Our Journey to Spirituality in School

Pat Featherstone is a dedicated Christian who lives to serve others and is a leader in his church. But he hasn't always been that way. As an adolescent, Pat found himself before a judge in juvenile court. The judge gave him a choice: spend time in juvenile detention or go to the local Seventh-day Adventist school. Though I'm sure that some students might think school is as bad as jail, Pat chose an Adventist education rather than juvenile detention.

While at school, he managed to stay out of trouble, but didn't give his heart to Jesus. It wasn't until years later when he was in the military and facing an especially difficult time that God impressed him to take a two-day leave and drive hundreds of miles back to the school where he had first learned about God. He sat in the school's parking lot, prayed, and gave his heart to Jesus. Now, decades later, he volunteers his services at Livingstone Adventist Academy in Oregon, not the school of his youth, but nonetheless, a place where he "feels the presence of God"[1] in order to fulfill his commitment to give back to the community.

What is the value of Adventist education? Results from the North American Division's CognitiveGenesis Study[2] indicate that academically, Adventist education is as good as, if not better than, its public counterparts. But as Jesus discussed with His disciples,[3] the bottom line for anything in life, including academics, is this: Unless it profits one's spiritual life, there really is no point to it at all. A look at Adventist education's philosophy[4] (see sidebar on page 35) confirms that its distinctive characteristic is, "to restore human beings into the image of their Maker."

In life, there are many things that can be done correctly in only one way. Spirituality at school is not one of them. This article will describe the journey and process that Livingstone Adventist Academy in Salem, Oregon, has taken and continues to implement to achieve faith integration and authentic spirituality.

BY CHRIS SEQUEIRA

Intentionality

The journey to becoming a spiritual haven for students does not happen by accident. Though Livingstone Adventist Academy has been an institution of Adventist education since 1898, many former students have stated that it has not always focused on spirituality. As occurred in many Adventist church schools until the 1980s, students received the message that they were saved through their behavior. Tied to that concept was the idea that school rules such as dress codes were linked to salvation. I recall from my academy days being told that the length of a boy's hair was reason for expulsion on the grounds that he was not going to heaven. In the early 1990s however, through the leadership of Principal Jim Roy, the school board and the staff intentionally reoriented the school to bring it into line with the Philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist Education[5]: "*to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator; to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others' thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual's potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.*" A significant way of achieving this goal is to be intentional in distinguishing school behavior issues from salvation issues. We did this by communicating to our students and parents that violating school rules does not cause God to love us less, but nonetheless is unacceptable.

Our school has particularly concentrated on two elements in the last paragraph of the Adventist Philosophy of Education. First and foremost is our focus on a balanced development of the whole person—physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually, which is at the heart of everything we do. At Livingstone, we are intentional about not letting one dimension overshadow any of the others. This is not an easy task, and requires us to constantly fine tune our program in order to keep things in balance. Second is the three-cord strand of the home, school, and constituent churches. As the old African proverb goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." We realize that we are only one of the agencies that God uses to mold our students' lives; and therefore, do everything we can to help our students' homes and local churches to embrace and achieve the same goals.

Role of the Teacher

At the forefront of a school's spiritual journey are the teachers. They are the ones who minister to each young person with whom they come in contact. The ministry of the teacher should not be underestimated—and it is not a responsibility to be taken lightly. Above and beyond the role of conveying academic information to students, the teacher at an Adventist school is also a spiritual mentor. This is a mission, not a job. To be effective, a teacher must embrace this role fully.

Not that many years ago, Livingstone offered only kindergarten through 10th grade. However, since most students finishing the junior high chose not to continue at another Adventist school, the community, school board, and Principal Barbara Livesay envisioned an expanded and unified K-12 program. Livesay managed to get all the staff to support a unified vision of a K-12 school, rather than separate K-8 and 9-12 programs. When all the staff are unified, it is amazing what God can accomplish. Because of the shared passion and vision, Livingstone Adventist Academy, a quality K-12 program was quickly incorporated.

Prayer groups are just one way that Livingstone Adventist Academy students support one another on their spiritual journey.

At the end of every school year, the staff re-evaluates Livingstone's mission statement. The reason we keep revisiting this document is that it is a living declaration and focus for every classroom.

To develop relationships for now and for eternity with Christ and each other. To help our students develop life skills based upon moral values.

To pursue our educational best.

As a staff, we understand that just as it's important to develop a relationship with Jesus, when we form healthy relationships with students, this goes a long way to influencing them in a positive direction. We have found that the best way to do this is through various school activities and interactions with students outside the classroom. Every activity that we promote is viewed through the lens of developing relationships for now and for eternity with Christ and one another. The teachers also realize that some of the most important lessons we teach are not necessarily academic. Therefore, life lessons that include Christ-centered morality are taught with intentionality. To help students achieve their educational best we have found that nurturing communication and relationships with students and their parents pays enormous dividends. One of the most effective ways we have found to communicate is through an online grade book program.[6] When students know where they stand academically (updated on at least a weekly basis), all parties benefit.

Role of the Student

Though the significance of having the right staff cannot be understated, equally important is having the right students. Students are the driving force of spirituality in the school; they, in essence, have to "buy" into what the school is offering in order for it to work. Students who negatively affect our school's spiritual and academic health are reminded that it is their choice to be here and to be a part of our program. If, by their words and actions, they show that they do not want to be a part of our mission, then they can choose to attend somewhere else.

At first, this was a difficult step to take. If we did not admit certain students and/or asked others to seek success somewhere else, our enrollment might decline. However, now, with the right students in place, this has enabled us to attract more young people who embrace the spiritual program as a priority. God has blessed us with a healthy enrollment and student body.

One of the biggest challenges in creating a culture of spirituality at school is making it relevant to the students. Teachers need to ensure that students know why or how they are going to use academic information. Students also need to know that Jesus is a valuable part of the lives of the school staff and other adults in their lives. One of the most positive results of the actions we have taken is that, for both staff and students alike, our campus is a place where God talk is "cool." Staff and students pray together often, and students feel comfortable talking to staff about spiritual matters and other non-academic issues.

Another vital element of spirituality at school is student voice. School needs to be a place where students can not only express their thoughts and opinions, but also know that their voices are being heard and respected. Since Livingstone became a full-fledged academy, the high school-level student council has played a valuable role in evaluating and updating the student handbook. Some of the changes may appear to be trivial; however, one of the outcomes of giving students voice in school operations is that they feel ownership of the rules. Issues such as allowing gum chewing and fingernail polish at school are not major items, but nonetheless, allowing input on such matters reassures students that we are listening to their concerns and are willing to be flexible. Students know that if they abuse their privileges, they may lose them.

When we designed our new building, including a chapel area was one of our top priorities. We wanted a location where we could meet for various gatherings, as well as a safe and spiritual place for the students to "hang out" and visit when they are not in class.

One of the most popular ways for our students to express themselves is through music. For our weekly chapels, we have a student praise team that leads out in the singing. Our school invested in a drum set and installed a sound sys-

Student praise teams lead out in singing for Livingstone Adventist Academy's weekly chapels.

Teaching in multiple intelligences and providing hands-on activities not only help students learn better, but also allow the teacher to be a "guide on the side" rather than a "sage on the stage."

tem for various instruments. When there are no formal meetings in the chapel, students are welcome to play the piano and sing. It is a place the students like and respect. Soon after the completion of our chapel, the student council chose to make it a place of special reverence by having students remove hats and hoodies when in the room.

Small Steps to Change

Spiritually healthy schools do not become that way overnight. Change for the sake of change, however, is pointless. Developing and following a master plan has been very helpful. By beginning with the end in mind, we became aware that to make a lasting and meaningful change in the perspective of our students now, we needed to change one step at a time. That change would be slow. School culture is difficult to change! Our school needed to become a place where all (students, parents, and community members) could seek spiritual insight; not just a place where students acquired academic learning.

We have done several things to facilitate this change. Among the most effective was to change our teaching practices. The teachers transitioned from being a "sage on the stage" to a "guide on the side." To decrease classroom focus being entirely on the teacher, we implemented practices that made students central to the learning process. To do this, the teachers studied and put into practice various "brain-compatible" learning/teaching strategies such as cooperative learning, Glasser Quality Schools, Integrated Thematic Instruction (now called Highly Effective Teaching), Tribes, and Multiple Intelligences. The modifications in teaching methods made it easier for teachers and students alike to form healthy relationships and thereby produced a better spiritual atmosphere.

