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## Nurturing the Faith of Students: The Role of Support Staff

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### ABSTRACT

The article addresses two fundamental questions: What is the role of the non-teaching staff in nurturing faith in student lives? How can support staff be most effective in fulfilling that role? In response, the article first presents a biblical perspective regarding the function of the non-teaching staff in the spiritual development of students, shaping lives for God's kingdom. Second, the article delineates sixteen faith-nurturing strategies, organized in contextual, relational, conceptual, and experiential clusters. Each of these strategies can be instrumental in the hand of a committed staff member to intentionally touch and transform the lives of students.

### Introduction

Some stakeholders in educational institutions have a wrong idea regarding the nurture of faith in student lives. They believe that only teachers can nurture the faith of students. Of course, teachers can and do! However, the problem is that we sometimes think that teachers are the only ones who can exert an influence on the lives of students. That is simply not the case.

Over several decades, I have had the opportunity to talk with students. When I ask who has had the greatest influence on their lives, especially in terms of spiritual growth, sometimes, they will mention one of their teachers. More often, however, they will talk about one of the non-teaching staff at their school, perhaps a residence hall dean, a librarian, a work supervisor, an office assistant, or a janitor, who took time to become acquainted, who encouraged them, who mentored them, who prayed with them. Many of us, as we think back to our own school experience, may also identify someone of the non-teaching staff who exerted an important influence on our lives.

Over these years, I have also had the opportunity to interact with non-teaching staff in a variety of educational contexts. While some have questioned if faith integration might not be the sole purview of teachers, others have sensed that support staff can also serve as catalysts of faith development, but wonder how this can most effectively be achieved.

In response, this article seeks to address two fundamental questions: First, what is the role of the support staff in nurturing faith in the lives of students? Second, how can they be most effective in fulfilling that role? Non-teaching staff includes all staff in an educational institution whose primary function is not classroom instruction. These support staff include office workers, custodians, maintenance workers, cafeteria staff, dormitory deans, and work supervisors, among others.

## A biblical perspective

In Scripture, apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers clearly have a faith-nurturing role (Eph. 4:11-13 (see Taylor, 2012 for a more comprehensive examination of the biblical foundation for the integration of faith and learning)). But what about those who do not stand in the pulpit or in front of a classroom? What about those who do not serve on the front lines as church leaders or evangelists? Can they also be agents of salvation? Here are three examples:

She was a young woman and, we might say, a recent employee. Others who were there came from a secular background, as do many students in Christian schools today. This young employee, who was but an assistant to the wife of the Director for Strategy and Operations, noticed that someone was suffering. She felt compassion and spoke of one who could bring healing. As a result, Naaman not only gained a new lease on life, but experienced a spiritual transformation (2 Kings 5:1-17).

He was a middle manager – a deacon, as they were then called, but he listened to the prompting of the Spirit. He went out of his way to travel to a rather dreary and unpromising setting—the road which goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is desert. There Philip met a student, who was a foreigner who wondered about many things. Receiving an invitation, Philip stepped into the student’s chariot and spoke with him about Jesus. As a result, the Ethiopian accepted Christ as his Savior and was baptized (Acts 8:26-39).

His name was Ebed-Melech. He was neither a prophet nor a prince. He was simply one of the workers in the palace. But he found out that someone was in distress. That person had landed in a deep pit and could not get out, much as what happens at times with some of our students. No one offered to help until Ebed-Melech stepped out of his comfort zone, spoke up on the student’s behalf, and then with gentleness and compassion, rescued Jeremiah from the abyss (Jer. 38:7-13). All three cases illustrate that one does not need to hold a leading position to become a remarkable influence for salvation in the lives of others.

## The role of support staff

I will offer a bold and, perhaps to some, unconventional statement: While not all those who work in an educational institution are teachers in the strict sense of the word, all can be educators. The word “educate” comes from the Latin root “ducere” which means to lead, to draw, or to guide, while the prefix “e-” signifies “out of.” Thus “to educate” means “to lead forth” or “to bring out.” This implies that an educator is someone who serves as a guide on life’s journey, one who draws out the gifts and potential of others. Consequently, anyone who takes an interest in the lives of young people and who intentionally seeks to nurture them can be considered an educator. In other words, non-teaching staff also educate and, in fact, form a vital part of the formative educational effort in any school.

