational design research.²¹ Following cycles of development, expert review, and usability testing, 595 grade 7-12 students attending eight Adventist middle and high schools on three continents completed the final 100-item *GDI* online. Each cycle of design research provided evidence of the inventory's effectiveness in facilitating Christian spiritual development.

The biblically based *TGFD* model provides a framework to explore the cycles of lifelong Christian spiritual development. Focused on growth, it assumes as a baseline a personal decision to follow Christ. The cyclical nature of this framework recognizes the diversity of learning styles and the varied ways people come to know, love, and serve God. Thus, the *GDI* was developed for individual use, within the context of the home, church, or Christian school where students and others have become or are interested in becoming followers of Christ. It was

Table 1. Comparison of Models of Christian Spiritual Development

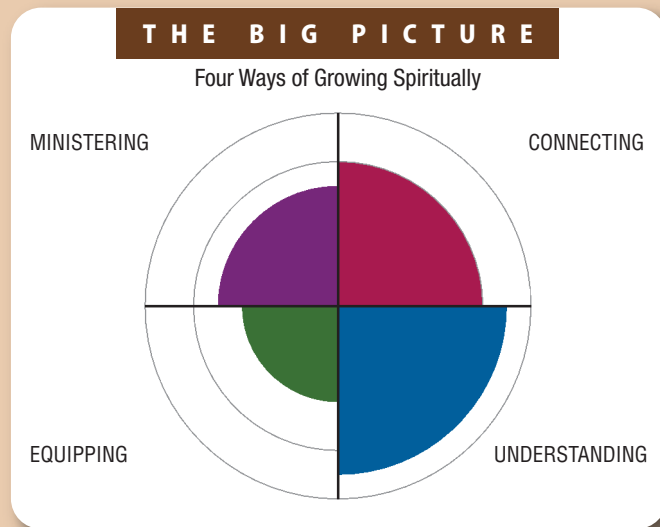
<i>Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Model</i>		Boa	Rice	Taylor	Trent, et al.	Domains
Personal Processes	Connecting	Experience	Being	Heart	Love	Affective
	Understanding	Doctrine	Believing	Head	Know	Cognitive
	Ministering	Practice	Behaving	Hand	Serve	Behavioral
Community Processes	Equipping one another in the processes of Connecting, Understanding, and Ministering					

not designed as a system-wide assessment, as it would be inappropriate in schools where the majority of students are from non-Christian backgrounds. In such situations, it may still be useful in Christian worship and Bible study situations.

After the *GDI* is completed, reports can be immediately and securely accessed online. A concise, visual report is presented as a circle graph and four bar graphs, as shown in Figure 1. This provides two levels of comparative information. Color-coded graph segments depict the results within the four *TGFD* framework's cyclical processes, and the five or six more specific commitments or objectives, within each process, as shown in the bar graph. Smaller segments represent a self-assessed area needing development; larger segments are currently perceived as areas of strength. Because of (1) the cyclical nature of spiritual growth; (2) the inextricable connections between the discipleship Processes, Commitments, and Indicators (see the *TGFD* framework, pages 19-23); and (3) human nature, which always seeks to compare and label, *GDI* reports do not include numerical values.

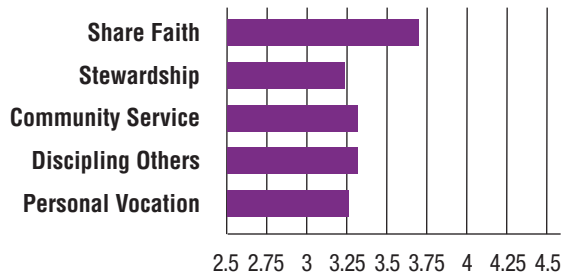
While values are never included in reports, they have been added to the bar graphs in Figure 1 to show the mean of the 595 student responses in the validation study while developing the *GDI*. How might such a report about your students influence what you plan to teach and test across the curriculum or how you focus your school's spiritual life plan? Clearly, Christian education strengthens understanding of biblical truths and nurtures connecting with God, self, and others. Results indicate that students rated their experience in a broad range of ministering or service options and engaging in equipping (*being disciplined while discipling others*) as growth points. In perspective, where comparable items were found, these findings are consistent with prior studies of adolescent faith.²² Should this not prompt the rethinking of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to ensure that holistic Christian spiritual development is made a high priority?

