As Christian teachers, we invariably want more for our students than solid scores on national exams and success in earthly careers. Despite our busy schedules—overflowing with the routine tasks of grading papers, classroom management, and lesson preparations—we work with the underlying hope that students’ experiences in our classrooms will make a difference in the people they become. We want to help our students, whether they are 5 or 25 years of age, to develop their gifts and realize their potential as human beings made in the image of God. We are proud when we hear that former students have become occupationally accomplished and have achieved positions of respect in their disciplines, and even more gratified when we see evidence that they are happy, healthy, integrated members of their faith community. Teachers and parents alike want the education students receive to prepare them for both a joyful life of service during their years on this planet and the unknown wonders that stretch into eternity.

While our goals are clear, the task of spiritual development can seem mystifying. We know that we are co-workers with God on this project, dependent upon both the working of the Holy Spirit and our students’ receptivity, yet we are not always certain about our own contributions to the process. We start the day with prayer, write Bible texts on the whiteboard, incorporate intentional religious instruction, read character-building stories, insist on kind behavior in the classroom—asking students to think about what Jesus would do in various situations—yet the questions still remain. We wonder: Am I truly educating for eternity? Are these the things that have the most impact? How can I cooperate most fully with God’s project of...
redemption for these students? How can I assist them in developing their spiritual as well as academic aptitudes?

While spiritual development is many-faceted, we can feel assured that we have the power and tools to effect spiritual growth. One particularly significant aspect of this venture is helping students to cultivate a spiritual voice, to develop the confidence and ability to articulate (verbally and/or in writing) their own religious and spiritual experiences. This is a dimension of spiritual growth that fits well into strategies and lesson plans that are already being used in the classroom and one that every teacher can successfully cultivate. The great news is that successful strategies for student spiritual development do not require that teachers sit through long in-service training sessions or design elaborate new lesson plans. Much of what will stimulate and establish spiritual voice is already part of good teaching practice.

Whenever teachers invite students to make prayer requests, share statements of gratitude, choose a favorite hymn, or read a favorite Bible text, they are helping students develop a spiritual voice. These exercises prepare students to speak openly about their personal spiritual experiences and help them become familiar with the forms the church community uses to express faith. An open and accepting atmosphere in the classroom creates a space where spiritual beginners can learn to recognize their personal responses to God and the universe. A group acknowledgment of the spiritual dimension, along with the encouragement to own and articulate personal religious experience, raises students’ spiritual awareness and contributes to the development of mature faith. Over time, as such practices are repeated in the classroom, students become more comfortable describing the meaning and role that religion plays in their lives. They also learn how to apply what they have learned in order to encourage others.

As an added bonus, the spiritually active classroom helps create a community that values the individual voices within it, including those young or inexperienced voices seeking to find their places as involved, contributing members of the church. Through these concrete, everyday activities, spiritual voices are identified and trained, the “cloud of witnesses” expands, and the goals of Christian education are realized.

Adventist Heritage and the Development of Spiritual Voice

When teachers encourage their students to develop a public spiritual voice, they are continuing an established Adventist religious tradition. The pioneers of the early Advent movement expected individuals to speak about their religious struggles, victories, and beliefs. The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald published frequent appeals to readers to write “spirited and interesting articles,” and stressed the importance of having all believers speak to the community as an act of discipleship. The magazine’s solicitations to write helped shape a membership that was convinced of the value of the individual voice, a group of people who were empowered to describe their personal spiritual experiences and testify publicly to their faith. The resulting articles and letters offer a lively picture of the faith and experience of these pioneers. Their descriptions provide us with raw material that we can use to gain insight into early Adventist spirituality and the language that Seventh-day Adventists continue to use when speaking about their faith.

For the early believers, the Review became a substitute spiritual family, replacing the congregations the “scattered flock” had left behind. By providing a forum for diverse and distant
voices, this journal helped to create the expectation that all believers would participate in the new community of hope. Because they were Christ’s disciples, believers were called to share their faith and their experiences to encourage others along the way. This expectation helped to create a spiritual ethos that valued the voice of every disciple.