When Jesus spoke the words, “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world” (Mt.5:13-14, NKJV<sup>1</sup>), He was not only speaking to the religious or political leaders. He was addressing His disciples (Mt. 5:1-2), and, by extension, anyone who is a follower of Jesus. Likewise, the Great Commission to “make disciples of all the nations” (Mt. 28:19) is directed to all believers in Jesus. These believers are to share with others how to put into practice “all things

that I have commanded you” (v. 20). Under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, believers in Christ are to be witnesses—first, in Jerusalem, the place where they were situated, and then in ever expanding waves, to the farthest reaches of the world (Acts 1:8). Consequently, as believers in Christ, non-teaching staff are to be “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor. 5:20), serving as God’s official representatives—in character, in word, and in action.

First, we are to reflect God’s character. After all, we were created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), to reflect His attributes. Consequently, God calls us to be holy, as He is holy (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 1 Pet. 1:15-16). Similarly, Christ enjoined, “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:12; also 13:34-35). We reveal God’s character when we evidence in our lives the fruit of His Spirit—love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Second, Jesus observed that “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt. 12:34; Luke 6:45). As Christ’s followers, what we say is to “always be with grace” (Col. 4:6; Eph. 4:29), seasoned with the distinctive flavor of Christ’s love. Consequently, as we interact, our words are to be spoken with kindness, with respect, and with compassion. Yet there is more. We should always be prepared to share with others “a reason for the hope” that is in us (1 Pet. 3:15), a witness to the faith that we hold. The way we share our faith, however, is important, for Peter adds that we are always to bear this witness with utmost courtesy, in a gentle and respectful manner.

Finally, our actions possess convincing power, either on behalf or against the gospel. Jesus declared, “Just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions” (Mt. 7:20, NLT). The decisions that we enact and the lifestyle that we live are observed by others, including our students, and speak forcefully regarding our faith. Someone once observed, “Your actions speak so loudly that I cannot hear what you say”. Jesus reminded His followers, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

In sum, the role of all believers who serve as staff in an educational institution is to bear witness to their faith through character, word, and action. As educators, we do not simply occupy a position or collect a paycheck. We are in the business of shaping lives, now and for eternity. Students are not merely a source of revenue, or individuals to be prepared for a career or to occupy a productive place in society. Rather, we are to see each student as a candidate for heaven. As educators, we are to be mission focused, and our ultimate mission is the salvation of our students. That is why, in the highest sense, “the work of education and the work of redemption are one” (Taylor, 2012).

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical passages quoted are from the NKJV unless otherwise noted.

## Strategies that nurture faith

Christian education is directed toward the formation of Christian persons—individuals who think and who live Christianly. At the heart of this process is the nurture of faith, the distinctive task of a Christian school, college, or university. The problem, however, is not so much theory, but practice. It is not that we do not believe that students should grow in faith and in their relationship with God (2 Pet. 3:18). Our quandary is with application, with understanding what we should then do. Here, then, is the crucial question: How does a Christian staff effectively nurture the faith of students?

Before we talk about strategies, however, we should recognize that there are at least three conditions for this process to be effective. First, we cannot share what we do not have. We cannot guide students toward a faith relationship unless we ourselves have deepened that relationship. Second, we must think deeply about what we believe and why we believe it. We must be able to bear a first-hand witness. Third, we must have a commitment to do all things to God's glory (1 Cor. 10:31) and to speak and act in the name of the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:17). Without these, our endeavors will be in vain, like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal (1 Cor. 13:1).

With these conditions in place, however, we can now address the matter of faith-nurturing strategies. To explore these strategies, we will consider them through the lens of four clusters: contextual, relational, conceptual, and experiential.

### The contextual cluster

The contextual group of strategies seeks to create a setting that nurtures faith. These strategies include institution's mission statement, core values, policies, and visuals.

#### Mission

Each educational institution has a statement of vision and of mission. These are not simply a compilation of pleasant phrases. They are to provide clear direction for the institution and a sense of shared purpose for each entity within the institution. As employees of the institution, we should each be familiar with its mission. We should display the statements of mission and vision in our offices and work areas. Most crucially, we should ensure that the activities that we undertake in our areas of responsibility contribute in tangible ways toward fulfilling that mission.

