Central to the mission of Christian schooling is the spiritual formation of students. If that statement is true, as I believe it is, then it would seem essential for those of us leading in Christian schools to frequently ask if our school is effective in the spiritual formation of its students. Of course, we all want to quickly answer yes. The difficulty lies in the follow-up question: How do you know?

For years, I answered that question anecdotally, telling stories of the many lives we had seen transformed. While anecdotal evidence can be of value, it rarely reveals a strong link between cause and effect. It cannot inform Christian school leaders as to what aspects of school life are or are not effective in the spiritual formation of students.

For many good reasons, one of the key buzzwords in contemporary education is assessment. Nitko and Brookhart define assessment as “a process for obtaining information that is used for making decisions about students; curricula, programs, and schools; and educational policy” (2011, 3). Excellent schools make decisions that are informed by constant and consistent assessment. In Educational Assessment of Students, Nitko and Brookhart encourage educators to design assessment activities that provide the information necessary to make best decisions for students. Does that admonition include spiritual assessment?

Designing assessment activities regarding the spiritual formation of students is complicated. Some argue that since it is a mysterious work of the Holy Spirit it cannot or even should not be measured. Dan Egeler says: Christian schools do face real difficulty in trying to objectively assess whether or not spiritual formation is taking place among their students. In fact, an argument can be made that there is a mystery about spiritual formation and one should try to preserve this mystery. Any attempt to measure spiritual formation diminishes the mystery. It’s a bit like attempting to measure love—you know it when you see it but you can’t really measure it. Indeed it is true that one can attempt to quantify something in such an exacting manner that one misses capturing the whole thing. The real issue is the heart attitude and that is very difficult to quantify and assess.

There is a passage, however, in 2 Peter 1:5–9 that seems to suggest that there is a quantifiable component to the virtues that comprise spiritual formation... For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ [NIV 1984].... This passage seems to suggest that the mystery of spiritual formation may not be defined, but in some ways it can be and should be measured. (Graybeal and Associates 2011)

Clearly, there is no perfect method to measure spiritual formation. However, a well-designed and purposes imperfect measure is better than no measure at all.

Quantitative Data

Given the lack of data and published research, it would seem that few Christian schools are making serious efforts in assessing the spiritual lives of their students. Some are surveying seniors and graduates to probe for insight into their school’s spiritual climate and its impact. In 2011, the Cardus Education Survey opened an opportunity for comparing Protestant Christian school data with data of Catholic, public, and private nonreligious schools, as well as homeschoold. The Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) consolidated the spiritual results of the survey into the following five categories:

1. ACSI schools have the greatest emphasis on student development of moral character and personal virtue.
2. Protestant Christian school graduates are significantly more likely to pray and read Scripture both alone and with family.
3. ACSI schools have the highest belief in biblical accuracy in scientific and historical matters.
4. Protestant Christian school graduates are more likely to attend religious services and respect the authority of church leadership.
5. ACSI schools most often include these among their top priorities: for students to have a close, personal relationship with God and for students to develop a Christian worldview. (Pennings et al. 2011; ACSI 2011)
The Cardus results are both insightful and informative. Each Christian school would do well to examine this study and share it with its community. Unfortunately, the Cardus study does not provide data describing the effectiveness of the spiritually formative climate at Tree of Life, where I serve, nor of the school where you serve.

In 2006 I set out on a journey, with Dr. Todd Hall at Biola University, to study the spiritually formative effectiveness of individual Christian schools. Dr. Hall’s survey, the Spiritual Transformation Inventory (STI), has resulted in a data set that includes thousands of Christian college and Christian high school students. The Christian school results were shared in CSE, volume 14, number 3 and CSE, volume 15, number 1. That study is ongoing.

In 2001 Dr. Michael Zigarelli developed The Christian Character Index (CCI). He reported his findings in the excellent book Cultivating Christian Character (2002). Dr. Zigarelli’s research has included thousands of participants.

Tree of Life students have participated in both assessments; the results are providing clear road maps for spiritual education decision making, curricula, programs, and policy.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data
For the last five years, it has been my privilege to be associated with the Spiritual Formation Assessment (SFA) project created by Dr. Phil Graybeal and now owned by ACSI. The SFA involves a team of Christian school practitioners and research experts. It combines data collected from the CCI with on-site ethnographic research techniques. “Ethnography is a qualitative research methodology that comes from the anthropological traditions of illuminating patterns of culture through immersion in the field by collecting data primarily by participant observations and interviews” (Egeler 2011). The SFA approach to spiritual formation assessment joins quantitative research using Hall’s or Zigarelli’s survey with qualitative research through intensive interviews representing all constituents in a Christian school.

In order to have as complete an understanding as possible about Tree of Life’s climate that contributes to student spiritual formation, we contracted for a spiritual formation assessment in the spring of 2012. The visiting team consisted of four noted Christian school experts: Dr. Dan Egeler, acting president, ACSI; Dr. Milt Uecker, dean, Columbia International University; Dr. Phil Renicks, former vice president, ACSI; and Dr. Steven Reel, superintendent of Southside Christian School.

Scores of interviews were conducted with parents, area pastors, alumni, faculty, staff, and students. Those interviews resulted in threads that could be more fully explored in follow-up interviews. In short, the SFA was turning over the rocks of Tree of Life in an effort to reveal truth about the strengths and weakness of the spiritual formation climate of the school. After years of strategic and intentional efforts toward the spiritual formation of our students, we were learning about the effectiveness of those efforts. The SFA’s findings were compiled in a report that included hundreds of responses to the quantitative research, the CCI, and scores of responses in the qualitative research (the interviews). That document has provided a crucial barometer that is laying the groundwork for strategic planning and implementation through the school’s Spiritual Formation Committee. After implementation we look forward to ongoing assessment to determine the effectiveness of current efforts.

Approaching student spiritual formation through a data-driven lens continues to strengthen our communities’ efforts to encourage students to love God with all their heart, mind, and soul. It is time to get back to work, implementing informed strategies and assessing the spiritually formative climate of our schools.

References

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