Even women, who were largely excluded from the public sphere, were encouraged, even expected, to overcome the limitations of silence imposed on them by society and their previous religious training. This was not always easy. Sister A. C. Mackey referred to both the opportunity to enter into the public discourse and the responsibility as a disciple to do so when she wrote: “I have for a long time felt it duty to write to you through the Review, but I have excused myself because my talent is so small. But will God excuse the one that has but one talent sooner than the one that has ten? I think not.”

The setting may be different today, but the task of developing a community of believers that can testify to their faith is similar. While this is no easy task, an examination of early Adventist spiritual life and the language the believers used to describe it can inform our practices today. Adventist pioneers understood the importance of believers’ speaking publicly of their experience—both for their own spiritual growth and for the encouragement of others.

The 19th-century Review and Herald and church hymnals provide accounts of the believers’ spiritual experiences through open letters, articles, poetry, and hymns. Through these, the men and women of the Advent movement found their voice and developed the language that Adventists continue to use when describing their commitment to their community and their relationship with God. This is an important part of the spiritual heritage bequeathed by the pioneers to the current generation.

In this documental heritage, teachers can find resources to connect students with the imagery and themes characteristic of Christian spirituality in general and Adventist spirituality in particular. Of the several themes that can be derived from these sources, the prominent motif of “the journey” may be used successfully to help students bridge the gap with the past and
claim their Adventist heritage, while learning to express their own spiritual experience and identity.

**Family Album: Pictures of Pilgrims on the Road**

By bringing together the varied voices of the early Adventist community, the 19th-century *Review* serves as the Adventist family album, preserving the portraits of those who journeyed before us. James White established the journal in 1850 to provide a public voice for those believers who, despite the Great Disappointment in 1844, continued to believe that God was behind the Second Advent movement and had moved forward in their faith journey to embrace the seventh-day Sabbath. This group was both scattered and small, consisting of individuals who had sacrificed much, including membership in their various church communities. While recognizing their error in setting a date for Christ’s return, these disappointed ones maintained their faith in the soon coming of Christ and their longing to draw near to God. Even though the proposed date for Christ’s return had passed, they continued on the pilgrim road, seeking to better understand God and to achieve a closer union with Him.

The *Review* soon became a central part of the early Adventist experience. Its letters to the editor frequently allude to the role it played in the believers’ spiritual lives, giving us glimpses of Adventist life during the embryonic stages of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This weekly journal brought scriptural exegesis, testimonies of faith, and news about the progress of the work to each believer’s home. Readers personified it as an itinerant teacher or a welcome visitor, and “servants who are giving meat to those who are hungry and thirsty, and to those who have fed on husks long enough.”

Throughout the paper, one finds comments that testify to the believers’ breaks with the larger society, the loneliness of their situation, as well as their hunger for truth and a deeper understanding of the will of God. Whichever metaphors or biblical allusions the writers used in relating their experiences, they shared an understanding—either articulated or assumed—that they were journeying to Zion, the kingdom of God.

Thus, readers saw the *Review*, as well as all other things in life, as integrally related to that journey: what they wanted, needed, and prized was whatever would aid them in their progress along the road to God’s kingdom. The *Review* was a help indeed, creating what amounted to a virtual classroom that overcame the constraints of distance and fostered spiritual conversation. This journal provided theological discussions with a sophisticated rationale to refute objections that “outsiders” posed to Adventist beliefs, but just as importantly for the pilgrims, it challenged and assisted its readers in their spiritual walk.

**The Journey and Pilgrimage Motif in Literature**

Just as the journey is an ancient and classic theme in literature in general, pilgrimage is a major motif in the literature of spirituality. Essentially, a pilgrimage is a journey with a specific purpose: to move toward God. A pilgrimage requires a destination of great significance, a place where God and humanity can meet, where people go to encounter God—whether it is Mt. Sinai, Jerusalem, or their bedside. Union or unimpeded communion with God stands as the greatest goal of the spiritual quest. Because the pilgrimage is a specific type of journey narrative, pilgrimage accounts share the major features common to the genre. In short, in a journey narrative, the hero leaves the safety of the familiar and ventures into the larger world to gain what cannot be found at home. The journey may be long and difficult, with unforeseen obstacles blocking progress or frustrating his or her success. It poses risks and requires separation from comforts and friends. The pilgrimage requires sacrifice and clarity, for the traveler can carry only the bare essentials. Preparation requires careful focus and discernment in order to outfit oneself with travel necessities and discard whatever would impede the journey. It also requires the pilgrim to collect and organize resources, as trips are expensive, and unforeseen expenditures must be anticipated.

