

# FAITH by Design:

## Creating and Implementing a Spiritual Master Plan

**W**e were interacting with a group of students. It was part of a visit to the institution where they were enrolled, and we wanted a sense of what they thought of the spiritual-life experiences at the school. “It’s pretty standard, I guess,” one of the students began. “We have Bible classes and a chapel period each week, but the chapel is mostly announcements. Sometimes, though, they will have a good speaker. But it seems random.” “Mostly, it’s pretty boring,” another

student said. “Even the teachers in the [religion] classes rarely talk about things that matter to us.”

“Do you feel that spiritual matters are important in your life?” we asked. Students nodded. “What do you think could be done to make the spiritual experience here more relevant and meaningful?”

The group came alive. They talked about the need for a spiritual community, safe places to share their questions, caring people who would encourage them and pray with them, and messages that would connect the Bible with situations and decisions they faced. They reflected on prior

faith-building experiences in their lives—a small-group fellowship, service activities, a weekend retreat, an agape supper—and talked about how they wished these could be re-created at the school.

Later we sat with the chaplain. “Yes, we have a spiritual master plan. That is one of my summer projects, to have it ready for the new year.” We asked about what served as input or feedback. “Well, I watch how things went the previous year. And take my cue as to what I should change.” We asked whether the institution made a

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budgetary provision for the spiritual-life program. “Not exactly,” the chaplain replied, “but if we have a special project or program, we can make a request. And sometimes it gets funded.”

We talked with the president about the spiritual life at the institution. “We have a good chaplain, and each year I receive a copy of the spiritual master plan.” We asked the president what he, as a leader in the school, saw as his role in the spiritual life of the institution. “To hire a good chaplain!”<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

Seventh-day Adventist education builds on the premise of whole-person development.<sup>2</sup> An overarching dimension in this process is spiritual nurture and growth. Ellen White, who was instrumental in founding the Adventist educational system, wrote, “The students in our schools and all our youth should be given an education that will strengthen them in the faith.”<sup>3</sup>

An essential purpose of Adventist education is that students might experience God’s saving grace. Ellen White described this encounter as the redemptive purpose of education.<sup>4</sup> While developing skills and understanding in the disciplines is vital, the redemptive focus prioritizes becoming a disciple of Jesus and then a disciple-maker, extending the kingdom of God through witness and selfless service (Matthew 28:18-20). As Jesus reminds us, “What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul?” (Mark 8:36, NLT).<sup>5</sup> “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33, NKJV).<sup>6</sup>

### Faith by Design

Faith formation and faith affirmation lie at the heart of Adventist education. To be effective, however, these processes must be intentional. We must nurture faith by design.<sup>7</sup> The intent is that each person who is part of a Seventh-day Adventist school might “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2

Peter 3:18), experiencing a Bible-based, Christ-centered, Spirit-filled, and kingdom-directed life.

To make intentionality tangible, each educational institution should create and implement a spiritual master plan. This organized and focused approach to nurturing spiritual life is core to the mission and philosophy of Adventist education.<sup>8</sup> To this

end, the first element of the Spiritual Development, Service, and Witness area in the Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges, and Universities (AAA) Standards highlights the expectation that “The institution has an intentional, coherent, detailed, and current Board-approved spiritual master plan, which serves as the basis for the effective



spiritual development of faculty, staff, and students.”<sup>9</sup>

Recently, the authors of this article had the opportunity to lead a well-qualified and committed taskforce in developing an updated guide for creating and implementing a spiritual master plan at Adventist colleges and universities, with applications to primary schools. This guide, *Faith by Design*, incorporates the contributions and feedback of experienced chaplains, administrators, and educational leaders from around the world. The document, available online,<sup>10</sup> is organized into three sections: (1) The Essentials—for those who are already experienced as a chaplain or spiritual-life director or vice-president at an Adventist school, college, or university; (2) The Details—for those who may be new to their roles or who would like to delve more deeply into the process; and (3) The Materials—A wealth of templates, instruments, and other resources for those who seek to nurture faith.

In the following sections of this article, we will share some of the expertise and wisdom of those who participated in developing *Faith by Design*, to whom we are indebted,<sup>11</sup> as well as a few insights from our own experience as we have partnered with educational institutions to promote spiritual development and strengthen faith.

### Potential Pitfalls

As we reviewed our collective experience, we realized that there are potential hazards that can hamper the achievement of vibrant spiritual life at an Adventist college, university, or secondary school. These perspectives or situations often limit the effectiveness of our efforts to develop and strengthen faith.

