

Preparation for Session G33 – Stages of Faith

The preparation for this session includes an unusual amount of printed material. It is important that you read this material, as understanding the language of the “stages of faith” will enhance the quality of the session.

Some people theorize that a person’s faith develops in predictable stages. These theories are similar to theories about cognitive development and moral development. Whether these theories are “right” or not, studying and understanding them may lead us to a new understanding of our own religious journeys. Prior to the next session, you are encouraged to do four things:

1. Attend the worship service on October 13. If you are unable to attend the service, beginning on October 14 the sermon will be available by e-mail from Marie Houck: mehouck@pacbell.net. It will not be posted.
2. Read through the description of Fowler’s stages of faith (attached). This is a fairly academic description.
3. Read MacLennon’s questions (attached) to see if one of these categories accurately describes your own faith.
4. Finally, answer the following lettered questions.

Questions to consider in preparing for the Small Group Ministry session:

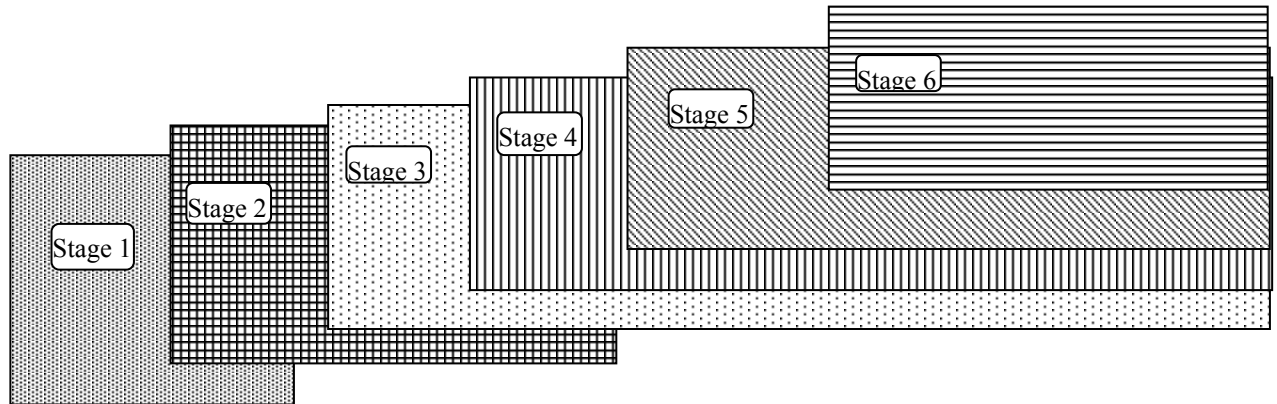
- A. How would you describe your present stage of faith?

- B. What, if any, trauma or challenges have marked your past movement from one stage to another?

- C. How open are you to the loss that would come from moving to a new stage? What, if anything are you doing to prepare yourself for such a move?

- D. Maybe most importantly, do you think it matters if you move to a new stage?

During childhood, the movement from one stage to another happens at more or less predictable ages. After childhood, things are less predictable, and people may remain in one stage throughout their adult lives. Thus people of the same age may be in any one of several stages. See diagram below:



If you are interested in reading further on the subject of faith development, some websites that you might find useful are:

Sermon by Rev. Kit Ketcham entitled: Growing into Spiritual Maturity

<http://www.users.qwest.net/~wyoffice/sermons/2000/06Feb2000.html>

Sermon by Rev. Scotty M McLennan entitled: Climbing The Spiritual Mountain

<http://users.rcn.com/fpmilton/Sermons/2000/20001112-ScottyM.htm>

Sermon by Rev. Carol S. Haag entitled: Seasoning Faith

<http://www.uc.summit.nj.uua.org/Sermons/CSH/19991010.html>

Sermon by Anne Anderson and Rev. Kenneth Collier entitled: James Fowler's Stages Of Faith

<http://www.uucpa.org/sermons/sermon010107.html>

Sermon by Rev. Rudolf C. Gelsey entitled: Stages of Faith

<http://www.geol.vt.edu/uu/sermon980322.html>

Books:

Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning" by

James Fowler

Finding Your Religion by Rev. Scotty McClennan

Dr. Fowler's book is a text aimed at an academic audience. He conducted his research into faith development while a professor at Harvard Divinity School, Boston College, and Emory University. The book is written in a style appropriate for this higher education setting. Rev. M.'s book, on the other hand, is written for a popular audience. This Unitarian Universalist minister weaves theory with people's stories to illustrate his points. This book is not specifically about faith development, but includes one chapter on the subject.