On the journey, new acquaintances are made, some of whom prove to be boon companions, while others are sources of danger or betrayal. Along the way, the pilgrim gains knowledge, but his or her character is sure to be tested in negotiating the trials and temptations of the road. As the pilgrimage is separated from other travel narratives by the identified intention to gain spiritual ground, pilgrims can be distinguished from people who travel as tourists. Tourists go to see the sights. They come home with stories to tell and souvenirs to put on their shelves. Sometimes tourists learn much, and they may report enthusiastically that the trip was worth the effort. Some even come to prefer the anonymity...
of the traveler or the excitement of the unknown to the predictable patterns of stable community life. Most importantly, whatever benefits the tourist expects, the intention is to return home and resume his or her former life without any major disruption or change in character or lifestyle.

Pilgrims may share delight in the changed scenery or the new experiences and people they encounter on the journey, just as tourists do, but they are far more than sightseers. They differ radically in their expectations for the outcome of the journey: They go to be changed. They travel lightly with the full intention of jettisoning any habit or possession that would keep them from the goal of fellowship with God. They, too, pick up souvenirs, but instead of reminders of places they have been or things they have seen, pilgrims collect symbols of internal changes. These travelers see themselves as citizens of another realm who are moving outside and beyond the accepted boundaries of this world. They acknowledge a higher authority that replaces old authorities and rules. They find community with other travelers who seek the same destination and are guided by the same light. They have no intention of returning to their starting point to resume their former lives.

The pilgrimages depicted in the Bible include the stories of Abraham and Sarah’s journey from Ur to Canaan, the Exodus from Egypt to Canaan, Jesus to the cross, and the corporate journey of humanity from Eden to the New Jerusalem. In Christian literature, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, an enduring spiritual classic, describes the journey of one named Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. It is difficult to overstate the influence of *Pilgrim’s Progress*—it is one of the most widely read Protestant books on spirituality, and has long been considered a fundamental primer on the nature of the Christian experience. Bunyan’s metaphors and analogies have been picked up and utilized by incalculable writers, preachers, and teachers.

The first vision of Ellen Harmon (later White) shares the same pilgrimage motif; she saw the Advent believers traveling toward the heavenly city. Her representation of Adventists as travelers on a “straight and narrow path” that is “far above the dark world” depicted them on a journey led by Jesus. Her vision drew on the believers’ self-understanding: Adventists were a pilgrim people journeying in uncharted territory who depended on the light of God’s truth to guide their steps.

**Pilgrims and Strangers: The Journey Motif in Early Adventist Thought and Writing**

The literature of the early Adventist Church abounds with mini-narratives that fit into the Christian tradition of spiritual autobiography. The pages of the *Review and Herald* presented a steady stream of individual faith declarations filled with allusions and imagery comparing the writers’ experiences with those of the biblical pilgrims. The journey metaphor provided a lens through which the early Adventists could view their experience. Like Abraham and Sarah, or the New Testament disciples, they would leave behind much that was dear and familiar in order to follow God. They could expect disappointments, suffering, and setbacks along the way. But the God who called was the God who blessed and enabled the willing to make the trip to the land He had promised to them.
Believers shared portions of their journey in the Review and encouraged others to be faithful in their own walks. Corporately, they developed a language that enabled them to talk about their experiences “on the road” and created a nurturing spiritual space. When they found themselves on unexpected terrain, during “the waiting time,” the sojourners incorporated the delay and their personal grief responses to it into a comprehensible part of the ongoing spiritual journey. Similarly, they identified the forced separation from the affection of family and friends, and even their rejection by other Christians, as necessary losses they would suffer along the way. Using the archetypal language of wandering and home, desert and garden, loneliness and community, light and dark, along with frequent biblical allusions, they described life as a pilgrim people. They testified to the work of God in their lives and publically committed themselves to continuing the journey. They encouraged others on the road as they sacrificed cultural approval for the more precious goal of “drawing near to God.”