Figure 1. *Growing Disciples Inventory* Individual Report With Research Data



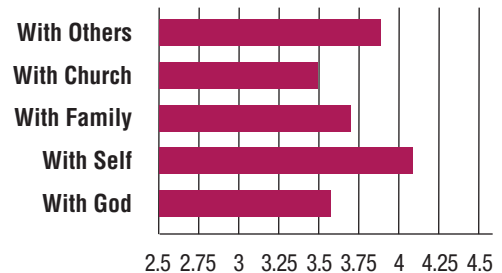
M I N I S T E R I N G

Growing by participating in God's mission to reveal and restore



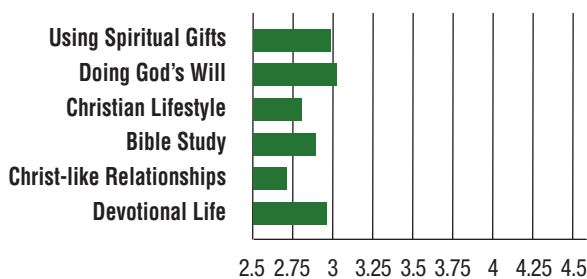
C O N N E C T I N G

Growing in relationship with God, self, and others



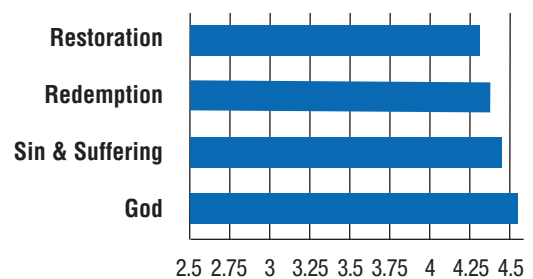
E Q U I P P I N G

Growing the body of Christ by discipling one another



U N D E R S T A N D I N G

Growing through knowledge of Jesus and His teachings



Using the *Growing Disciples Inventory* in Your School

No prior knowledge of the *TGFD* framework is needed to administer or complete the *GDI*. However, the value of completing the *GDI* will be maximized when the students review the *GDI* with a mature Christian who has carefully considered

the *TGFD* framework and understands the key concepts of *discipleship*, *disciple*, and *discipling*.

To access the *GDI*, go to <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/gdi>. After completing the 15-minute inventory, a password-protected report is instantly available online to anyone 13 years or older. A short paper version (download at [<http://jae.adventist.org>](http://growing</p>
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fruitfuldisciples.com/gdishorte.pdf or request from the author) can be copied, completed, and discussed within two class periods. Either format could be used as (1) a personal self-awareness activity, (2) an introduction to a course, or (3) a key component of a school-wide spiritual master plan. The online version contains prompts to guide you, and the computer instantly scores each student's report. The online report includes links to the *TGFD* framework, suggested activities, and other resources for students completing the *GDI* with teacher guidance.

Students and teachers who have completed the *GDI* have provided valuable feedback, suggesting ways to use this self-assessment tool with adolescents and young adults in a variety of settings.

To use the GDI during a specific course, a teacher might:

1. Introduce the concept of discipleship; have students take the *GDI* and reflect on their individual reports; discuss observations in groups or alone; or have students write a thought paper on their journey to this point, and where they see God leading them to grow next. If your class has a flexible lesson plan, you might allow several days to address student discoveries and follow up on class interests. Or you can create a list of questions to address in greater depth when they fit into the prescribed curriculum.

2. Before introducing the concept of discipleship, have students take the *GDI* and print their reports. Compile a list of questions raised by the individual student reports or your group (class) reports. Then weave the answers to these questions into a series of lessons on discipleship, having students review their reports to connect new understandings from the discipleship lessons to their self-assessment.

