

A Collision of Faith: Home – Church – School

Our higher calling – and God's ultimate desire – is for our students to connect, in a real way, with Him. We fight to compete for the attention of our students in a modern world that pulls at the materialistic, mind dulling, self-loving human nature in all of us. How then, can we truly nurture in our students a meaningful encounter with God? (From the 'Encounter' Bible Curriculum Overview)

"I know we should be doing something about family worship – we'll get to that next month when things aren't so busy." "I send my children to a church school, I pay enough for them to sort this one out." "I drop my kids to Sabbath School – the youth pastor will sort them out if he's worth his salt– after all isn't it his job?"

'Growing In Discipleship' is the mission statement for the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. All the ministries of the conference are working together to create a disciple-making environment. The Growing Fruitful Disciples model is being used extensively in this process. The model provides a framework for developing a shared understanding of discipleship. It also provides a framework for shaping and delivering resources. Pastors, teachers and church leaders are able to see how the various resources and processes

being promoted by the conference are part of an overall discipleship picture.

A key focus area in the Discipleship strategy is being intentional about disciple-making environments for children. It is during childhood that worldviews are shaped, values formed and most decisions for Christ are made^[BS1]. (George Barna, 'Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions' Regal, 2003 p.47)

No one programme, event, ministry or even school can do it alone. The conference emphasises the need to join the dots between home, school and church. While spiritual growth is the Holy Spirit's work, the conference believes it is called to do all it can to create environments conducive to the Spirit's leading.

Church:

Over the last four years the conference has put significant resources into creating healthy church discipleship environments. The pastors and elders have been extensively trained in the discipleship framework and much work has been done on growing pastors in their personal spiritual practices.

Every second week pastors from across the city come together for discipleship resourcing and discussion on how their discipleship plan is being implemented. The conference discipleship coordinator meets with church

leadership teams to help discern God's leading for that congregation. The team then maps out its next step. The discipleship inventory is used to give a quick diagnosis of the congregation. The fruitful disciples framework helps the church identify areas to work on and how to synergise the ministries of the church around discipleship.

Conference leaders are very pleased with how congregations that represent various expressions of being church have embraced the discipleship strategy. While each church has a different '*next step*' overall the churches are working together with a common framework.

While the conference was seeing significant increases in various measures of church health the strategic planning team of the conference still felt they were missing the mark. It was then that the Home Grown discipleship strategy was developed and is currently being implemented.

In 'Child Guidance' Ellen White, in the first 52 chapters spells out the importance of the home being the primary environment for discipleship.

It is in the home that the education of the child is to begin. Here is his first school. Here, with his parents as instructors, he is to learn the lessons that are to guide him throughout life...Parents, remember your home is a training school, in which your children are to be prepared for the home above. p1

Later chapters outline the important role of the school in shaping a child's character including a chapter (54) describing how teachers and parents can work in partnership.

The character of the work done in our church schools should be of the very highest order...both at home and at school simplicity and godliness should be maintained p310

Our schools are the Lord's special instrumentality to fit the children and youth for missionary work p311

In the formation of character no other influences count so much as the influence of the home. The teacher's work should supplement that of the parents, but is not to take its place. In all that concerns the well-being of the child, it should be the effort of parents and teachers to cooperate p319.

Later chapters emphasise the place of a healthy church community in the spiritual formation of children. While the church plays a vital role in giving a sense of belonging, providing community and supporting parents, faith development starts at **home**^[BS2]. Chapter 81 describes the coordination between the home and church.

Ministers may do their work faithfully and well, yet it will amount to very little if parents neglect their work p550

At every opportunity let the story of Jesus' love be repeated to the children p552

Home Grown:

The Home Grown strategy still uses the Growing Fruitful Disciples Framework as a base however translates it to a home environment. The conference recognise that, for the most part, church is the watering can while what

happens at home is the soil of discipleship. Children spend about 1900 hours at home each year (this does not include sleep). It is in the home where most children come to understand who they are and how to interpret the world.

The Home Grown strategy aims to have every family taking the next step in terms of discipleship. From initial observations of the strategy it seems once a home takes one discipleship step other steps soon follow.

One father who was part of a Home Grown Sabbath School Class decided his 'next step' would be to pray for his children as he dropped them to school and watched them walk through the gate. He rarely prayed for his children. The next Sabbath he described how this step brought tears to his eyes and he then found himself praying for his children during the day and even praying as he arrived home from work, before walking inside, that he would be the husband and father his family needed. That family now has family worship as one step grows into further steps.