Today’s Adventist hymnal retains some of the songs of those early believers. Even a cursory perusal of these hymns yields ready evidence of their spiritual experience. Of the 17 hymns included in the “Early Advent” section of the hymnal, 12 contain some aspect of the pilgrimage motif. Mary S. G. Dana captured the urgency of the journey in her refrain, “I’m a pilgrim, and I’m a stranger, / I can’tarry, I can’tarry but a night” (No. 444). The hymns of Annie Smith, whose poetry appeared frequently in the early Review, caught the eagerness of the pilgrim and the longing for home that transcend the weariness and hardship of the road. “How far from home?” the wanderer asks,
and receives the watchman’s assurance that “The long, dark night is almost gone / The morning soon will break.” Impelled by hope, the travelers watch for the morning star that guides them to “the realms of light, / In everlasting day.” The only response to such encouragement is to “weep no more, but speed thy flight.” Their goal is the land where there will be no more sorrow or crying, but with “joys complete, / Safe in our Father’s home.” The imagery of light contrasts with the night of the earthly journey, the struggle of the Christian’s warfare with the victory won, and the loneliness of the road with the community of the Father’s house (No. 439). In their songs and writings in the Review, Adventists consistently articulated their break with their cultural setting and their identification with the life of the spiritual pilgrim.

Teachers should not underestimate the value of presenting stories depicting pilgrims on their quests when trying to facilitate student spiritual sensitivity and growth. As students study the archetypal journey stories in the Bible, spiritual classics such as Pilgrim’s Progress, and the writings of Ellen White, they will recognize the elements and patterns of the motif. This will enable them to embrace spiritual life as an acceptable arena of human investigation and interest. They will start to identify the common aspects of spiritual life and the ways humans have communicated their subjective, internal processes, insights, and conclusions to others.

Hearing and analyzing the stories that wrestle with spiritual topics written by others can stimulate spiritual growth and students’ desire to consider their own journeys. Further,

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**MARKING THE MILES**

**Questions on the Pilgrimage Motif**

While developmental level determines the vocabulary used and ways in which a teacher introduces the ideas of pilgrimage and spiritual journey, the following questions can be selected and adapted to give students ways to reflect on their spiritual life and begin to articulate their spiritual goals.

Thinking of the Journey in Religious or Spiritual Terms:

- Have you heard a call from God to move from where you have been to somewhere new?
- What parts of the call forward seem difficult or even impossible?
- What people, things, ideas, relationships, and experiences tug on you to stay within the familiar instead of journeying? How do you resist these forces?
- What price may you have to pay for moving forward?
- What obstacles do you place in your path to make it harder to move forward?
- In what ways are you being asked to step out in faith?
- How have you been blessed by following God in the past?
- Have you been disappointed, disillusioned, or hurt when you have tried to move forward in faith in the past?
- What do you imagine that you must leave behind you in order to progress?
- In what ways are you ambivalent about the journey or afraid that it will entail missing something that is important to you?
- Why embark on a pilgrimage that takes an entire lifetime? What’s wrong with staying put?

Packing Your Bags:

- What do you find essential to take with you in your journey?
- Are you ready for the undertaking? What do you need yet to acquire?
- What have you chosen to leave behind as extra baggage?
- What might you still need to jettison along the way?

Traveling Companions:

- Who are your traveling companions? How do they help you along the road? How do you help them?
- Are your closest friends and family on the road with you? Are they supportive of your journey? If so, what do you say to them about what you are up to with this “road trip”?
these accounts provide the students with written models to use when experimenting with constructing stories about their own spiritual experiences.

Assignments based on these accounts can sharpen awareness of personal spiritual life. The act of writing is in itself a way of coming to know. Just the discipline of attempting to find words to express one’s inner reality brings clarity to the understanding of God’s work in our lives. Similarly, creating a piece of art that represents an experience or conveys a feeling invites the student to stop, reflect on, and relate to specific spiritual events or times. The time that teachers devote to exploring the issues and the seriousness with which they respond to students’ work will encourage students to strengthen their voices and join spiritual conversations in various ways. Quality classroom time spent reflecting on spiritual life can increase students’ confidence about their ability to articulate their experiences and empower them to participate more fully in church life.