For example, spiritual-life plans that achieve only limited effectiveness tend to have been created in a vacuum, without broad consultation with stakeholders (e.g., alumni, church members and leaders, parents, and the wider community). These plans often focus almost exclusively on students, without regard to the spiritual nurture of faculty and

support staff, who serve as models and mentors to students in their faith journey. And when focusing on students, the spiritual activities and initiatives tend to cater solely to residential students, without considering the spiritual nurture of off-campus or online students.

In these institutions, a belief often pervades the campus that caring for the spiritual life of the institution is a task reserved for chaplains or pastors. The chaplains and pastors themselves often seem to believe that the spiri-

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tual-life program is defined primarily by the religion courses and the main religious events, whether organized by the institution or the campus/sponsoring church or that a mere collection of spiritual activities, without an integrating purpose, will create a spiritual environment and affirm faith.

Spiritual master plans that tend to fall short do not specify who is responsible for a given initiative, when it will take place, or what resources will be required. Consequently, the initiative rarely transitions from con-

cept to reality. And because a formal annual budget is not developed, the administration allocates little or no funding for the spiritual-life program of the institution while still expecting the institution to be effective in nurturing faith and promoting spiritual development. Many spiritual master plans and initiatives do not undergo rigorous formal evaluations, with administrators relying on anecdotes as the basis for review and revision. In some cases, there is not even a yearly update of the plan, with essentially the same spiritual program implemented year after year.

Another shortcoming concerns the matter of the campus church at a boarding institution. Often a campus church pastor is chosen through an appointment process that excludes institutional participation. As a result, the program of the campus church tends to focus primarily on meeting the expectations of those who attend from the surrounding community while disregarding the needs of the institutional family—and especially students—as its core mission.

Pitfalls such as these compromise the spiritual life of an institution.

### Best Practices

We, as a team (the authors and those who participated in developing *Faith by Design*), endeavored to distill the most effective practices that nurture spiritual life in Adventist educational institutions. Here is a short list of these practices:

1. The spiritual-life program of a college, university, or school is viewed as the *very reason* for its existence, not merely as a service to the institution or an added benefit of Adventist education.

2. The spiritual-life program of the institution must *closely align* with the institution’s philosophy, mission, and values and with the mission, beliefs, and priorities of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

3. The spiritual master plan must be a *core component* of the institution’s strategic plan, occupying a place of priority and interfacing with the institution’s academic, financial,

human resources, and facilities master plans (see Figure 1).

4. The president/principal is the *spiritual leader* of the institution. This role may be shared with, but not delegated to, the church pastor, chaplain, Bible teacher, or others involved in the spiritual-life program of the institution.

5. The person who oversees the implementation of the spiritual-life program of the institution *reports directly* to the president/principal of the institution.

6. The various *stakeholders*, such as faculty, support staff, and especially students, should participate in developing, implementing, and updating the spiritual master plan.

7. The spiritual-life program must be *comprehensive*, encompassing the various student categories (including non-residential and online students), as well as administrators, faculty, and non-teaching staff.

8. The *church* at a boarding academy, college, or university serves, first and foremost, those who comprise the institutional family, including students, administrators, faculty, and support staff.

9. Adequate *resources* for the spiritual-life program of the institution must be provided by the administration, commensurate with the priority of spiritual nurture and faith development in the life of the institution.

10. The spiritual-life program must be *intentional*, carefully planned, and executed in such a way that will accomplish its anticipated outcomes.

11. The spiritual-life program should be *dynamic*, periodically assessed, and updated to adequately reflect the spiritual needs and aspirations of the institutional family.

These practices, in turn, can serve as guiding principles in developing and implementing the spiritual-life program, steering the process through its key phases.

#### Four Phases

In our reviews of successful spiritual-life programs, there seem to be

Figure 1. The Place of the Spiritual Life Master Plan in the Strategic Plan of an Institution



four crucial phases that occur. These stages—*Prepare, Develop, Implement, and Evaluate*—correspond to the questions: Who are we? Where are we going? How will we get there? What impact did we make?

The first phase, **Prepare**, includes two steps: *Organize* and *Appraise*. In the *Organization* step, a standing spiritual-life committee is set up, comprised of persons who represent significant groups within the institution, including students. The committee is chaired by the president/principal as the spiritual leader of the institution, with the head chaplain or Bible teacher often serving as secretary. The core functions of this committee are to prepare the spiritual master plan and provide guidance regarding its implementation and evaluation.

