rowth is an essential ingredient of life. Whether it be the world of plants and animals or human beings, whether it be the physical, mental, social, or spiritual realms, where there is no growth, decline and decay take over. How true this is in the most significant area of life—that of the spirit—is reflected in the question Jesus once asked: “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36, KJV).

As Adventist educators, we should prayerfully reflect on this question: What is the most fundamental aspect of Christian education? Is it not the spiritual growth of the students who attend our schools? “True education,” wrote Ellen White, “means more than the pursuit of a certain course of study. It means more than a preparation for the life that now is. It has to do with the whole being, and with the whole period of existence possible to man. It is the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers.”

This article deals with the third and most significant dimension in the above definition of true education—spiritual growth. To probe this topic, we will discuss four questions: What is spirituality and spiritual growth? How do students relate to the concepts of religion and spirituality? How is spiritual growth achieved in the school environment? How can we incorporate activities into the day-to-day activities of every Seventh-day Adventist school that will help our students to better understand God and relate to Him?

**Spirituality: What It Is**

Webster defines spirituality as a sensitivity and attachment to religious values. Theologians and researchers differ...
on their definition of spirituality, even though they generally acknowledge that it is somehow related to and intersects with religion and faith as its essential components. James Fowler, noted for his research on faith development in the Christian setting, says that each person experiences stages of faith growth—from the primal faith of infants, to the intuitive-projective faith of toddlerhood and early childhood, to the mythic-literal faith of middle childhood and beyond, and finally, the synthetic-conventional faith of adolescence. People at each of these stages have an ability to relate to God that is appropriate to their development level, ranging from the very simple faith of children to a more complex and mature relationship to God that develops over time. Thus, the development of spirituality is a lifelong journey.

Spiritual awareness is not possessed only by adults with special training or experience. After studying the spirituality of 6-year-old and 10-year-old children in England, Rebecca Nye found that not a single child was lacking in spiritual awareness, even when his or her experience was restricted by vocabulary and experience. Hay defines spirituality as an innate awareness that is biologically implanted in the human species and undergoes development as people mature. Thus, children do not have to be taught spiritual awareness; it is built into their physiology. However, teachers can help enhance that awareness by offering their students language and experiences that help them to articulate it.

In Western society, there is a tendency to separate spirituality and religiosity. One often hears the statement, “I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not really religious.” Dowling offers a helpful definition and comparison of religiosity and spirituality that connects the two concepts in order to facilitate human thriving. He describes religiosity as the impact of beliefs on self, religious views and restrictions, and the role of church life. By contrast, spirituality is defined as doing good deeds and helping others, but having thoughts and attitudes that transcend the ritual, form, and rules of religiosity.

The two—religiosity and spirituality—are actually complementary because they give children and youth rules to live by and then show them how to live out these rules in daily life. When the rules are mediated through parents, school, and church, they provide young people with a moral compass for developing good personal values and a positive identity, which should help them to successfully cope with life’s problems and challenges.

Having reviewed the various definitions and approaches to spirituality, we now offer a personal definition: Spirituality is using the tools of ritual and religion to nurture human beings’ powerful relationship with God, and all of the emotion that goes with it.

**Spirituality: Student Surveys**

Schools usually focus mainly on the transmission of information and on pedagogical processes—math, science, English, and so on—rather than on spiritual development. Even Christian schools tend to put their primary emphasis on the acquisition of facts and preparation for employment. Yet schools can be powerful settings for spiritual-life education.

A fairly recent World Values Survey of North America,9 18- to 24-year-olds from 41 countries and eight regions were asked three questions: (1) Do you believe in God? (2) How important is God in your life? (3) How important is religion in your life? More than 90 percent said they believed in God, but only about 50 percent thought He was very important, and about 43 percent said that religion was very important.

The National Study of Youth and Religion in a survey of almost 3,300 teenagers (13- to 17-year-olds) found a similar pattern, with 84 percent believing in the existence of God; 65 percent believing in a personal God involved in their lives; 51 percent affirming that their faith was extremely important to them; and 36 percent testifying to a close relationship with God.

These surveys reveal that there is a significant difference between believing that there is a God and actually having some sort of relationship with Him. I have encountered a number of students who claim to be atheists or agnostics. Almost without exception, these students come from a long history of church-school education—elementary through secondary, and into college. Every year in my Adventist teaching experience, students enroll in my university-level classes who are non-receptive to any mention of God or religion, and some profoundly resent the inclusion of spirituality in class discussions.

Some studies have indicated that about one of every two young adults leaves the church after high school. These negative attitudes toward religion seem to have developed early in children’s education and frame the choices they make in academy and college.

Alternative, “Monitoring the Future Study,” has annually asked an
ethnically composite group of 50,000 8th, 10th, and 12th graders across the U.S. in 1995 and 1996, “How important is religion in your life?” Sixty-eight percent of girls and 57 percent of boys found religion very important. Fifty-six percent of the respondents were Afro-Americans; 26 percent were white. While the survey asked about religion, rather than spirituality, and did not include a definition of religion, one can assume that the young people believed that the term included their feelings about God, not just what God could or could not do to/for them.\textsuperscript{11}

**Spirituality: How It Is Conveyed**

What modes of transmission can be used to enhance young people’s spirituality? Crawford and Rossiter point to three influences:\textsuperscript{12}

1. **Family.** Spirituality and religion are positively correlated with marital stability and satisfaction. This makes for strong family relationships.\textsuperscript{13} When the parents have a strong commitment to church attendance, prayer life, and participation in religious activities, young people generally have a strong spiritual life. They develop more effective methods of coping with adversity and handling conflict.

