

**T**ranslating Bible knowledge into personal character development,

spirituality, and practical Christian behavior is a constant challenge for Adventist educators. During 1998, teachers in the South Pacific Division (SPD) have been piloting a new elementary Bible curriculum framework, *Growing in Faith*. The refined edition will be used in Adventist schools throughout Australia and New Zealand beginning in 1999.

But what is *different* about the new material? First, as the title suggests, a *faith development* perspective undergirds and guides the program. This marks a significant shift from the *information transfer* approaches of the past. Educators have tended to assume that personal faith grows naturally when children gain knowledge *about* the Bible. However, extensive research and discussion in recent years have challenged these assumptions and provided valuable insights into what constitutes faith, how it develops, and how it can be nurtured. The structured approach used by the new SPD curriculum incorporates these insights in the following ways:

- articulating a working definition of faith and its various facets,
- generating a framework to relate these facets of faith, and
- suggesting a range of related strategies to develop these facets within each student.

#### What Is Faith?

Faith is complex. But in concise terms, it represents a sense of personal meaning, a life orientation or worldview. By nature, it reflects:

- one's understanding and sense of the supernatural,
- one's level of trust and commitment, relationship to the supernatural, ethical and moral behavior, and relationship with others. (See Diagram 1.)

# GROWING IN FAITH: A NEW ELEMENTARY BIBLE CURRICULUM FOR AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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**By Don C. Roy**

students, as well as the learning processes they use to help the learner develop a personal sense of meaning.

#### Framework to Facilitate Faith Development

We must be ever sensitive to the risk of over-simplification. Any framework is prone to reductionism, and with it, a lack of authenticity. By the same token, a good framework reveals linkages and relationships between the various elements in order to provide guidance and support for teaching and learning. In this case, the framework has three major strands. (See Diagram 2.) These are grounded in the premise that Christian faith builds on knowledge and understanding derived from God's self-revelation. Intentionally sequential and cyclic, the three strands build on the belief that God has the right to speak first in demonstrating His initiative to restore the broken relationship between His creatures and Himself. The three strands are as follows:

Such faith is essentially *relational*. For the Christian, it reflects an active *personal* connection with God through Jesus and the nurture of the Holy Spirit. But it is also conducive to *group* cohesiveness growing out of unselfish, unconditional love (*agape*) and group sensitivity (*kooinonia*). The body of Christ metaphor captures beautifully this communitarian spirit.

Faith is not static. It grows and develops. Obviously, small children perceive God, the world, and others differently from adolescents and adults. Throughout life, individuals develop through defined stages of maturation.

From this perspective, faith is fundamentally *relational*—linking humans with the supernatural, with other humans, and with the created world. The resulting framework assumes that faith grows out of the active exploration and sharing of biblical reality between the learner and his or her mentors—be they teachers, parents, or other significant individuals. This view has critical implications for how mentors relate to stu-

# Faith is fundamentally relational—linking humans with the supernatural, with other humans, and with the created world.

## Strand 1: God's Relationship With Us

God's initiative and action are set in the Bible's context of the grand narrative. This strand has two clusters of stories: those that reveal God's character and redemptive action, and those that show God calling a people into a family that represents His character and mission. The church is thus described as *the picture of love God wants the world to see*.<sup>1</sup> The knowledge and understanding, or worldview, that grows out of this represents the cognitive basis of one's faith.

## Strand 2: Our Relationship With God

Christian faith is also responsive. Attitudes and values grow out of an appreciation of God's action, motivated and nurtured by the Holy Spirit. Again, a cluster of appropriate stories about people who exemplify a responsive relationship with God provides the basis for reference. This is intended to motivate an *affective* response, manifested in character and lifestyle development. It includes a range of devotional and worship practices at both the individual and corporate levels.

## Strand 3: Our Relationship With Others

An additional cluster of stories exemplifies unselfish love and service. This is intended to motivate a *practical* response through service projects similar to the Bible Labs program developed by Dr. Edward Norton.<sup>2</sup>

These strands are also organized in three levels: Lower (approximately Kindergarten to Year Two), Middle (Years Three to Four), and Upper (Years Five to Six or Seven). Material and goals were selected to match students' faith development. The syllabus for each level includes a profile of the typical child of this

age, in terms of faith development. To provide further support for the teacher, each component of the framework, at all three levels, includes an outcomes statement. Diagram 3 clearly shows the expected development through each of the stages.