*Appraisal* is the second step. Here the spiritual-life committee commissions and receives relevant data that provide a diagnostic profile of the spiritual life of the institution. This appraisal seeks to identify what is working well, what needs to be adjusted, and what needs to be added or dropped. This diagnosis should involve consultation with all stakeholder groups.

The second phase, **Develop**, also

involves two steps: the development of *Goals* and the creation of *Action Plans*. In terms of *Goals*, the intended outcomes of the spiritual-life program should align with the institution's mission and strategic priorities while considering student and employee demographics. These outcomes might include the following:

- Personal perception of a more *vibrant relationship* with Jesus Christ and *faith development* through their experience at the institution.
- *Expressed commitment* to Christ and the divine plan for life and learning through a growing understanding of the dimensions and implications of a *biblical worldview*.
- Increased understanding, acceptance, and practice of the *teachings of the Bible*, including the manner these are conveyed through the *mission, beliefs, and practices* of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.
- Involvement in personal and corporate faith-building practices, including *prayer, Bible study, and worship*.
- Expressed commitment to and engagement in *service and witness*, seeking to make a positive difference in the world for God.

Goals can also feature specific be-

## Figure 2. Spiritual Master Plan Checklist

### Does the spiritual master plan . . .

- Delineate those who were involved in its development and the process followed?
- Describe the diagnostic-assessment results that factored into the development of the plan?
- Explicitly state desired outcomes, inclusive of students, faculty, and support staff?
- Indicate who is responsible for the general administration of the plan?
- Identify specific action plans for achieving each of its goals?
- Specify where an action plan will take place and who is responsible?
- Specify the resources (human, financial) that will be required for each initiative?
- Contain a timeline for implementation of each action plan?
- Describe how each initiative will be communicated to the target group(s)?
- Present an overall budget that will be needed for implementation?
- Use a variety of methods to evaluate the goals?
- Explain how evaluation data will be used to bring about needed change?
- Identify means whereby the spiritual master plan will be broadly communicated?

liefs, values, and principles based on the needs assessment.<sup>12</sup> It can be helpful to develop a conceptual framework. For example, one institution used the framework: *Know Christ. Grow in Christ. Serve with Christ.* While another institution fits its spiritual master plan within the framework: *Belong. Believe. Become.*<sup>13</sup>

In creating action plans, we delineate how, when, and in what venues it is anticipated that spiritual changes will occur in the lives of students and employees. We also specify who is responsible for each initiative and give an estimate of the resources required. Finally, we identify indicators of how the initiative's success will be determined. Together, the goals and action plans constitute the heart of the spiritual master plan (see Figure 2 for a checklist of key ingredients).

The third phase, **Implement**, incorporates two key elements: involvement of the *Whole Institutional Family* and the process of *Formative Evaluation*. Some spiritual master plans focus almost exclusively on students. While students are certainly a key focus, it is equally essential to implement initiatives for faculty and sup-

port staff successfully. When the spiritual experience of employees is nurtured, they can more effectively influence students' faith.

Formative evaluation is a core component of implementation and involves feedback loops and mid-course adjustments. Feedback loops provide

data early in the process regarding what is working well and what needs to be adjusted. That data, whether obtained through brief surveys or small-group interviews or based on other metrics such as participation rates, can inform mid-course decisions that need to be made. The bottom line is that we do not want to wait until the end of a school year to discover that a particular initiative is faltering when with a mid-course adjustment, it might have resulted in optimal effects.

The final phase, **Evaluate**, involves a *Summative Evaluation* and an *Annual Report*. A comprehensive year-end evaluation of the spiritual-life program includes formal assessments completed by students, faculty, and staff. These need to be designed with sufficient specificity to assess progress toward the goals of the spiritual master plan, as well as the effectiveness of various initiatives (see Figure 3 for potential evaluation strategies).

Based on the year-end evaluation, an annual report is prepared that documents the efficacy of the spiritual-life program of the institution. This report is presented, first to the spiritual-life steering committee, then to the full administration, and to the board of trustees/school board, with highlights

## Figure 3. Potential Evaluation Strategies

- End-of-year surveys on spiritual life.
- Exit interviews with students.
- Attitude surveys on matters of faith, spiritual practices, lifestyle issues, and spiritual development, taken when students enter the institution and when they leave.
- Questions in course assessments about faith and spiritual nurture in the classroom.
- Asking faculty and staff to include a section on service and faith in annual reports, noting how they perceive that their intentionality influences students.
- Surveying alumni on attitudes about faith and the church a few years after graduation.
- Identifying means to gauge the involvement of students, faculty, staff, and administration in spiritual activities, such as service, witness, and worship.