3. Begin the school year by having students take the *GDI*, and file their reports as the first item in a discipleship portfolio. Have each student complete a *Christian Spiritual Growth Plan* (e.g., <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/action-plan-blank.doc>). Sample activities (or actions) that enhance spiritual growth and that correspond with each of the *TGFD* framework Commitments (or objectives) are available online at <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/action-plan>. Either (a) commit to meeting with students individually at least three times during a term/year to discuss their progress (confidentially, using their individual report as a diagnostic and formative assessment tool); or (b) pair students to equip each other, with accountability checkpoints and clear expectations for what to include in the portfolio (i.e., equipping them to disciple others while being disciplined by you). Portfolios should reflect the holistic goals of Adventist education, with personal goals set for spiritual, physical, mental, and social development. Ideally, these holistic and personal goals should align with the *TGFD* Processes, Commitments, and Indicators. Repeat the *GDI* at the end of the year/class, and use part of the final exam/essay to have students reflect on changes they have made based on their spiritual plan, and what they plan to do about what they discovered.

4. Create a group account (for details, go to <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/group-reg-info>). Have students enter the group code when they take their individual *GDI*. Every time individual students are assigned to take the *GDI*, a group report can be accessed to provide anonymous aggregate data for the class/group. This data could be used to (1) adjust plans for topics to cover within a defined course curriculum, (2) adjust the length of time allotted to each topic; (3) influence choices made about which assignments and service projects to assign. Group reports facilitate student-centered teaching and learning.

The General Conference and Andrews University work in partnership to coordinate the development of resources aligned to the *TGFD* framework. Free use of the *GDI* is made possible by the General Conference and the creator of the Inventory.

- *GDI* – online youth version: <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/gdi>
- *GDI* – short paper version: <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/gdishorte.pdf>
- A full paper version and translations are under construction for school or church use. Adult and child versions will follow. Check availability at <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com>.

To use the GDI to plan curricular and co-curricular learning experiences in contexts where students are open to or already committed to Christ, the educator(s) might do the following:

A. Under the leadership of a pastor, counselor, or Bible/religion teacher, the *GDI* group report can be used to gauge spiritual climate (i.e., a summative evaluation at a point in time). Such a report could (a) be included in a school evaluation report, (b) guide the spiritual master plan for the year, or (c) be used in choosing Week of Prayer speakers, worship programs, outreach and service projects, or as the focus of camp experiences, etc. The sample action plans for each *TGFD* framework Commitment, available at <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/action-plan>, could facilitate this level of planning.

B. Choose a specific class in which students will take the *GDI*. This could begin a portfolio requirement as in Option 3 above. As part of the school-wide spiritual master plan, projects begun in one class could be included as part of a portfolio requirement that continues for one or more years, and culminates in a final project for a capstone course prior to graduation.

C. At the undergraduate/college level, include the *GDI* (1) in

a Christian Life course, (2) as an activity in a small-group Bible study, (3) as preparation for student mission experience, (4) in student counseling, and (5) as an invitation to reflect on the student's spiritual experience on campus during senior testing.

D. When adopting a new Bible or religion curriculum, the GDI could be used as a pre- and post-assessment. Data from the group report could aid in assessing and improving curriculum and instruction.

E. The TGFDF framework Processes, Commitments, and Indicators could be used as a checklist to review the Bible curriculum. If necessary, supplement existing courses, or create new components to fill major gaps. "In Step With Jesus," the *New Members' Bible Study Guide* series (four books, 13 lessons each), which is aligned with the TGFDF framework, may be a helpful tool for older adolescents or young adults. (See pages 46 to 48 for an article about this series.) The iFollow discipleship resources available online through <http://ifollowdiscipleship.org> are another excellent source for youth and adult students.

F. Reporting findings from the large U.S.A. National Study on Youth and Religion, Smith and Denton²³ captured the importance of the religious experience of significant adults in the lives of adolescents with this phrase, "We get what we are." *The quality of student spiritual life is significantly impacted by the quality of each teacher's commitment to following Christ, aware that their actions speak louder than their best curriculum, instruction, or assessments.* The GDI can be a helpful staff assignment, as well. Each year, another aspect of discipleship could be chosen to equip colleagues first, and then to build stronger students for Christ.

Conclusion

A slogan caught my attention recently. It succinctly describes the purpose of the *Growing Disciples Inventory*: "Know to grow." The GDI is a self-assessment that can provide tools to help you grow and equip your students to be "knowledgeable and competent disciples in a hurting world."²⁴ It is hoped that the GDI will facilitate reflection and planning for Christian education in home, church, or school settings. ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



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