### Special Features of the Framework

#### The Place of Narrative

The new framework shows that through the ages, God has revealed Himself predominantly through narrative rather than in propositional terms. In turn, the Judeo-Christian culture, like other cultures, is encapsulated and transmitted through a unique grand-narrative.<sup>3</sup> This use of narrative reflects a number of characteristics:

- *It stresses the underlying theme of God's redemptive action.* Stories should be viewed as part of a whole that centers on this theme. For example, the point of the story of Joseph and his coat of many colors is not a father's indiscretion in sin-

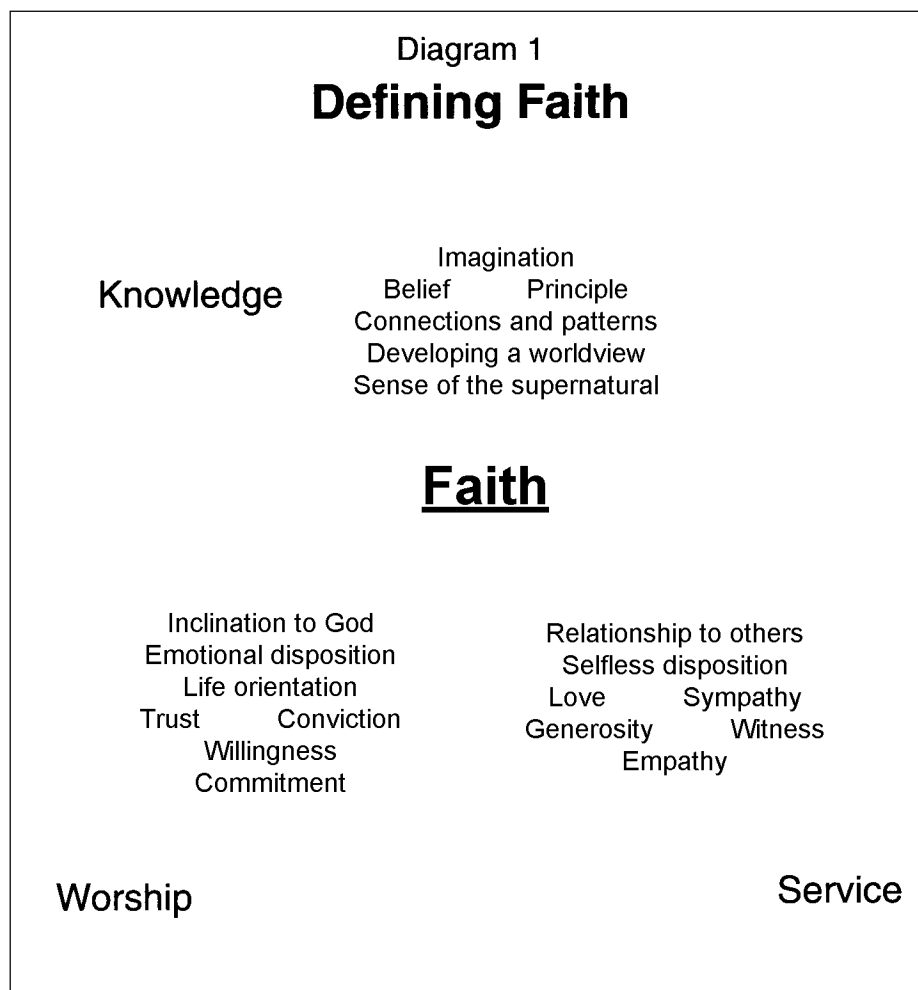
gling out a son, thereby inciting jealousy. It is that God prevented the annihilation of His people by ordaining a pre-eminent son to be a *savior*. The foreshadowing of Jesus permeates the Old Testament narrative.

- *It promotes and develops the Great Controversy theme in Scripture, following a sequence of its four major events—Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and Consummation.*

- *It fosters understanding through a developing spiral.* By the end of the middle grades, the pupils will have studied the entire Bible narrative. At appropriate points, the program introduces a simple illustrated timeline to illuminate biblical sequences and patterns. In the upper grades, doctrinal themes representing the distinctiveness of Adventist Christianity provide the format for clustering relevant narrative and portions of Scripture.

#### Skills Development

The program seeks to develop a range



of skills. To complement the emphasis on revitalization of storytelling and the learning environment, the framework seeks to develop personal Bible study, inquiry, and valuing skills. Similarly, other portions of the framework focus on the development of personal devotional, worship, and interpersonal skills.

**Methodology**

In recent years, educators have become more sensitive to the range of personalities and learning styles in the typical classroom, and to the need for a positive learning environment. This is especially a challenge in religious education, where young children are immersed in the conceptual and symbolic richness of the Christian culture, but must eventually make a conceptual leap from the concrete to the abstract. It is generally agreed that active participation leads to more effective learning. In this vein, Jerome Berryman's notion of *godly play*<sup>4</sup> provides helpful insights in helping children make that leap.

It also makes learning more enjoyable and personally meaningful. The acclaimed work of Howard Gardner<sup>5</sup> in the area of *multiple intelligences* is prominently represented in the curriculum framework in order to create a rich, stimulating, and multifaceted learning environment.

**The Place of the Teacher**

Lawrence Richards<sup>6</sup> sees religious education essentially as *sharing reality* between child and mentor. The responsibility of the teacher is therefore inescapable. *A river cannot rise higher than its source.*

**Resources**

The new Bible materials are a *framework*, not a textbook. Consequently, teachers have flexibility in using new resources. In addition to the materials published by the General Conference, there are other valuable resources such as the *Matthew* and *Acts* videos, *Forever Stories* (Review and Herald), and material published by Group and Gospel Light. In

Australia, resources include the excellent *Themes for Kids* program and a set of activities to accompany the *Matthew* videos by Western Australian Conference Superintendent of Schools Gary Blagden. The new Bible syllabus refers to many of these resources as a complement to older materials.

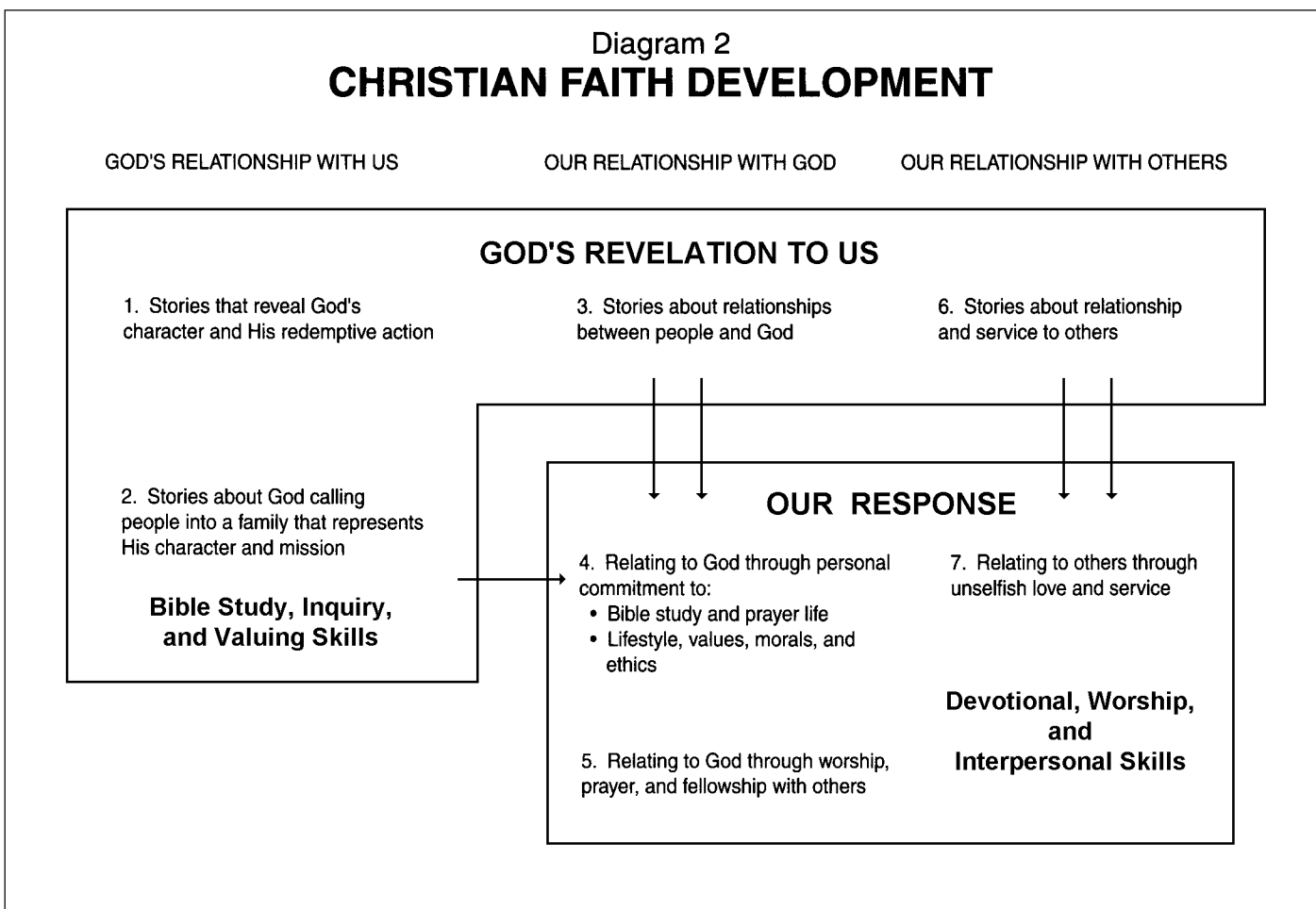
**Potential for Inter-Disciplinary Links**

