

# Faith Development and Discipleship: A Conversation With Milt Hughes

**CM:** Can you suggest any connections between the faith development models of Westerhoff, Fowler, and Powers and the model that you have used in the Master Plan for Discipleship? It seems to me that your discipleship model is in a sense a model of faith development that you've got laid out already with the four stages.

**Hughes:** Yes, that's what I see as I look at these models: a kind of parallel to what I'm trying to do with the beginning, growing, ministering, equipping — although I guess if you looked at it carefully there would be some missing elements in mine or there would be some hidden elements. For example, in the growing stage is where I would see a lot of the faith development in terms of a person struggling with beliefs and making them truly his own.

**CM:** So you would see all that stuff where you go through a stage of reality testing and then you go through a stage where you have more individuation and making your own choices as happening within that growing stage before you really got to the ministering phase?

**Hughes:** Well, I never intended the four phases to be sequential in terms of "you do one, then you go to the next one," except for the foundational one, the beginning, which is basic. The others would develop parallel. Depending on one's growth — how well they came to realize the impact of their faith and did whatever reality testing was necessary — they would be free to minister. I've found that those who are not free to minister are those who have no assurance of what they believe, or why they believe it, or it's not really their own. They just keep it on the shelf or just separate it from reality and don't really do much about it. Very few go on to what I call the equipping phase.

I think that there is a definite parallel between these models of faith development and what I've been trying to do. There's a little different angle, I don't know what you call it — more of a psychological angle.

**CM:** Right, their starting place is developmental psychology as a framework. It grew out of that from Piaget to Kohlberg and others.

**Hughes:** I really like Westerhoff's model, especially the analogy to the rings of a tree.

**CM:** Are your four stages like rings of a tree?

**Hughes:** More or less, except that the growing stage is something that continues throughout life. The implication is not that you go through discipleship training and you're finished growing; now you can go minister to other people. The growing stage is something that lasts for the rest of life. It will involve change and different ways of looking at things, sometimes reinterpreting Scripture, reinterpreting my role in life. The growing stage is something that people come to; it involves searching, being willing to risk and ask questions and move on from there.

**CM:** So are your stages more like aspects of the Christian life?

**Hughes:** They are in a sense, if you can see the second area of growing as involving all of life. Once a person becomes a Christian and begins to get established in faith that growing phase overlaps the others. But I do think that the other two — ministering and equipping — are rings that would be added, if you follow Westerhoff's model. That is an overflow of what you're experiencing in growing. I might add a fifth ring to his tree analogy. I'd call it "shared faith." This is not just limited to evangelism, but really sharing your life with other people and helping them to reproduce the same thing in their lives.

**CM:** Powers' last stage is active devotion, in which your concern is no longer about yourself and what you believe and you move into living out your life, being a disciple really.

Don't you think that some of the students and others we

run into who have finished a discipleship program or the MasterLife course have the sense that they've done it; they are through growing and now it's time for them to be ministers?

**Hughes:** Yes.

**CM:** How can we avoid this?

**Hughes:** I don't know. That's a real problem area and it's my fear of any kind of systematized discipleship plan. That is: it gives the impression that when people have finished this they will have arrived and they don't need any more growing and developing. You have this danger any time you try to systematize something. But the way I try to approach it to avoid that is one, I emphasize that it is a process and not a program. I shudder when people say, "I've been through the program." I know that Avery Willis does the same thing. We need to avoid getting people mired down in what we might call "indoctrination," where stuff is just learned. It should affect their lifestyle, their relationships with others; it should uncover areas of their own lives where they need growth and development.

I want to come back to the thing of balance. We need balance between learning and doing, and the emphasis of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and in a bunch of different places that it's not just learning that makes you a kingdom citizen but doing and putting it into practice. In Paul's model, he encourages people to pass it on to others in 2 Timothy 2:2. He said that "everything that you have heard me teach, you should give to them." That's amplified in 2 Timothy 3:10 when Paul says to Timothy, "You know my teaching and my way of life." That indicates that Paul is not talking about just passing on indoctrination or information, but a life. Teaching involves indoctrination and passing on principles, but the way of life involves actually fleshing it out.

My fear is that when we develop a program or a sequence of meetings that you have with people to try to get certain material across — my fear is that it becomes just a program. It does not affect lifestyle. Unfortunate-



ly I've seen people who have been through this and it doesn't seem that they have rethought their lifestyle. They're still living the same way; their priorities are still the same. They're not really sacrificing to meet people's needs and bring people to Christ, for example, meeting needs in Third World countries. I think in that case it's just more indoctrination.