The Spiritual Journey and Telling Our Stories Today

The stories found in early Adventist literature are now the artifacts of the lived spirituality of another time and place. They serve as models of vibrant spiritual life and reminders of Adventist heritage. Yet as helpful as these accounts are when incorporated into the curriculum, students also need to hear stories from their own time and place. The voices of our pioneers are not substitutes for hearing firsthand accounts of spiritual life and growth from people who occupy the same historical terrain, or for learning to articulate one’s own spirituality. And

- Are there others you wish would join you in your journey?
- If so, how do or would you try to interest them in the trip?
- Does the road seem lonely to you at times, and if so, how do you deal with the loneliness?

Maps and Guides:
- How do you find your way? Are there maps or signposts that you use or expect to use along the way?
- Is the path you are taking fairly well mapped out, or are you finding your way through a lot of new territory?
- Do you find other travelers’ stories or advice helpful or useful for your trip?
- What are your most significant sources of information or advice for the journey?
- Are there books or authors that you have found helpful as sources of wisdom for the road?
- Are there any biblical stories that you see as relating to you on your journey?
- Are there any biblical texts that have given you guidance or comfort in your journey?
- When faced with a crossroads, how do you decide which road to take?
- What do you do when you run across conflicting information?
- What do you do when you get lost?

Rest and Refueling:
- Where do you look for fuel?
- What do you do when you are running low on fuel?
- How do you know when it is time to stop for rest, refueling, or reassessment?
- What kinds of stops do you make to get ready for the next segment of the journey?
- What roadside rests do you find most helpful, most enjoyable?
- Where do you find encouragement or strength to continue, to not turn back?
- What is your experience of the Sabbath, and what role does it play in your journey?
- What provides the hope or encouragement that keeps you on your journey in times of disappointment?

Arrival:
- How do you envision your arrival? Who is there? How will you be welcomed?
- What does your new home look like?
- How did Jesus depict homecoming in His parables?
- What is your favorite biblical picture of homecoming?
- What have you experienced in your pilgrimage that gives you a taste of what homecoming is like?
they are not substitutes for small-group sessions where each student learns to cultivate his or her spiritual voice and helps create an open and comfortable spiritual environment for others to do likewise. When students tell their stories and experience their own voices as heard and valued, they begin to own a part of the conversation on spirituality. Inviting them to use the metaphor employed by church pioneers creates an opportunity for them to draw connections between their personal experiences and their Adventist heritage. It also encourages them to understand their experience in the wider context of the biblical story and the Adventist story.

In addition to hearing their own stories, students need to hear the stories of their wider community: church members, teachers, principals, pastors, and youth leaders. Unfortunately, many people feel hesitant about sharing their personal spiritual life. Few of us have received encouragement to find and develop our own voices. Many of us have spent large portions of our life in social settings where spirituality was considered a private and suspect matter, and in religious settings where the emphasis was on doctrine rather than spiritual development. Most church members have had relatively little instruction on spiritual growth; thus, teachers may not think to devote time to helping students practice how to relate their spiritual experiences. Indeed, even teachers with an active spiritual life may feel unprepared to describe or discuss personal spiritual experience. Where does one start?

It is at this point that the journey metaphor can be as helpful for the teacher as it is for the students. This motif provides a framework in which to organize our spiritual experience and provides a framework for telling our stories. The archetypal stories of the journey give us the language and framework to tell our own stories and to understand our own spiritual experience. The journey metaphor allows us to present ourselves as people who daily respond to God’s call and are walking toward Him, and denies any projected claim to already have arrived at one’s final destination. It gives us permission to be honest about where we are, which is always short of erasing the distance between self and God.

Ellen Harmon White gave the church a tremendous gift when she relayed her first vision. The image of the pilgrim band

**SUGGESTIONS FOR ASSIGNMENTS**

Age-appropriate classroom activities and assignments can invite students to write for specific purposes and audiences in the church community. Discussion can relate to the needs of particular audiences and the characteristics of the forms of writing appropriate to their purpose.

**Interview:** To gain an understanding of the different experiences in the church, students can interview older family members or church members who either grew up in the Adventist tradition or converted to it, and ask them to tell their stories. How do their experiences both resemble and differ from that of their generation? Notice the imagery and biblical allusions they use, the challenges they faced, and where they found strength for their journey. The teacher can prepare a short list of questions for students to ask. Some of these questions could be pulled from the questions on the journey motif (pages 14 and 15).