2. **Peers who share similar values.** When a young person’s friends embrace a faith orientation and communicate that this plays an important role in their lives, he or she is more likely to adopt the same attitudes. This provides an alternative path for identity development in youth susceptible to discovering their uniqueness by riskier means, such as drinking, drugs, sex, and gang membership.\textsuperscript{14} In fact, these positive peer influences may counteract negative influences and enable adolescents to resist peer pressures to reject religious and spiritual standards.\textsuperscript{15}

3. **Mentors.** The third suggestion is for positive mentors to engage regularly with young people. This could include almost any adult, including teachers, and/or any group that actively supports spiritual development.

According to Doe and Walsh,\textsuperscript{16} while as adults we may know how to do and teach everything to young people from nutrition to coaching, from organizing their lives to giving them every advantage, we may be failing to engage the very core of their being: their spirituality. A little girl asked her parents as they drove to church, “What do we get at church? At the library we get books; at the bank we get money; at the grocery store we get milk. What do you get at church?” The child could well have asked the same about her experience in a Christian school: “We get math, science, spelling, history, and Bible, but what else do I get there that will help me spiritually?”

Duncan and Kennedy\textsuperscript{17} state that teachers struggle with the challenge of including spirituality equally alongside other dimensions of education. I believe that the issue is simpler than what teachers think! The influence of the teacher’s own spirituality will shine through in his or her response to children’s spiritual expressions, if he or she recognizes the spiritual potential of all areas of the curriculum, works to enhance the teacher-child relationship, and intentionally focuses on improving the spiritual climate of the classroom.

When I was teaching elementary school, I found it a struggle to integrate faith and learning. Trying to insert some relevant religious concept into a math problem or extract some idea from a spelling list that made my students think about religious things was difficult for me. But although curricular interventions can certainly play a part in enhancing students’ spirituality, the goal of spiritual wholeness is broader and more inclusive: It requires creating an overall environment of spiritual freshness and connectedness, based on a growing relationship with God.

**Spirituality: Helping Children Understand God**

Where do people’s ideas about God originate? Matthew Alper\textsuperscript{18} observes that since all human cultures, no matter how isolated, have believed that a spiritual realm exists, this likely suggests that this perception is an inherent
characteristic of human beings and a genetically inherited trait. There have been theories and postulates and even scientific investigations that speculate about the sort of human pre-programming that causes human beings to recognize that there is a God and to desire to respond to Him in a spiritual way.

When asked regarding their views about God, young people often come up with some interesting answers. For example, one 5th-grade teacher in a Christian school asked her children to look at TV commercials and see if they could use them to describe God.¹⁹ These students had no trouble using their understanding of God to come up with statements about who God is and what He is like, though the assignment obviously dictated and limited the scope of their responses. Here are some of the varied answers the teacher received:

- God is like Bayer Aspirin, He works miracles.
- He is like Hallmark Cards, He cares enough to send His very best.
- He is like Tide, He gets the stains out that others leave behind.
- He is like Scotch Tape, you can’t see Him, but you know He is there.
- Allstate, you’re in good hands with Him.
- [He’s like] Dial Soap, aren’t you glad you have Him?
- He is like the post office, neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet, nor ice will keep Him from His appointed destination.

The answers are humorous, but they certainly show that children have an affinity for the spiritual and from an early age desire a relationship with God. Adults need to attend to how children experience and understand God. This will enable ministry leaders, parents, and teachers to help children develop their life of faith.

Stonehouse and May²⁰ probed these questions by talking to children about their relationship with God, by observing them in worship settings, and by interviewing adults about their childhood faith experiences. The researchers concluded that setting the stage for children to wonder together about God, guided by wise and spiritually mature teachers in an environment that is specifically prepared for spiritual growth, helps children to learn about and to know God. The children will then be able to express what they know and their desire to learn more. As they become more attuned to the spiritual, this makes room for the Holy Spirit to assume the critically important role of teacher in their lives. The authors list important elements that contribute to this process such as worship, Scripture, prayer, and compassion.

So, how can parents, teachers, and church leaders help young people learn to talk and listen to God? First, we need to recognize that as children go through the various developmental stages, their ability to understand abstract concepts changes and matures. Young children have the ability to understand that Jesus is their friend, so simple prayers and stories will keep them connected. Stories are children’s tools for learning about the world around them, coping with adversity, and drawing meaning from life. Yet we persist in presenting them to children as lessons from doctrine or morals rather than as something to be remembered, celebrated, and processed by children in play and art.

School-aged children are very aware of the evil in the world around them, and they need to know that God cares about everything that happens to them and their surroundings. It is important that they feel comfortable asking for God’s help and can express those thoughts. It is essential for schools to provide experiences and time for students to learn that God wants to be personally involved in their lives and that they can take their worries and joys to Him.

We do not need new curriculum frameworks for teaching kids how to have spiritual connectedness. We need committed, spiritually minded teachers who live what they believe and who invite students into a spiritual relationship with God through prayers and
The question is: Will we make room for spirituality in our classrooms? If so, will we do so for the right reasons? We should do this because it is the best thing for teachers and for students. But we must create a welcoming climate, be genuine in sharing our personal walk with Christ, and offer support as students struggle to find authentic spirituality in their lives.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES