

## “Measuring Spiritual Formation”

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Nearly all Christian schools lay claim to the idea that their education consists of “academic excellence with a biblical worldview.” If that holds true at Faith Christian Academy, what’s the evidence? Our mission statement uses the letters in the word FAITH: Fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, Academic Excellence, Integrity of Heart, Transformation of Self and Hope for the Nations. While many metrics are in place about intentionally measuring academic growth, no intentional measurement of spiritual formation existed at our school. The purpose of this project is to examine what our school does related to spiritual formation, examine its effectiveness, and make necessary course corrections to help students grow in their faith in God. The further our staff moved on these initiatives, the more opportunities to define, refine and develop our spiritual formation efforts emerged.

### What did you do?

The first step was to get a clearer picture of what our school actually did related to spiritual formation. Three school-wide Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were established at our school this year: 1) Literacy, 2) STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math), and 3) Spiritual Formation. Every staff member, including non-instructional, instructional, office and administration, selected their preference among the three. Seven meetings were scheduled for the 2019-20 school year, but only five took place due to COVID-19. The administrators selected the PLC Lead Teachers, and met with them to discuss expectations at the beginning of the year. A “systems thinking” model was selected, with a request for the team to identify vision, goals, objectives, data/information, processes and staff development for their respective PLC. The following objectives are listed as “Expected Student Outcomes” in the areas of “Spiritual Formation” for our students:

- Personally respond to carrying out the Great Commission locally and around the world in a culturally sensitive manner.
- Know, understand, and apply God’s Word in daily life.
- Respect, and relate appropriately with integrity to the people with whom they work, play, and live.
- Understand and commit to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.
- Are empowered by the Holy Spirit and pursue a life of faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love.
- Treat their bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- Are actively involved in a church community, serving God and others.

Related to these outcomes, the team listed the activities in which our school already participates. Next, we evaluated the level at which we are aligned with the stated spiritual formation objectives. Here’s a link to the alignment activities: [Spiritual Formation Brainstorm \(1\).pdf](#). Plans were developed to fine-tune student activities (i.e. Chapel, Spiritual Emphasis Week), but more information was needed to understand what next steps we should take. Another team was formed to seek the Lord and determine how to move forward.

Four local youth and missions pastors, along with selected FCA staff, began planning for an important spiritual formation event- our Upper School Spiritual Emphasis Week (SEW). To get a better understanding of the current spiritual disciplines of our students, a “Spiritual Life Survey” (SLS) was developed. In addition to prayer and collaboration, the book by Kinnaman, D., & Matlock, M. (2019). *Faith for exiles: 5 ways for a new generation to follow Jesus in digital Babylon* was referenced. The consequent survey was designed to be

anonymous, and students were encouraged to be honest in this self-assessment. Students were presented with 25 questions on a Google Form, with categories that included:

- Time Spent With God
- Church Connection
- Scripture Study
- Service to Others
- School Atmosphere
- Walk with God
- Help Growing in their Faith

The data obtained from the SLS helped us get a better sense of where our students perceived their walk with the Lord to be, and aided in our planning for SEW. The SEW team has already pre-determined the theme for this year: “The Gift of GO,” based on Matthew 28:19. The purpose of this week was to help students deepen their walk with the Lord in a tangible way, to lead students to salvation and in discipleship steps. The results of the survey indicated how appropriate that purpose was. An excerpt of the student responses to the selected survey questions (figures rounded; may not equal 100%):

- “You have accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.”
  - 79% Yes
  - 20% Not sure
  - 1% No
- “You attend church services (on Sundays and/or Wednesdays) on a weekly basis.”
  - 36% Completely or Always
  - 25% Mostly or Often
  - 12% Somewhat or Occasionally
  - 15% Not Much or Rarely
  - 12% Not at all or Never
- “You are involved in serving at church (childcare, audio visual, worship team or similar).”
  - 23% Completely or Always
  - 17% Mostly or Often
  - 10% Somewhat or Occasionally
  - 17% Not much or Rarely
  - 35% Not at all or Never
- “You want to use your unique talents and gifts to honor God.”
  - 51% Completely or Always
  - 20% Mostly or Often
  - 17% Somewhat or Occasionally
  - 11% Not much or Rarely
  - 1% Not at all or Never
- “You like to serve others.”
  - 39% Completely or Always
  - 30% Mostly or Often
  - 21% Somewhat or Occasionally
  - 10% Not much or Rarely
  - 0% Not at all or Never

During SEW, a Chapel service was held each day, which included worship and the Word. Worship leaders from three different churches led worship, and four pastors from three different churches shared with the

students and staff. After the messages each day, students were divided into small groups, led by FCA Staff, to process the message together. Friday was “GO” day. Students were divided into groups and participated in service opportunities around our community. Projects included working with the elderly, at food pantries, beach cleanup, supporting individuals with disabilities and helping at a local business whose proceeds benefit domestic violence victims. Once the students returned from serving in the community, their small groups reconvened. During that time, we asked students to provide written reflections on three questions: 1) What stood out this week and why?; 2) What were you challenged to change this week?; 3) How can we pray for you? The next week, our entire Upper School staff reviewed the student responses. As part of the analysis of the students feedback, our staff considered three primary categories: 1) Observation (patterns and themes); 2) Implications; 3) Actions. Areas for potential ministry opportunities were gleaned, but within two weeks, our school buildings closed due to COVID-19. An after-action survey was deployed for the FCA staff who participated in “GO” Week, asking for reflection on various elements of the week, including the speakers, worship, workload, commendations and suggestions for improvement.

As an elective, our middle and high school students have the option of joining a pilot program, our first ever “Missions” class. Separate high school and middle school sections of the class were formed, and students participated in classroom learning as an introduction to missions. Students had the opportunity to work with our Lower School students in projects like the Lower School Spiritual Emphasis Week, Field Day, and a Literacy Day. As the year progressed, a simultaneous stream for spiritual formation for our students came in the expansion of the Missions class to an initiative called “Missions U,” which primarily aligns with the “Hope for the Nations” portion of our missions statement. Another team, made up of FCA staff and the pastor of our host church, spent time refining and expanding the program during the last quarter of the school year. The intent of Missions U is to cultivate a heart for the Great Commission, by focusing on the Kingdom of God and his church. Partnerships with local churches will be grown, with students trained with skills to assist in “front of the house and back of the house” endeavors. As a school that represents over 40 churches in our community, a real opportunity exists to support churches, break down any denominational barriers that may exist, and partner with churches for the sake of the Kingdom and the kids. Please see the Vision, Mission and Expected Student Outcomes below for Missions U:

Vision	To empower students to live “On Mission” by discovering their giftings and experiencing spiritual growth in the Lord through service to their Church, Community, and the World.
Mission Be LED!	<p>Living “on mission”</p> <p>Engaging your gifts</p> <p>Determining to serve</p>
Expected Student Outcomes	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Prioritize their relationships with God, other believers and daily spiritual disciplines.</li> <li>● Actively serve in a church</li> <li>● Understand the calling to live “on mission”</li> <li>● Engage in opportunities for service and leadership</li> <li>● Discover their individual talents &amp; gifts</li> <li>● Value the diversity of the Kingdom of God, including community churches</li> </ul>

In addition, the pastor of our host church resides on the board of an organization named Go To Nations, a “missions sending agency” whose strategic focus is working with at-risk children and youth, mobilizing nationals, leadership development, and community transformation. The following goals have been established in our partnership with Go To Nations:

#### Initial Goals:

1. The Missions U Project Team to create a working template with:
  - Established teaching curriculum
  - A designed practicum that offers students the opportunity to practice what they are learning.
2. Meetings with the 44 pastors of the home churches of the students attending Faith Christian Academy with the purpose of explaining the Missions U Project.
3. Arrange a meeting with select members of GTN’s Go Team where Pastor Rob Goyette will explain the Missions U Vision.
4. Arrange personal meetings with presidents, headmasters, and/or directors of Christian Schools in the North Florida / Jacksonville area.
5. Establish an Advisory Committee made up of select members of the Missions U Project Team, six pastors of local churches, three directors of Christian schools, and three members of GTN’s World Headquarters Staff.  
*(The number of active members can be adjusted as the project develops.)*

#### Mid-Range:

1. Have Missions U fully implemented in Faith Christian Academy for the fall class of 2020.
2. Assess and make any needed changes in order for the revised program to be ready to implement in the fall of 2021.
3. Implement Missions U in two other Christian schools in the fall of 2022.