The framework also provides a starting point for linking various subjects in the curriculum. As an example, consider a hypothetical unit beginning with an upper-grade project to raise funds for an ADRA-sponsored water pump for an African village. The topic could get its motivation from Bible stories and contemporary examples of service found in the third strand of the Bible syllabus, *Our Relationship With Others*. A brief sequence of possible links might appear as follows:

**Bible:**

Examining stories of service.

Diagram 2  
**CHRISTIAN FAITH DEVELOPMENT**



Deducing and stating principles.  
 Studying the mission and role of ADRA.  
 Developing commitment to a plan to provide finance for a village well.

**Social Science:**

Learning about the nature and typical problems of the developing world (e.g., geographical, social, etc.)

**Health:**

Understanding the uses of water for survival and sanitation.

**Technology:**

Learning about the design of the pump, conservation, and supply system.  
 Obtaining relevant information via the Internet.

**English:**

Oral—discussion of issues, topical presentations.  
 Reading—researching topics from various sources.  
 Writing—using a range of text forms to report, explain, argue, and discuss relevant issues.  
 Making Bible study the centerpiece of the curriculum has always been a chal-

lenge. But this new Bible framework, with its emphasis on developing vibrant personal faith with all its spiritual and practical facets and implications, should contribute significantly to the realization of this dream. ✍

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Donald Bubna and Sarah J. Ricketts, *Building People Through a Caring, Sharing Fellowship* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale, 1978), p. 42.
2. See the special service edition of *The Journal of Adventist Education* 54:1 (October/November 1991).
3. J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995), Chapters 4 and 5, "They Don't Tell Stories Like They Used To," and "The Biblical Meta-Narrative," are of particular relevance. See also John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (Basingstoke, Herts.: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1984), pp. 2-40.
4. Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: Teaching Children the Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991). This work bears a strong affin-

# A good framework reveals linkages and relationships between the various elements in order to provide guidance and support for teaching and learning.

- ity to aspects of Maria Montessori's concepts.
5. Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983); \_\_\_\_\_, "Reflections on Multiple Intelligences: Myths and Messages," *Phi Delta Kappan* (1995), pp. 201-209. See also the special multiple-intelligences edition of *The Journal of Adventist Education* 59:1 (October/November 1996), particularly with respect to the application of MI to religious education.
  6. Lawrence O. Richards, "Experiencing Reality Together: Toward the Impossible Dream" in Norma H. Thompson (ed.), et al., *Religious Education and Theology* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1982), pp. 198-217.

Diagram 3 FAITH DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES			
	LOWER SCHOOL	MIDDLE SCHOOL	UPPER SCHOOL
<b>God's Relationship With Us</b>	L. 1 Appreciates Bible stories portraying aspects of God's character and redemptive action.	M. 1 Understands Bible stories portraying aspects of God's character and redemptive action.	U. 1 Explains Bible stories and passages portraying aspects of God's character and redemptive action.
	L. 2 Appreciates Bible stories about God's family on earth.	M. 2 Understands stories about the development of God's church.	U. 2 Explains stories and Bible passages about the development of God's church.
<b>Our Relationship With God</b>	L. 3 Appreciates stories about relationships between people and God.	M. 3 Understands stories about relationships between people and God.	U. 3 Explains stories and Bible passages about relationships between people and God.
	L. 4 Shows a willing response to Jesus as a personal friend.	M. 4 Develops personal devotional habits and Christian lifestyle.	U. 4 Exhibits consistent personal devotional habits and Christian lifestyle.
	L. 5 Participates in group worship activities.	M. 5 Participates in and contributes to group worship activities.	U. 5 Active involvement in the life of a church family.
<b>Our Relationship With Others</b>	L. 6 Appreciates stories about people relating to one another.	M. 6 Understands stories about people relating to one another.	U. 6 Explains stories about people relating to one another.
	L. 7 Shows a willingness to help other people.	M. 7 Participates in serving other people.	U. 7 Chooses to serve in local and global communities in various ways.