#### Core values

Values are those concepts that we highly esteem, such as liberty, happiness, justice, compassion, loyalty, and stability. In the Christian view, values are God's purpose for us as His creation (Mic. 6:8). Educational institutions typically adopt a set of core values which contribute toward a shared identity and shared priorities. As staff, we should understand what each of these values implies. We should discuss them with students, and model them in our own lives. Further, we should identify certain additional values (see Figure 1) that complement the core values and that are particularly germane to our areas of activity, and then seek to emphasize and exemplify these, as well.

Accuracy	Competence	Efficiency	Freedom	Friendliness
Altruism	Cooperation	Excellence	Generosity	Happiness
Balance	Courage	Fairness	Harmony	Honesty
Compassion	Dignity	Forgiveness	Hospitality	Humility

Impartiality  
Initiative  
Integrity  
Justice  
Kindness  
Loyalty  
Mercy  
Obedience  
Orderliness  
Patience  
Peace  
Perseverance  
Promptness  
Respect  
Responsibility  
Stability  
Sympathy  
Trustworthines  
s  
Understanding  
Unity

## Figure 1. Sample Values

### *Policies*

Every institution has rules and regulations. In a Christian school, however, it is important to ensure that these are based on biblical principles and that they incorporate the core values of the institution. As employees, we must then personally uphold the institutional codes of conduct, both in relation to the students as well as in our own lives. A disconnect between words and practice, or inconsistency in the application of rules leads to perplexity and uncertainty for students. Perhaps even more important, however, we should take time to talk with students regarding the principles that undergird the rules. This will help students see that the policies and regulations are reasonable and that these principles can serve as a basis for life, even when one is not at the school.

### *Visuals*

Finally, in the physical space where we work, we can post visual reminders of our spiritual priorities. These can include biblical passages or quotes containing moral principles. We can also display pictures and art that convey spiritual themes. In all, we want students to experience frequent reminders of God and of His plan for their lives.

### **The relational cluster**

For a student, belonging precedes believing. Relational strategies seek to establish friendship and community. Through these encounters, non-teaching staff connect with students in faith-forming ways.

### *Availability*

Jesus was accessible to students. He talked with the woman at the well (Jn. 4:5-42). He joined the wedding celebration at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11). He traveled to Sidon to interact with a foreigner (Mt. 15:21-28). He was even available for Nicodemus outside of office hours (Jn. 3:1-21). To connect with students, we must first be accessible. Students must sense that we value them, and that we have time for them. They should never have cause to conclude that we are bothered by their “intrusion” on our time and activities. After all, what would a school be without students? They are the reason that we are there.

### *Conversations*

Relationships are built on conversations. Just ask any young man or woman who is developing a relationship. So, take opportunities to engage students in conversations. Show an interest in their lives. Ask them about their background, their interests, and their dreams. Then listen! Many students are longing for someone to listen, for someone to care, for someone to understand. Then, when you do speak, direct the student toward faith. If the student is discouraged, share a promise from Scripture that brings encouragement. If the student has achieved a success, celebrate! And praise God for His role in that accomplishment.

### *Modeling*

The Christian life is often better caught than taught. Students carefully observe those who are

Christians, particularly those who carry out the day-to-day functions of an institution. They want to see how we treat co-workers and subordinates, how we relate to leadership. They want to see how we deal with conflict, how we react when things don't go as we planned. They want to know if Christianity is real, if we are authentic. Through the prism of our lives, students should see our trust in God, in His Word, and in His plan for our life. They should see our commitment to fulfill our responsibilities as a service to God and to His children. They should see confidence in what they can become, by God's grace.

### *Prayer*

Of the relational strategies, prayer is the most powerful (Mt. 21:22). A colleague of mine shared his experience. He was attending a conference when a young man walked up and greeted him. It was a student who had studied at the institution a few years before and was now a professional. "I'm so happy to see you!" the young professional exclaimed. "And I have never forgotten you.

One day, you noticed that I was worried and you asked about it. After we talked, you offered to pray for me, and I have never forgotten. You see, that was the only time during the four years I was at the school that someone prayed just for me." My colleague told me that it was a bittersweet moment. Sweet, in that a prayer, which he scarcely remembered, made a lasting impression on a young person's life. Bitter, in that he thought, how many other students went through their entire experience at the school and no one ever prayed just for them. So, seek opportunity to pray with and for the students. Prayer transforms lives.

### *The conceptual cluster*

The Conceptual strategies endeavor to help students to think Christianly, to see things as God sees them. This cluster includes four strategies: passages, questions, issues, and paradigm.