**Witness:** As a statement of faith, students can prepare a succinct statement of their relationship with God or their experience with the sacred or their understanding of a biblical text or concept. They can tell of specific events, times, or places in which they have encountered the sacred or grew to a new understanding of God and His work in their lives. Students can be asked to write out a statement of their spiritual experience or understanding and revisit it periodically throughout the year.

**Letter of Encouragement/Letter of Counsel:** Students can write a letter of encouragement to their teacher, pastor, conference president, or other church leader in which they identify something about the church which has been a special blessing to them. The purpose of this letter is to support others in the church by identifying something the church is doing which benefits them or someone they know and expressing appreciation. Or they may write a letter of counsel in which they identify something about the church they would like to change. They can tactfully and persuasively explain why this practice is detrimental to them or someone they know and courteously suggest specific alternative ways they would like to see it done.
led by Jesus’ loving presence encourages us to move forward in hope. It serves as an antidote to the paralysis that can set in when we feel overwhelmed by the difference between where we are and where we expected to be. Her willingness to share her spiritual experience despite her weaknesses still serves as a powerful testimony to God’s ability to bless the faithful efforts of even the “least of these.” It demonstrates the unanticipated serendipity that can result when people share their spiritual experiences and utilize their voices. Her example encourages us as we speak and write our letters and testify to the blessed hope. Our stories need to be added to those in the family album where they will testify to the faith of 21st-century Adventism to our children, thereby adding to the Adventist heritage bequeathed to those who follow until the blessed hope is realized.

From Family Album to Facebook

In the age of Facebook and Twitter, the social and communication landscape is rapidly changing. It can be tempting to assume that the current generations are wired differently than the rest of the family. Yet, beneath the surface differences, the need for spiritual connection is the same. And fortunately, spiritual growth and life exhibit similar patterns of raised awareness, longing, crisis, and response from one generation to the next.

The language of spirituality has its own timeless characteristics as it seeks to express the deepest of human experiences—relationship with God. It is often emotional as it speaks to the commitment of the heart as well as the conviction of the mind. It is personal and confessional in tone as it invokes the authority that comes from personal experience. It is often metaphorical. Spiritual experience is an abstraction that looks to the concrete for expression. For young people nurtured in a Christian (or even post-Christian) environment, the concrete expression often draws on the imagery and narratives of the Bible. The archetypal language of the Bible makes the spiritual life accessible to the mind and senses. The language of mountaintop and pit, banquet and famine, broad way and narrow way, weddings and wedding garments, battles and armor, and salt and savor can continue to speak as the concrete expression of the spiritual life today just as it did for first-century Christians and early Adventists.

Evidences of spiritual reality often manifest themselves in the form of specific experiences and stories that we can convey in many different forms. The stories of our journey are the artifacts of our spirituality, the Christian journey as it is lived in this time and place. While customs and costumes are different now from that of our predecessors, as is the specific geography of the road, the landmarks and destination of the journey are the same.

As we share our own experiences with our students, we model the way to deepen personal relationships with God, and when we create opportunities for them to speak publicly to the church community, we embrace Adventist spiritual tradition. It is important to teach our students that the Adventist spiritual heritage values the voices of all believers and endeavors to develop in each the spiritual maturity to speak from a personal relationship with God. As we introduce these themes and experiences in the classroom, we are preparing students for a lifelong spiritual journey and participating with God in the education for eternity that we long for our students to receive.

Notes and References

3. Women were among those who had been silenced in their previous churches and were now invited and even urged to speak publicly by Adventist leaders. For more information on the voices of women in the early Advent movement, see our two articles on the subject: “Your Daughters Shall Prophesy”; James White, Uriah Smith, and the “Triumphant Vindication of the Right of the Sisters to Preach,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 43:1 (Spring 2005):41-58 and “It Was Mary That First Preached a Risen Jesus”: Early Seventh-day Adventist Answers to Objections to Women as Public Spiritual Leaders,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 45:2 (Autumn 2007):221-245.
5. The *Review and Herald* is accessible online in the DjVu and PDF format from the General Conference Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research: http://www.adventistarchives.org/documents.asp?CatID=27&SortBy=1&ShowDateOrder=True.