**CM:** What's the key there? Is the modeling of the leader the key?

**Hughes:** That's a key thing: the modeling of the leader is really important. Paul made himself vulnerable so that he could say to them "Look at my life." Although that may sound a little egotistical, and surely risky, it's really what's taking place. I've recently written some material on marriage preparation. In my leadership guide, I point out to the leader that he'll be teaching a group of students some information but what they're really going to learn is your life. If you're married, they're going to look at your marriage. You have a tremendous opportunity to model for them what marriage ought to be. Not that you're perfect, but that as you teach they're going to observe more about your life than information. I think that's true about any aspect of discipleship: the leader becomes a model whether he likes it or not.

**CM:** What does that say about the situation in which we take a sophomore who has completed a discipleship program and make him into a leader who is supposed to be modeling for others? Is that premature? Is it really valid to use student leaders if they're still early in their faith development?

**Hughes:** No, I think that's a risk we have to take because if as campus ministers we limit our input to getting students ready to do that and say, "Well, maybe later on you'll have the maturity to teach this to someone else," we are risking their not doing anything. If we can take people who are reasonably well along in their growth and help them to become leaders with the understanding that they are still in the process of development — and that the people that follow them must realize

that too — then I think that when a student learns a certain amount of information that changes his life he doesn't have to be a theologian or a fully mature person to share that.

**CM:** In these faith development schemes the searching or reality-testing stage comes when most of our students are in college.

**Hughes:** That's right.

**CM:** According to these schemes, you can't get to the stage of owned faith or making your own choices until you're in your late twenties or age 30, depending on who you listen to. If that's valid, doesn't that mean that we are prematurely asking students to grab hold of their faith when their natural stage would be to be searching at this point?

**Hughes:** Even though the research indicates it to be true that they don't come through that searching stage until later, if we just operated on that basis then we wouldn't be doing very much groundwork for helping people to move on and make their own choices. Unfortunately, students are forced to make very major decisions while they are in college. It's almost unfair to ask students to make major decisions about marriage and about career. Of course the marriage decision is being delayed more and more perhaps because of the recognition that they're not mature enough to make a decision. The other problem is that the divorce rate is still increasing. Part of that comes from immaturity, from making a lifetime commitment without really knowing where they were going themselves. In the career decision, students are forced to declare a major and enter into a career and for the most part stick with what they decide. Many change careers along the way but for most the direction is pretty well set. So I think that college is sort of a pressure-cooker situation in which students are forced to think about mature decisions when they're really not there themselves. In campus ministry we need to build into their lives the principles of Scripture to help them when they must make decisions.

I've had a very close example of this with my son,

Larry, when he went away to college. He followed this scheme almost to a “T”: experienced faith, affiliative faith. When he got to college he began searching and declared himself an atheist. He could no longer make it jive with his scientific thinking. But he continued to study the basics as I and others would challenge him to do so, and he continued searching and asking questions about his position. Finally, about age 29, he came to his own faith which was really dynamic. In fact, I believe that he has greater potential in the kingdom of God to impact the world now than he would have if he had not gone through that long period of drought which was that searching stage.

I really feel that God had a purpose in this, although it was very difficult and painful for me to go through it as he went through it. I kept trusting that God would bring him through it. In his case, he was in his late twenties before he was able to come out of it. But what he came out with was so much better than what he would have had before. The one thing I can't stand is mediocrity in Christian faith. But I see so much of it. Unfortunately a great deal of it is held by people who have never gone through a period of doubt or questioning or experimentation. They're still really affiliative in their faith. They've accepted this; they don't question it; they've been taught not to ask questions.

**CM:** Right! That's been the big question in my mind as I've read faith development theory. When students come to BSU with affiliative faith which is based on the youth group — or Powers would say that they've been in the indoctrination stage, just learning the basic content of the faith — in order to have faith development they're going to have to go through some period of searching or reality-testing. I'm afraid that sometimes BSU keeps them in that affiliative stage. The peer-group pressure within the BSU is such that everyone is believing one thing and they may not be encouraged by us to search and to go through that doubt. Is there anything we can do about that programatically or in our philosophy of campus ministry?

