

Connecting Faith and Practice

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After a recent team visit for a Spiritual Climate Assessment at a member school, Dr. Stephen Reel shared this story:

I was impressed with the maturity in the first group of junior high students I interviewed. After the second and third group, I thought the principal had sent me only the best and brightest—but comparing notes with my fellow researchers showed that these were not isolated groups.

So, when I met with the fourth group of six students, I took a brief departure from our typical interview questions. I shared with them my concerns about our country and how much it has changed since I was their age. I asked them to consider what they might face in 20 years. Were they concerned?

Before I finished my question, one student said, “I feel confident I can move forward and know what to do and say. We are ready to take the truth we have been taught to others.” The others nodded and affirmed how their teachers had prepared them. Tears of joy poured from my eyes. “Are you okay?” one student asked. “No, I am not,” was all I could say.

How do seventh graders transition from learning biblical truth in their elementary years to integrating truth confidently in their everyday lives? How do Christian schools partner with families to help students connect what they believe with how they live? This happens when schools intentionally provide an environment conducive to spiritual formation. An environment that encourages a holistic view of faith and practice is an integral component of the Christian school experience. When schools are not intentional about the connections between “Christian ethos, pedagogic practices, and institutional processes,” the school culture is shaped by competing priorities (Cooling and Green 2015).

According to Smith (2009), Christian education is more than absorbing “ideas and information, but about the formation of hearts and desires.” Faith and the practice of faith are inextricably connected. The connection of who we are with what we do “molds us into people whose hearts, passions, and desires are aimed at the kingdom of God” (Smith 2009).

School climate has a direct, significant, and continuous impact on a school’s commitment to spiritual formation. As individuals in the school invest time, talent, and energy within the school environment, they are influenced and shaped by the opportunities available to them and the expectations of other people. A climate conducive to spiritual formation provides a space where individuals can explore and imagine freely as they ask fundamental questions related to their identity and purpose. It is where faith is interpreted and lived out in the



school community. In this shared space, shared customs and languages create a sense of identity and engagement within the school community, the larger community, and society.

In a collaborative research study with Barna Group looking at school choice decisions of prospective and current parents, we found that the most important factor of school selection was environment: parents are looking for schools that provide a “safe” environment. While there are many nuances to what “safe” means, essentially, **parents want their children to flourish in a nurturing environment that allows their children to connect what they believe with how they live.**

Education, at its most foundational level, asks what interactions among people can and should be deliberately structured to foster the changes our mission calls for and our understanding of human beings shows are possible. **Christian schools should be places where students see what faithful lives look like.**

The greatest impact for spiritual formation comes in school environments where students have structured opportunities to “eavesdrop on the grammar, vocabulary, habits, virtues, or practices of mature Christian adults” (Dean 2010).

School climate provides the framework for connecting faith and practice, thus fulfilling the mission of the Christian school. The rest of Stephen’s story shows the impact of an environment where students connect what they believe with how they live:

I realized God was speaking to me in that moment through these precious young people.... He was raising up a group of “Daniels and Esthers” who would hold fast to the Word of life in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation (Philippians 2:15–16). They are not afraid! So, I do not need to be afraid. What we are doing in Christian education really matters.

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References

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