Another strategy that we have incorporated to facilitate the desired change is to affirm students' positive choices. Borrowing the idea from Power of Positive Students International,[7] every month we focus on a themed character trait (for example, the fruits of the Spirit) and affirm teacher-chosen students who have modeled that trait. Through the course of a year, we make certain that every student has been affirmed. Every homeroom teacher creates a paragraph or two for each selected student that is read at chapel. Our principal hands the winners a certificate for a treat of some sort (this year they get a giant cinnamon roll at lunch time).

1. Competitive Sports

A rather controversial topic, and one for which we are still seeking to achieve proper balance, is how to approach the area of competitive sports. Though sports provide excellent life lessons, it is easy for a school to allow the sports program to become its main focus. While Livingstone was still a K-10 school, Principal Jim Roy and the school board opted for a non-competition policy. As basketball was the only sport in which the school was involved and the only competitive event was a conference-wide Friendship Tournament, this step was not too difficult to take. Rather than doing away with sports altogether, however, Mr. Roy started a new intramural conference-wide tournament program. Instead of pitting school against school, all players were put into a pool, and based on skill level as assessed by the coaches, the organizers created teams as evenly matched as possible. We discovered that when students played as teammates with young people from other schools, they formed friendships rather than rivalries. An unforeseen benefit was that schools with too few students to field a team for the competitive tournament could now participate. When we transitioned to a full K-12 program, however, this policy changed. In order for our students to take advantage of all the opportunities that Walla Walla College (now University) offered to academies, we needed a competitive sports

program to participate in the soccer, volleyball, and basketball tournaments they host. We are still in the process of finding a healthy balance for this facet of our school program.

2. Group Bonding Activities

Soon after Livingstone began intentionally focusing on spirituality and healthy relationships, we noticed an improvement in students' relationships with one another and with the staff. So as a result, the staff decided to start the next school year with a special emphasis on group bonding and spirituality. When you ask former students and alumni of Livingstone Adventist Academy what they remember most about their school experience and what had the biggest spiritual impact in their lives at that time, you are most likely to hear about the school's fall community-building activities.

Our middle school students spend some time at a ropes course getting acquainted, learning to trust God, and developing friendships. The freshmen and sophomores go on a weekend camping trip with the specific goal of building community and constructing a spiritual base for the school year. During Senior Survival, our longest outing, the seniors spend almost a whole week in intense Bible study and collaborative activities. This program starts on Tuesday and lasts until Sunday, with the junior class joining them on Thursday for leadership training. One of the highlights of Senior Survival is putting on the church service at Christmas Valley Seventh-day Adventist Church in central Oregon on Sabbath. These campouts also provide a great way to get to know parents who come along as chaperons.

Another tradition that Livingstone initiated was a yearly school-wide family campout at the Oregon coast. Over the years, this early fall event has become a gathering of not just students' families, but also extended family and other constituent church and school supporters. We invite guest speakers and enjoy the weekend singing and praising God together.

The most meaningful of our intentional spiritual outings, however, is a three-day retreat, mid-year, for the secondary-level students. We pack up after school mid-week and make the 30-minute drive to Silver Falls State Park, where we rent a large ranch house lodge that houses all 75 or so students and staff. There, we spend time playing and studying the Bible to recharge for the remainder of the year. Away from distractions and out of cell service, this location makes it easier to focus on Jesus and our relationship with Him.

3. Weeks of Prayer and Chapels

Another spiritually powerful activity is our **weeks of prayer.** Like other Adventist institutions of education, we use this time to refocus our attention on spiritual matters. We try to schedule three weeks of prayer in each school year. During the fall week of prayer, we invite a guest speaker. For our winter week of prayer, the staff give their testimonies. We have found these weeks to be a powerful witness and another way of building healthy relationships between staff and students. In the spring, our high school students not only put

Every fall, the middle school students attend a low and high ropes course that includes community building and spiritually uplifting activities.