The local church, resourced by the conference, comes along side with supporting ministries. The conference coordinates Home Grown parenting workshops, family worship resourcing events and training for how children's ministry leaders can impact the home. The conference's marriage enrichment programmes focus on discipleship in the home context. The conference also makes available an electronic newsletter that shares Home Grown ideas. A coaching system is being developed where more experienced parents take on a mentoring role.

In Greater Sydney, the departmental team is working with churches and schools to deliver and promote resources for family worship, tools for growing in faith as a family and ideas to help in shaping faith building conversations and **experiences**^[BS3]. The 'table talk' tin which includes conversation starting questions for families to discuss at meal time is being well received.

Pastors and Teachers in the Greater Sydney Conference are being taught that the home has the greatest impact on young lives; with few exceptions. If we fail to impact the home, we will never make a lasting impact on students. The 'Think Orange' material by Reggie Joiner (David C Cook, 2009) is adapted and used extensively in training churches to synergise ministries with a focus on re-activating the home.

The Home Grown strategy involves a lot of energy and resources going into addressing the consumeristic worldview. Marriages, church involvement and personal spiritual practices are being strangled by a materialistic values orientation. Church members can be left with homes that are beautiful buildings but do not contain spiritually fertile soil. While we encounter situations that are not ideal, no family is perfect, the conference is doing what it can to return the primary place for spiritual growth back to the home. The conference stewardship department is addressing worldview issues and moving people toward a biblical worldview that is conducive to **discipleship**^[BS4].

School:

Parents are not the only adult influences children need for healthy faith development. School teachers also play a significant role in the child's development.

The Adventist schools of the Greater Sydney Conference are keen to join the dots between home, church and school. Schools are also part of the Home Grown strategy and provide another resource base for parents. Various workshops coordinated through the school, newsletter sections and send home materials are available to assist parents with discipleship in the home^[BS5]. One head of campus even runs a class on Sabbath mornings, at a local church, to resource parents for discipleship. This class has proved to also be a useful outreach tool for parents at the school who are not part of the church community.

Our school teachers understand that while it is important that children are 'successful' academically; the only thing that matters 100 years from now is a child's relationship with God. One school is trialling the discipleship framework individually for each student. The teachers then help the children to shape their own next step.^[BS6] One principal commented 'We have very intentional programmes in place for developing children academically, what would it take to be even more intentional about their faith development?'

Once again the Growing Fruitful Disciples Framework provides a template of understanding for how the home, church and school can work together. Some teachers are even shaping homework exercises around the key discipleship areas.

The schools provide healthy role models and environments that promote spiritual discovery and growth. A child's faith development is significantly enhanced if another adult, who has a relationship with the child, gives the same faith message as a parent. Schools are an ideal place for this to happen.

The Adventist Schools in Greater Sydney are currently implementing a new, Australian/New Zealand inter-union co-ordinated, Biblical Studies Program entitled '*Adventist Encounter Curriculum*'. The curriculum is shaped on the building blocks of healthy faith development using the Spiritual Growth framework developed by Pr Ben Maxson. The curriculum promotes a worldview that integrates faith into all aspects of life by using the Transformational Planning framework developed by Lanelle Cobbin. Our church pastors are also being made familiar with this curriculum so that their sermons, language and local church initiatives can work with the same foundations in mind.

Some churches are working with their local Adventist school to integrate the school and the 'Gracelink' Sabbath School curriculums so that one main

message is being presented with one set of memory verses. While still having a long way to go, the Greater Sydney Conference schools and churches are keen to work together in joining the dots in terms of faith development.

Imagine what it would look like to have parents, school teacher and Sabbath School small group leaders coming together to pray for and discuss the faith development of a child.

Like the church, the school cannot take the place of home. Even though there are lots of amazing stories where the Holy Spirit changes lives in the school environment, in spite of difficult home situations, the ideal is to have school complementing what happens at home and in the church.

Children need parents who will help them advance in their relationship with God. Children need environments that promote healthy pictures of what it means to grow in faith – Adventist Schools. Parents need churches that will help them know how to be spiritual leaders and where their children can really belong to a faith community.

Imagine the impact when home, school and church collide.