

Faith Development

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Aims of seminar session

- To explore what we understand by 'faith'.
- To examine two examples of faith development theory.
- To reflect what this means for the children we work with.

What is faith?

The background of the slide is a serene, high-angle photograph of a vast, deep blue ocean. The water's surface is covered in fine, rhythmic ripples. On the left side, a bright light source, presumably the sun, creates a shimmering, white-to-yellow reflection that extends horizontally across the water. The sky above is a clear, deep blue, with a few wispy, white clouds scattered near the horizon. The overall mood is calm and expansive.

What is Christian / Biblical faith?



How does faith grow & develop?

The background of the slide is a photograph of a vast, calm blue ocean. The water is a deep, vibrant blue with subtle ripples. In the upper portion, the sky is a lighter blue with wispy white clouds. On the far left, a bright sun flare creates a shimmering path of light across the water's surface, extending towards the horizon.

Faith development

What is Faith development?

- How do I grow in an awareness of 'other'?
- How and when do I 'pin my faith' onto this 'other' and say I believe?
- What things support and sustain my belief in this 'other'?
- Where is this belief taking me in the future?

Faith development resources

- Fowler, J. *Stages of faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981)
- Westerhoff, J.H. III, *Will our children have faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976)
- Westerhoff, J.H. III, *Bringing up Children in the Christian faith* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1980)
- *How faith grows; faith development and Christian Education* (London: NS/CH Publishing, 1991)

Faith development

- *'We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith. How these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual and nurture'. – James Fowler*

Faith development

- *'Faith, as I have used the word, is a verb. Faith is a way of behaving which involves knowing, and willing. The content of faith is best described in terms of our world view and value system, but faith itself is something we do. Faith is an action. It results from our actions with others, it changes and expands through our actions with others, and it expresses itself daily in our actions with others.'* - John Westerhoff

James Fowler: The Road



John Westerhoff: The Tree



A tree with one ring is *'a complete and whole tree'* and a tree with three rings *'is not a better tree but only an expanded tree'*.

Westerhoff, 1976 p.90

Fowler & Westerhoff

- *'The 'linear progressive' aspect is described in Fowler's six 'stages of faith' which he claims are universal, invariant and hierarchical, but impressionistic rather than fixed in form.*
- *'Our lives as people of faith can best be understood as a pilgrimage that moves slowly and gradually through ever-expanding expressions'. Westerhoff, 1980 p.25*

James Fowler: The Road

0. Primal Faith (infancy) –

(The struggle to trust and mistrust)

1. Intuitive-Projective Faith (early childhood) – when child becomes aware of God; **(Imitating dependable adults)**

2. Mythic-Literal Faith (elementary-school years through early adolescence) when family specified perspectives and meanings of morals and God are internalized; **(Learning stories of one's group and community)**

3. Synthetic-Conventional Faith (middle adolescence) when faith is accepted without critical evaluation; **(Identifying with the views and opinions of others)**

James Fowler: The Road

4. Individuative-Reflective Faith (presumably young adulthood) when an individual's own belief is critically examined and reconstructed; **(Critically reflecting on what and how one believes)**

5. Conjunctive Faith (mid-life or beyond) when disillusionment with that belief system sets in, and one is caught between it and openness to other religious traditions; **(Living with paradoxes and polarities)**

6. Universalizing Faith (late life) brings oneness with the power of being or divinity, willingness to promote justice in the world and fellowship with others, regardless of their faith stage or religious tradition. **(Envisioning a sense of the unity of all things)**

James Fowler: The Road

Intensification & Catapulted from stage to stage by circumstances.

This approach is echoed by work done by M. Scott Peck, whose four '*stages of growth*' allow for multiple gradations.

Stage 1 - Self Obsessed

Stage 2 - Conformist (formal)

Stage 3 - Individualistic (sceptic)

Stage 4 - Integrated (mystical-communal)

(cf: 'Fowler 30 years on' pdf)

John Westerhoff: The Tree

1. Experienced faith

(Seeing the Christian faith 'modelled' by the people who have a living faith in Jesus)

2. Affiliative faith

(Being part of a Christian community e.g. family, church, young people's group)

3. Searching faith

(Things accepted initially are now questioned)

4 Owned faith (Movement from 'faith given' to 'faith owned')

(Personal commitment to Christ)

(cf: Faith development Westerhoff revised mar 18 pdf)

John Westerhoff: The Tree

Conversion = 'the act of surrender' between 3-4 only.

Westerhoff's work is echoed by Keen, whose developmental model includes five *'dimensions of life'*, each which he claims remains in a person who has advanced beyond it.

1. The Child - a stage of dependence and affiliation.
2. The Rebel - a stage of counter-dependence, a time of definition separate to parents and culture.
3. The Adult - a stage when there is the ability to be both child and rebel. A character is established which affirms the values of the culture. Few go beyond this stage.
4. The Outlaw - a stage when old authorities are killed off, old values questioned.
5. The Lover or The Fool - a stage of enlightenment. (Fowler's stage 6)

Personal Reflections

- Both models offer some useful insights for us as workers with children, as well as some issues:
- Fowler: Allows for adult growth and response. Progressive approach allowing for personal mental, emotional and spiritual development, whilst giving space for God's direct involvement at any stage.
- Westerhoff: Helpfully describes the reality of building on life experience, but seems to limit conversion to a particular set of developmental circumstances.
- Both models are useful in describing those already integrated into the church or with a Christian history, but less useful for those outside of the church's life.

Questions to ask ourselves

- What is the faith status of children and can that be measured at any time?
- How does an evangelical understanding of conversion fit into these models?
- What are we saying about sin if a person's behaviour is determined by 'natural' processes of development?
- What about personal accountability before God?
- Does this correspond to biblical understandings of faith?