From James Fowler's Stages of Faith

This is a developmental theory, so that these are necessarily ordered "stages"; that is, one has to follow the other. He draws heavily from Erickson, Piaget and Kohlberg on moral development and the development of how people think. He says adults operate anywhere from Stage 2 to Stage 6, so the ages used in describing these stages, particularly after Stage 3, are general guidelines. He says MOST adults are in Stages 3 and 4, and most churches operate primarily in Stage 3. (Interestingly, he specifically says UU congregations operate primarily in Stage 4.) There is not necessarily a sense that the higher stages are "better," only that earlier stages must precede later stages.

Stage 1: Intuitive-Projective faith (typically ages 3 to 7)

This is a fantasy-filled imitative phase in which the child is powerfully influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of the visible faith of the adults around them. The imagination underlying these fantasies are "unrestrained and uninhibited by logical thought." They tend to take the taboos of their culture very seriously, and they tend to be egocentric.

Stage 2: Mythic-Literal Faith (typically early elementary to the onset of puberty)

This is the stage in which the person begins to take on for themselves the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belonging to their community. Beliefs, moral rules and attitudes are appropriated with literal interpretations. People in Stage 2 see a world based on reciprocal fairness, and an immanent justice based on reciprocity, i.e., God punishes people who behave badly, and rewards those who are good. They do not step back from the flow of stories to formulate reflective, conceptual meanings from them.

Stage 3: Synthetic-Conventional Faith (typically puberty to late teens/early 20s)

People in this stage structure the ultimate environment in interpersonal terms. Their images of unifying value and power derive from the extension of qualities experienced in personal relationships. People in this stage are "conformist" in the sense that they are acutely tuned to the expectations and judgments of significant others, and as yet do not have a sure enough grasp on their own identity and autonomous judgment to construct and maintain an independent perspective. Beliefs and values are deeply felt, but they are typically tacitly held.

Stage 4: Individuative-Reflective Faith

(Fowler says many adults never transition to this stage. Further, he says that if the transition to this phase doesn't happen in the late teens/early 20s, it is more painful, and that the transition to this stage can take years. He says many people stay in sort of a permanent transition, and a significant number transition to this phase in their 30s and 40s.)

People in this stage move the locus of authority to the self. This stage is marked by a double development. The self, previously sustained in its identity and faith compositions by an identity as a member of a group, now claims an identity separate from the composite of one's roles or meanings to others. To sustain that new identity, people in this stage compose a framework for understanding the world that is conscious of its own boundaries and inner connections and aware of itself as a "world view." This is called a "demythologizing" stage. People in this stage are likely to be minimally aware of unconscious factors that influence their judgment and behavior.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith: (Unusual before or around mid-life)

This is a way of seeing, of knowing, of committing, which moves beyond the dichotomizing logic of Stage 4's "either/or": people in this stage see both (or many) sides of an issue simultaneously. People in Stage 5 typically reclaim and reintegrate elements of strength from their childhood faith. Symbolic power is reunited with conceptual meaning. This stage helps people generate and maintain vulnerability to the strange truths of those who are "other." The new strength of this stage comes in the rise of the ironic imagination -- the ability to hold your own beliefs firmly and fully live them, while at the same time acknowledging that they are, at best, incomplete and possibly inaccurate.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith: (Rare; this describes people like Gandhi and King) This person has reached a stage in which their felt sense of an ultimate environment is inclusive of all beings. Their heedlessness to self-preservation and the vividness of their taste and feel for transcendent moral and religious actuality give their actions and words an extraordinary, if often unpredictable, quality. Life is both loved and held too loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition.

From Finding Your Religion by UU minister and author Scotty McClennan. McClennan clearly draws from Fowler's work, but the stages are not quite identical. This is quoted directly from his book:

What Stage Are You In? A Faith Stage checklist.

Magic

1. Is your world full of spirits and demons?
2. Are fairy tales your favorite kind of literature?
3. Do you think God makes everything happen, for good and bad?

Reality

1. Do you spend a lot of time trying to determine what's real and what's not?
2. Are scriptures true in a concrete and literal sense, rather than being stories and maxims that may or may not be real?
3. Do you feel you can influence God's actions by being good?

Dependence

1. Do you have a very important peer group or leader who is primarily responsible for shaping your faith?
2. Is it important to you to understand and follow religious doctrine and moral rules?
3. Is your main image of God that of a perfect parent?

Independence

1. Is your spiritual life unique and personal?
2. Do you often find yourself wanting to demystify scripture?
3. Do you think of God or Ultimate Reality primarily as in impersonal force or spirit (or as non-existent)?

Interdependence

1. Do you find a spiritual community important to you at the same time that you maintain your own distinctive faith?
2. Do you experience spiritual power in religious symbols and myths that you can also analyze objectively?
3. Do you conceive of God or Ultimate Reality both as a person and as an impersonal force?

Unity

1. Do you sense yourself in community with religiously committed people of any and all traditions?
2. Is your consciousness ego-free and beyond paradox and ambiguity?
3. Do you often feel that God or divine spirit is in everything and that everything exists in God or divine spirit?