### *Passages*

It is a fundamental Christian premise that the Word of God speaks with relevance to each dimension of life. It provides real-life answers when we are faced with perplexity and when we confront decisions. As educational staff, we must first read God's Word for ourselves and allow its principles to take root in our lives. We should also gather pertinent biblical passages for situations that students often face, review these frequently, and then share them with students under the prompting of God's Spirit. Also, if students work in your area, conduct a short devotional for them as they begin their activities. In that devotional, don't merely read something that someone else has written, but from time to time, share with them a passage from Scripture and explain the insights that you have gained and what it has come to mean in your life.

### *Questions*

Jesus frequently asked questions. In fact, one of His favorite questions was simply, "What do you think?" (e.g., Mt. 17:25; 18:12; 21:28; 22:42). Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian also began with a question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" This exchange led to a Bible study and ultimately the Ethiopian's conversion (Acts 8:30-39). In our interactions with students, we also should ask questions and not merely make statements. The focus of these questions should be to direct the student's mind toward God and a clearer understanding of the spiritual nature of their lives: What ideas does this situation generate in your mind? How do you think that God may be



guiding you through these circumstances? How might this experience suggest ways in which we can most effectively serve our community?

### Issues

Controversial issues, with moral implications, exist in every aspect of our lives. We want our students to think carefully about these matters and to see these issues from God’s perspective. As educating staff, we have a key role. The prophet Ezekiel declared, “Teach my people the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezek. 44:23, NIV). We should engage students in the process of ethical reasoning: What are the facts in the case, including contributing causes and potential consequences? What are the purposes God intended for this area of human activity? What Christian response is called for? Our goal is to guide the student to arrive at value-based decisions, based on God’s priorities (see Figure 2).

- Respect vs. Discrimination
- Responsibility vs. Negligence
- Community vs. Egocentrism
- Integrity vs. Deceitfulness
- Courage vs. Cowardice
- Diligence vs. Indolence
- Service vs. Self-indulgence
- Stewardship vs. Wastefulness

**Figure 2.** Other-focused vs. self-centered priority

### Paradigm

Some years ago, I had opportunity to interact with a non-Christian student. She wondered if Christianity was real. I told her about the Bible, how it is a guide in life’s journey.

But she said, “How can I know that the Bible is true? How can I know that it is not just another fable?”

I shared with her my experience with God.

She replied, “Well, that may be the case for you, but it has never happened to me.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. Then God impressed me to tell her a story. I started at the very beginning and told it until the very end. It took quite a while, but she listened intently. It was the story of the great controversy between good and evil, between Christ and Satan.

When I finished, she exclaimed, “Now I understand!”

“What do you understand?” I asked.

“I understand life!” she replied. “Life never made sense before. But now I understand.”

Paradigm—seeing and understanding the big picture—approaches life at its deepest level, that of worldview. The Christian worldview helps students understand how the great controversy between good and evil affects every dimension of life. It provides hope. It helps them see that life is to be Christ-centered, Bible-based, service-oriented, and Kingdom-directed. Tell the story!

### *The experiential cluster*

The Experiential strategies seek to help students to live out the faith life. It is simply not enough for students to know about God. They must know God personally. The underlying premise in each of these strategies is that students must individually develop faith and form a close personal relationship with God, and that we as staff have a role to play.

### *Spiritual community*

Not too long ago I was invited to speak at the alumni homecoming of an institution where I had served 25 years before. It was wonderful to see my students again! Then a group of several students approached me.

“Teacher,” they said, “you taught us so many things those many years ago. And now we have forgotten almost everything!”

I felt a bit disheartened.

“But,” they continued, “there is something we’ve always remembered.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“Well,” they said, “you and your wife invited us to your house one evening for vespers. We ate together, sang songs together, and you shared with us some of your life experiences. And we have never forgotten it.”

That same weekend, two other students mentioned that the Sabbath when we had taken a group of students to the mountains and worshiped together was one of the highlights of their educational experience. I was surprised, but perhaps I shouldn’t have been. Creating community is one of the most effective ways to help students connect with one another and with God. As staff, if we create occasions of spiritual fellowship, we will have opportunity to touch students’ lives in ways that never occur in the classroom.