#### What did you learn?

As I reflect on these efforts, I am pleased overall with the type of spiritual formation initiatives that happened this year. It is now clear that we have the potential for greater things, and have been led to new opportunities to refine our focus, as several streams related to spiritual formation efforts are moving into one. There were three teams assembled to move these initiatives forward, and some of the staff were on all three teams. An unexpected blessing emerged as several staff members and pastors rose to the occasion and grew in their capacities to see a bigger picture related to spiritual formation for our students. There are many resources and partnerships that are just waiting to be developed, and those connections need cultivating. From the pastors at the 44 churches represented at our school, to the individuals who need help in our community, there is no shortage of opportunity to put students in positions where they can walk out their faith in God. Greater levels of connectedness with our community will not happen by accident; we must be intentional in the development of these relationships. In addition, the data from our SLS revealed that 50% of our students are “Somewhat” or

“Completely” involved in serving at church, but 88% “Somewhat” or “Completely” wants to use their gifts and talents to honor God. Furthermore, 90% of our students state that they “Somewhat” or “Completely” like to serve others. This data gives us a path where the wants of the students intersect with the directive to “GO”, to serve, to put faith into action. Along with prayer, mechanisms for measurement and feedback must be developed and refined. Like information in the Cardus studies, attending a Christian school can have a powerful influence on spiritual disciplines when adulthood is reached. Through prayer, listening to the Lord and to each other, we can move forward to advance His kingdom in our community, together.

As I was preparing to write this paper, an interaction really helped sum this up for me. A staff member who was on all three teams and walked through this process brought to my attention some material from J. Warner Wallace, Christian apologist and best-selling author: [The Choice Between Entertaining and Training](#) and [Stop Teaching Young Christians About Their Faith](#). In these articles, Wallace asserts that “ It’s time to move beyond... and shift from entertaining, to teaching to TRAINING.” After hearing that concept, the Lord put that together for me- that’s what we need to do and will be a key indicator if our actions will bear more fruit.

### What difference did/ will it make?

Due to COVID-19, some of our plans were adjusted related to our spiritual formation initiatives. Even so, there are clear outcomes and possibilities that emerged. When the staff saw the data compiled from the SLS, I saw an impact in their empathy levels toward students. Since the surveys were anonymous, any one of the students in their class could have been the one who wanted prayer for their “short temper” or who wanted “to be more bold sharing their gifts and talents for the Lord.” It seemed like their approach to how they handled our students changed. So, through prayer, additional training and taking the time to understand where students are spiritually, our approach can connect with and help students at a deeper level. Also, these spiritual formation efforts increased interaction between Lower and Upper School students, bringing the students together. Positive relationships were formed between older students and younger students. In addition, the Lower School teachers indicated in a survey that they enjoyed witnessing the interaction they observed between the Missions class and their students, and believe the Missions class had a positive impact on their class. As the Missions U program unfolds, opportunities for partnerships and unity in our church community abound. As we listen to the needs of local pastors and share the elements of the program, the role that our school plays in the spiritual formation of students will be more evident, the part of the “three-fold cord” among church, school and home that is not easily broken. Also, while looking at more ways to sharpen our focus, I was directed to Jana Magruder’s book *Nothing Less: Engaging Kids in a Lifetime of Faith* (2017). A survey was conducted among 2,000 about the spiritual health and upbringing of their now adult children. Out of that, 15 characteristics predictive of spiritual health in adult children were identified. Our Missions U program concept specifically addresses two out of the top five: Child regularly served in church while growing up; Child participated in church missions trip/ projects. This information caused me to believe we are on the right track and this program can make a difference in the spiritual formation of our students.

Finally, as head of school, the biggest difference this project will make for me will be the lens through which I view our school’s spiritual formation efforts. The concept of a shift from “entertaining to teaching to training” has tremendous implications when analyzing activities. We can use the tools the Lord has given us to sharpen our focus as we partner with our school community to train up the children in the way they should go.

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