**Hughes:** I think we need to be careful about getting into



the business of knocking props out from under people. I think that's the danger we find in religion departments. The professor has gone through all of this and may have come out of it with a very strong faith. He sees these kids who have never questioned anything, so his first desire seems to be to knock that out from under them. This produces two extremes. One extreme is classic liberalism in which they reject everything; the other would be angry fundamentalism, in which they spend the rest of their lives attacking the institution which tried to knock the props out. Instead, there ought to be an honest approach in which you say that there are problems you're going to run into, the Bible is not as simple as you've been taught that it was, and there are some heavy questions you're going to have to deal with. I like professors who give a personal testimony of where their faith is currently so that when the students do go through it they can think of that professor who made it through. I had one student recently at Southern Seminary who said that had it not been for the professor's testimony on the first day of class she would have really gotten bogged down in higher criticism. But she kept thinking, "He's teaching this for a purpose and he's come out with a strong faith in Christ." I think that if a professor wants students to rethink some things he needs to be there to give them some help and encouragement.

I came to this in my own life when we were in California in the '60's at USC and UCLA. We worked with students who did not take things lightly and wanted to raise questions. We caused a little turmoil in the association because students kept asking, "Why? Why do you do this? Why do you believe this?" I learned to walk with them in their questions and many of them came out with much stronger faith because of that. Another thing we did was to set up a de-briefing, a question and answer format, after some of the religion courses they were taking. We tried to help them to think through their faith commitment along with the new information they were getting.

The best way to help students with reality testing is

to discover the areas of need in their lives where they need to do some questioning, where they need to have someone jog them a little bit. One example is the version of the Bible they use. A lot of kids come to college with the belief that the King James is it and that there is no other version. If you pull out a modern version they go bananas. They need to be helped beyond that or they're going to be in a shell the rest of their lives.

**CM:** When you talk about not knocking the props out, I guess that means that we need to keep the nurturing going the whole time. And some people come to college with a real need for basic indoctrination, don't you think?

**Hughes:** There are three key ideas I've used in developing materials. The first is the developmental idea. It's amazing how many students are in the beginning stage and do need indoctrination into the basics before you can get them into the growing stage. The second area is the experiential, where you motivate students to do things themselves. The third area is the parental. As spiritual parents, campus ministers need to take the students wherever they are and nurture them, guiding them to the next level, so that when they leave us they are on the way to maturity because they've been given the tools and resources they need.

**CM:** There is one more area I'd like to talk about: the question of authority. In all of the faith development theories there is a movement from a stage in which authority is external, coming from an authority figure, a leader or a book, to a point at which authority is more internalized in the later owned stage of faith. Part of what happens in the transition of young adulthood is getting away from seeing the authority for faith as being something "out there" — being an institution or a person — and taking it in as your own. I wonder if when we have discipleship group leaders and MasterLife group leaders there isn't in the students' minds a lot of just taking everything on the authority of the leader. How can we get students away from that? I find that when we get them into a discipleship program automatically the group leader or the notebook is almost infallible.



**Hughes:** That's a tough one. Primarily, as leaders we have to be confessional. We have to really let them know that we're still on a pilgrimage ourselves. Maybe in our leadership material we need to more clearly identify that. There is a danger in some approaches regarding authority — that people just don't ask questions.

One example is a particular seminar that I've gained a lot from. You sit there for thirty hours and listen to this one man. The first time I went to it I was enjoying a lot of the input, but I noticed that there was no dialogue, no questions; we just sat there mesmerized for thirty hours by a set of materials that one person can come up with as authority. While there are some good things there — and I would recommend that campus ministers become acquainted with it and help to debrief their students afterwards and raise questions — there is a danger of no questions asked. That's not the way we approach *MasterLife* or *Patterns*. The main part of *Patterns* is to give students a chance to talk and share and raise questions. There are a lot of blank lines in the leadership guide, so that they can put in what they think ought to be included.

We've got to recognize that there is an authority. God is sovereign and we cannot just turn students loose on a sea of relativity. We have to point them to the authority of God. The objective of the training is not to master a set of materials but to become truly Christlike. They'll forget the outlines in *MasterLife* or *Patterns* — they'll even forget the faith development models — but if you've tied them in with Scripture and with the application of the meaning of following Christ, that's going to be with them the rest of their lives.

**CM:** That sounds like a good place to stop. Is there anything else you want to add?

**Hughes:** I just hope that the campus ministers across the country, rather than writing off the discipleship training programs as something too simplistic or smacking of authoritarianism will really give it a chance, because we do need to transmit information to students who are immature. Perhaps a lot of their immaturity is because they haven't had the right information.