

Child Development: Stages of Faith Development

Introduction

Drawing upon the above theories of social scientists, Professor James W. Fowler, Developmental Psychologist at the Candler School of Theology, proposed a framework he called “Stages of Faith” (Fowler, James W., 1981. *Stages of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row). Fowler’s stages include seven periods that span the whole life of the individual.

Faith can be defined in many different ways. From the religious side it is a gift and an infused virtue. According to James Fowler, from the human side, faith is a process of handing on story, values, and beliefs through the rituals, stories, symbols and witness of both living and dead members of a believing community. He describes faith as a dynamic process which is “a way of knowing, a way of valuing, a way of seeing.”

According to Fowler, “faith permeates and informs our way of being in relation to our neighbors, and to the causes and companions of our lives. It is the primary motivating power in the journey of self and springs from a community of values.”

This segment is meant to help you reflect on different stages of faith development. When reading it, reflect on your own journey and those close to you. Begin by reflecting or journaling on the *first question*. Then read the article “Faith Development” and jot down your responses to the *reflection questions*.

First Question

How does your faith today differ from your faith as a child?

Faith Development

Read the following article and respond to the questions:

The theories of Fowler and Westerhoff propose that faith in human beings developed in stages. This can be helpful for catechists to understand as they work to enhance and call forth religious faith in those to be catechized, whether they are children or adults.

Fowler proposes seven periods of faith development that span the entire life of the individual. They draw heavily upon Kohlberg's moral developmental stages (see article on moral development) as well as other theories of human development.

- Stage 0, Primal or *Undifferentiated faith* (from birth to 2 years), focuses primarily on the sense of trust and safety that comes from caregivers.
- Young children, during Stage 1 of faith development (*intuitive-projective*), follow the beliefs of their parents and/or significant adults. They tend to imagine or fantasize angels or other religious figures in stories much as they do characters in fairy tales.
- In Stage 2 of faith development (*mythical-literal*), children tend to respond to religious stories and rituals literally, rather than symbolically. There is a strong belief in justice, and particularly the idea that doing good will be rewarded and doing evil will be punished. Fowler pointed out that children in this stage can sometimes be rather legalistic.
- In Stage 3 of faith development (*synthetic-conventional*), individuals tend to conform to a belief, but do not do much self-reflection or examination of their beliefs. Many people remain at this stage their

whole life.

- Stage 4 of faith development (*individuating-reflective*), which Fowler stated could take place from the mid-20s to early 40s, involves a process of struggle in which the individual takes responsibility for his or her own beliefs and often questions the group from which his or her earlier beliefs came.
- Stage 5 of faith development (*conjunctive*) occurs in middle age. In this stage, individuals begin to feel more comfortable with paradox and mystery, and make peace with the traditions from which they came. They see the value in serving others..
- Individuals who move to the sixth and last stage of faith development (*universalizing*) search for universal values, such as unconditional love and justice for everyone no matter what. Self-preservation is not important to them. Service is most important. Mother Teresa or Gandhi might be examples of people who have developed to this stage. Not too many of us do.

Westerhoff gives a similar but simpler and more religious framework for describing faith development. His four-stage theory also is a movement from external to internal to being for others:

- Experienced—I take on the faith of my family (pre-school, primary age)
- Affiliative—I begin to identify with the values of my peers and the larger community (middle grades–early adolescence. Many remain at this stage and never have reason to move from it)
- Searching—Something happens that makes an individual question his or her former beliefs, and he or she begins to search for meaning and value outside the “faith of their [his/her] childhood.”

Many remain in this searching stage. Others endure a period of searching and integrating, and move to the next stage.

- Owned—I own my faith because I have internalized it not because of outside “authority.”

Most of the children you will work with are probably in the first group of stages of either theorist. It is important to think about the fact that in a catechetical session, a child experiences a community of Catholic beliefs and values. For many of them that community strengthens and adds to the Catholic identity of their family and their family’s practices. For others who have not experienced that kind of practice of the faith at home, it is an initiation into a community of religious values and identity.

Reflection Questions

- How would you describe your own faith journey in relation to the stages of faith development?
- How does this article help you understand the faith development of young people in your group?

Stages of Faith. James W Fowler. Harper, San Francisco, 1995

Will Our Children Have Faith? John Westerhoff III. Morehouse, Toronto, rev. ed. 2000