The Senior Mission Trip to our sister school/church in Golfito, Costa Rica, is a life-changing experience for participants, many of whom have never been outside of the Pacific Northwest.

Philosophy of Seventh-day Adventist Education*

The Seventh-day Adventist Church recognizes God as the ultimate source of existence and truth. In the beginning God created in His image a perfect humanity, a perfection later marred by sin. Through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, God's character and purposes can be understood as revealed in nature, the Bible, and Jesus Christ. The distinctive characteristics of Adventist education, derived from the Bible and the inspired writings of Ellen G. White, point to the redemptive aim of true education: to restore human beings into the image of their Maker.

While God presents His infinitely loving and wise character as the ultimate norm for human conduct, human motives, thinking, and behavior have fallen short of God's ideal. Education in its broadest sense is a means of returning human beings to their original relationship with God. Its time dimensions span eternity.

Adventist education seeks to develop a life of faith in God and respect for the dignity of all human beings; to build character akin to that of the Creator; to nurture thinkers rather than mere reflectors of others' thoughts; to promote loving service rather than selfish ambition; to ensure maximum development of each individual's potential; and to embrace all that is true, good, and beautiful.

An education of this kind imparts far more than academic knowledge. It fosters a balanced development of the whole person—physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually. Working together, homes, schools, and churches cooperate with divine agencies in preparing learners for responsible citizenship in this world and in the world to come.

* http://journeytoexcellence.org/purpose/

on weeks of prayer at our feeder schools, but also give their testimonies to their peers and the lower grades. This is one of my favorite weeks of the school year, as I'm sure it is for many of the students and other teachers.

When students lead out in spiritual activities at school and church, it is a good indication that spirituality at school is healthy. Though we schedule quality and memorable chapels such as Laura Morett from Survivor Samoa, or World War II Veteran Donald Malarkey from Easy Company of the 101st Airborne Division of the U.S. Army, student input and participation in chapel is what makes it a meaningful time for our students.

The Campus Ministries Committee, comprised of five students, the Associated Student Body spiritual vice president, and each of the class pastors from the high school, plan and coordinate a quarterly youth church, put on by and for the students. In addition, they lead out in numerous service projects.

4. Service Activities

I believe that service is another litmus test of a school's spiritual health. Most grades at Livingstone Adventist Academy have a yearly service project. These range from crocheting hats for the local Adventist Community Center to raising funds for drilling wells in Africa, to Toys for Tots at Christmas time, to clearing brush for ranchers in central Oregon. In addition to these class service projects, the high school students, in conjunction with a constituent church, participate in a mission trip every spring break. Lives change when students get out of their comfort zones and are put into a situation of helping others rather than focusing on themselves.

When our first senior class planned their class trip, the students and staff intentionally chose a mission trip rather than a Disneyland-type event. Though we have had the privilege to serve schools and churches in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Costa Rica, it is the spiritual lives of our students that have been the most affected.

Back to Purpose

"While God presents His infinitely loving and wise character as the ultimate norm for human conduct, human motives, thinking, and behavior have fallen short of God's ideal. Education in its broadest sense is a means of returning human beings to their original relationship with God. Its time dimensions span eternity."[8]

For students like Pat Featherstone, the value of Adventist education is not just academics, though that is important, but rather a place where he met Jesus, which has made all the difference. It is my hope and prayer that through Adventist education, we can "restore human beings into the image of their Maker." This is the journey and process that we at Livingstone Adventist Academy have gone down; we are always watchful for more ideas and would love to hear what is working at other schools to make them a place where people "feel the presence of God."

Chris Sequeira *teaches high school-level Bible, history, and physical education/health at Livingstone Adventist Academy in Salem, Oregon, and is currently working on his Master of Arts degree in teaching at Walla Walla University in College Place, Washington.*

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Interview with Pat Featherstone, September 2009.
2. http://www.cognitivegenesis.org/.
3. Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36, and Luke 9:25.
4. http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/purpose/.
5. http://www.journeytoexcellence. org/purpose/.
6. http://www.gradebookwizard.com/.
7. http://pops.com/.
8. http://www.journeytoexcellence.org/purpose/.