**Figure 4. Phases in the Spiritual-life Program of a School, College, or University**



of that report shared with various constituencies of the institution. This report also serves as a key element in the diagnosis that guides the update of the spiritual master plan for the new school year, thus completing the cycle (see Figure 4).

### Concluding Thoughts

Adventist colleges, universities, and schools seek to achieve and maintain high academic standards. These are made tangible by initiating quality academic programs, defining goals and outcomes, designing a relevant and coherent curriculum, and implementing an evaluation system well-aligned to goals and outcomes. It is now the time for Adventist schools to also be intentional in developing the faith of the entire learning community—students, administrators, teachers, and support staff.

Indeed, Jesus promises that when we, as children of God, intentionally prioritize faith development, other essential aspects will follow (Matthew 6:33). As educators, we can claim

this promise and be confident that this will result in the harmonious development of each student—academic, physical, socio-emotional, and spiritual dimensions. We reach this goal as Adventist schools prepare, develop, implement, and evaluate a fitting spiritual master plan—faith by design.

Let us revisit the school in the vignette shared at the beginning of this article. Envision us seeing the students' excitement as they tell us of their involvement in developing and implementing the spiritual-life program of the institution. Instead of concerns, they share affirming testimonies of how the spiritual program addresses their interests and needs in meaningful ways.

Envision us listening to the president or principal say, "I chair the monthly meeting of the spiritual-life committee where we keep a close watch on the spiritual heartbeat of the institution." And the chaplain says, "The spiritual master plan permeates all aspects of campus life. It is the catalyst of all activities on our campus." Most of all, we envision hearing the affirmation of faculty, support staff, and students: "Our faith increases!" ✍

*This article has been peer reviewed.*



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### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. These vignettes are derived from a collage of interactions on various college and university campuses.
2. In the leading paragraphs of the book *Education*, Ellen White wrote: "True education is the harmonious development of the physical, mental, and spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come" (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903, 13). Luke 2:52 also describes multifaceted development: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man" (Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.)
3. Ellen G. White, Manuscript 106, 1905.
4. \_\_\_\_\_, "The work of education and the work of redemption are one" (*Education*, 30).

5. New Living Translation, copyright © 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

6. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture passages in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible. Scripture taken from the New King James Version.® Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.

7. Deuteronomy 6:5 to 9 and Psalm 78:5 to 7 indicate that *faith by design* is a divine concept that we are instructed to implement.

8. The General Conference Working Policy (2021), for example, highlights the spiritual master plan as a key expectation for elementary and secondary schools (GCWP A15-25) and for colleges and universities (GCWP A15-30).

9. *Accreditation Handbook* (Silver Spring, Md.: Accrediting Association of Seventh-day Adventist Schools, Colleges and Universities,

2019), III-10, Criteria for Review 2.1. Available at <https://adventistaccreditingassociation.org/wp-content/uploads/AAA-Handbook-2019-Complete.pdf>.

10. See [https://www.adventist.education/wp-content/uploads/Spiritual\\_Master\\_Plan\\_Guidebook\\_2021.pdf](https://www.adventist.education/wp-content/uploads/Spiritual_Master_Plan_Guidebook_2021.pdf). Also available in Spanish at [https://www.adventist.education/wp-content/uploads/Plan\\_Maestro\\_De\\_sarrollo\\_Espiritual\\_Guia\\_2021.pdf](https://www.adventist.education/wp-content/uploads/Plan_Maestro_De_sarrollo_Espiritual_Guia_2021.pdf).

11. Special appreciation for the contributions of Stefan Albu, chaplain, Sagunto Adventist College; Juvenal Balisasa, education director, West Central-Africa Division; Gordon Bietz, associate director of education, North America Division; Dilys Brooks, campus chaplain, Loma Linda University; Rich Carlson, vice-president for spiritual life, Union College; Mario Ceballos, director of Adventist Chaplaincy Ministries, General Conference; Gamaliel Florez, education director, Inter-American Division; Prema Gaiwad, professor of education, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies; Edgar Luz,

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12. In essence, the goals should be SMART—Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Result-oriented, and Time-focused.

13. Another framework that has been used effectively in Adventist education is ABIDE: Abundant discipling—becoming like Jesus; Bold godliness—growing character and identity; Intentional connecting—building community; Deliberate learning—seeking wisdom with a biblical lens; and Extravagant outreach—sharing Jesus with others. Further detail may be found at [https://www.imags.com.au/published/Abide\\_Master\\_Plan/20/](https://www.imags.com.au/published/Abide_Master_Plan/20/).



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