### *Cooperation*

Helping each other is a biblical concept. Paul writes, “Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter” (Rom. 15:1, *The Message*). He adds, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). In this strategy, we first look for opportunities to collaborate personally with students, working together in activities and projects. A student from one of those institutions two decades ago who keeps in closest touch was never my student. However, we did work together each morning for an hour or so, beautifying the grounds around one of the school buildings. And, that gave us opportunity to talk about many things and created a bond of friendship that has endured. We also can extend the strategy to encourage students to work together on projects, and for more advanced students in our work areas to serve as student mentors to fresh students. Finally, when we have a major project to develop or a problem to solve, we all gather together, staff and students, and we work on it as a unit, a team effort where each member’s ideas and contribution is valued.

## Service

In many of the educational institutions that I have opportunity to visit, it is the non-teaching staff that carry out some of the most effective service programs in which students are involved. Fundamentally, if we want students to live lives of service, we must set the pace. We must exemplify what we want them to become. This means that each of us, as staff, should become involved in some meaningful avenue of service – an extended involvement, not just a one-off event. Once we ourselves have become embedded in the service project, we can then extend the invitation to specific students to join us. Through that experience, these students will begin to look beyond themselves; they will develop compassion for others, and as a result, may commit to a life of service.

## Witness

Some years ago, while serving as a non-teaching staff at a university, a colleague and I decided to start a mime ministry. Mime is an approach in which the actors seek to portray a character, mood, or idea through gestures and movement, but without using words. We gathered a group of students, developed some acts with Christian themes (such as wholesome relationships and healthful living), and then we would take these programs to the surrounding public schools. I remember a program that we gave for the students of an inner-city high school, where many of the students led a rough life. At the end of the program, those high school students gathered around the students in our mime group.

They said, “That was just awesome! What you said was *so* intense!”

And we had not spoken a single word. As staff, we can engage students in witness – through many different formats and with many different themes. And this is essential. After all, the primary goal of a Christian school is not to insulate students from the world, but to prepare them to effectively represent Christ in every setting and in every aspect of their lives (Jn. 17:15-18; Acts 1:8).

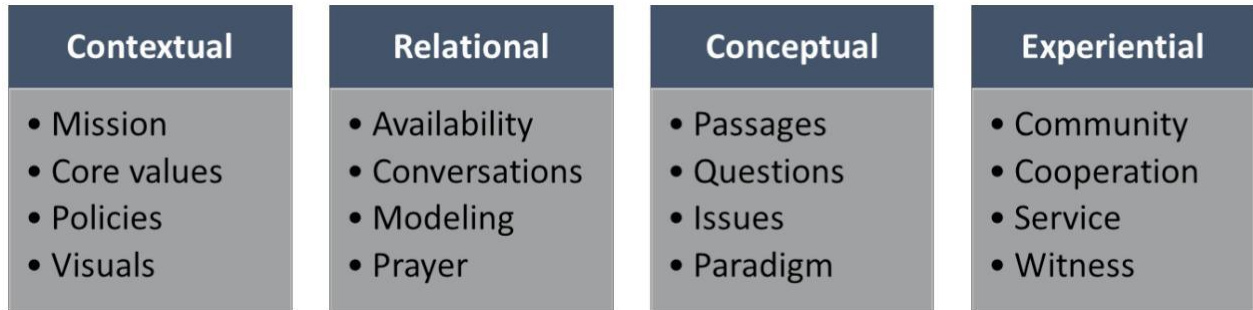
## Conclusion

Some years ago, someone asked me a thought-provoking question, “How is your work at the school different because you are a Christian?” It is a question that continues to challenge me.

The truth is, each of us who serve at a school, college, or university has a solemn, God-given responsibility to nurture faith, in our own lives and in the lives of our students. As we seek to carry out this divine commission, there are faith-nurturing strategies that can help us to be effective. Together, we have explored a variety of strategies clustered under the contextual, relational, conceptual, and experiential categories (see Figure 3). Each of these strategies is an instrument in the hand of a committed staff, and under the guidance and blessing of God, to intentionally touch and transform the lives of students.

The nurture of faith is a high calling, but He who has called has also promised to join us in this mission (Mt. 28:19-20). Moreover, He has given us His Holy Spirit to be our guide (Jn. 16:13). He has granted us wisdom, the ability to carry out our goals effectively (Prov. 15:2), if we will but ask in faith (Jas. 1:5-6). And He has promised to give us strength (Isa. 40:29), for those times when we may sometimes feel weary and disheartened. May we, as educating staff, reach out to Him in faith and claim the promise, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!”

(Phil. 4:13).



**Figure 3.** Faith-nurturing Strategies.

## Reference

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