

Faith Development in Campus Ministry

by Philip Briggs

Professor of Youth Education

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

A nationally known journalist and commentator and former Southern Baptist minister caught the attention of eager ears when he told college educators what he wanted college to do for his 17-year-old son.

Bill Moyers spoke quietly of three things when he challenged some Southern college.

1. Give him the personal touch. "He is still a child growing into adulthood and not merely a number."

2. Give him the beginning of a whole education. Moyers told of a directional sign in a planetarium that read: "Solar System and Restrooms." He expressed the hope that the college would help his son respect not only astronomy and philosophy, but also plumbing.

3. Help him take his place at the oars. "Help him dare to believe that he can make a difference in the world."¹

I have been developing over the last 20-plus years an interest in campus ministry and how to best help the college student in the development of his faith. During my sabbatical leave in 1979-80, I studied at the University of Missouri, and also served as a Campus Minister. As a result of taking courses in student affairs, I coined the term "collescent" as a definition of a blend between the adolescent and the collegian. I experience difficulty as a Christian psychologist and Chairman of the Human Growth and Development Division of Southwestern Seminary's Religious Education School, in accepting the classification of college students as adults. According to Dr. Michael Elkin, family therapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, "Biologically, adolescents are adults. Our culture has extended childhood beyond its biological limits because we feel our children need to have the benefits of higher education. Thus, medical students even are adolescents."² Some college students may be adults, but they are adults for the first time. Actually, there is evidence in the field of human growth and development to classify college

students as “older adolescents,” since many authorities label “adolescence” as ages 12 through 24. College students are not adults, but *collescents!*

It is absurd to think that the marriage ceremony makes one a totally married individual. In like manner, does graduating from high school automatically make one an adult? W. H. Moral and J. C. Hearst said,

Development is not dormant during late adolescence . . . the college years are time of developmental expansiveness and while attempting to order the diversity and complexity encouraged in college life, the students can be seen (1) exploring new ways of thinking, (2) engaging in novel activities, (3) shifting attitudes, values and beliefs, (4) employing new standards of conscience, (5) forming a changed sense of self, (6) setting career directions, (7) becoming more tolerant of individual differences, and (8) making other types of adaptations.³

The college student has his greatest intellectual powers at his disposal, and yet cognitive dissonance can occur and frustrations can be present. But dissonance leads to cognitive growth. Consequently, we must help that college student in his faith formation and correlate his intellectual development with his faith formation. The older I grow, the more significant is the statement, “Experience and wisdom replace cock-sure ignorance and thoughtful uncertainty.” What does this say to us about the oft-repeated experience of a child making a commitment of faith at six, seven, or eight years of age, then later (usually a decade) declaring a renewal? I believe it has a correlation to cognitive development.

Consequently, in confrontations between adolescents and adult authority figures, there are many issues of freedom, trust and responsibility to be worked out. During the early days of growth in the adolescent, braces may literally appear on the teeth, and figuratively on the brains! The brain’s doubling in size, not only changes its physical dimension, but its operative process as well. With a changing brain, faith is filtered, along with all other cognitive constructs. As far back as 1952, Gordon Allport theorized that the upper stage of adult faith (mature belief) is composed of positive sentiments and grows out of the alternating doubts and affirmations that characterize productive thinking.⁴ This kind of productive thinking can only happen in the person who is intellectually growing. Doubt is not an enemy.

but a friend of understanding. Healthy doubting keeps faith relevant and dynamic!

As our beloved W. F. Howard wrote years ago, conversion is three dimensional: an experience, a process, and a consummation.⁵ My experience has added credibility to the idea that one cannot divorce the spiritual pilgrimage from the maturation process. James W. Fowler, Professor of Theology and Human Development and Director of the Center of Faith Development in Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, Georgia, states in his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Faith and the Quest for Meaning*, that the individual must learn to take responsibility for his or her own convictions, commitments, lifestyle, beliefs, and attitudes.⁶

What is faith and what do we mean by faith formation? The emerging field of faith development, that is, how people grow in faith and maturity, offers new ways to talk about our lives. The idea of "faith" could benefit from a few more road signs and an occasional mile marker. Beyond conversation, we have few words and only vague concepts to share and understand about the faith journey, especially as it interfaces with our development. Fowler lists seven stages of faith development which reach beyond psychology, ethics, or theology to draw an unusual matrix for the pilgrimage of faith.

Len Donham, writing in "SBC Today," summarized Fowler's stages of faith:

Stage one: Intuitive-Projective Faith. Emerges between ages four and seven and all people pass through it. They are egocentric and try to make sense of a world full of imagination where symbols are powerful, but not very logical.

Stage two: Mythic-Literal Faith. Beliefs carry literal meanings as do moral rules and attitudes. The world is tit for tat. Stage Two perspective explains people's attraction to apocalyptic images. People tend to think in concrete images of God and the world. They are fascinated with literalistic numerology analysis of Revelation.

Stage three: Synthetic Conventional Faith is where people identify strongly with a group. This stage develops in adolescence, but for many adults it becomes a comfortable place to remain. So sharply tuned to other's expectations and judgments, Stage Three people lack a firm grasp on their own identities or perspectives.

Stage four: Individuative-Reflective Faith. Persons physically

and emotionally leave home, often in their twenties, taking responsibility for lifestyles, beliefs, and attitudes; ought to be going through a critical period of self-examination. The individual chooses an identity and world view.

Stage five: Paradoxical-Consolidative Faith. Here faith is a conjunctive process. People have moved beyond either/or, where they can let reality speak its word regardless of its impact. A Stage Five perspective of faith can recognize partial truths and their limitations, because it has been apprehended by a more comprehensive vision of Truth, but perceptions of Justice outreach their readiness to sacrifice themselves.

Stage six: Universalizing Faith. Such persons in this category are exceedingly rare. They show qualities that shake our usual meaning of normal. No wonder they ought to become martyrs for visions they make real. Many die at the hands of those whom they hope to change; such as Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Dietrich Bonhoffer. These universalizers have a special grace. Life is both loved and held too loosely.⁷

In another book, *Becoming Adult/Becoming Christian*, Fowler interprets the adult development of the Christian faith. He defines faith not as a verb, but rather as a noun, which is neither cognitive belief nor necessarily religious faith. Rather, it has several dimensions: Faith is viewed as a “universal phenomenon; an active way

in which every individual, regardless of any particular religious affiliation, understands and relates himself to a sense of self, others, the surrounding world, and the Transcendent.”⁸

In addition, Fowler emphasizes faith as a way of understanding in which the individual is able to construct and interpret experiences through interactions with his world.

Rather, it (faith) is a way of being and moving, a way of being on pilgrimage . . . The faith development perspective depends on . . . the availability of the Spirit. The dynamics of that openness . . . operate(s) as lure and power toward ongoing growth in partnership with Spirit.⁹

Faith involves how one views reality, how one talks about life, what one will do, how one will go about committing oneself, how one will relate to others and their viewpoints, how one reasons about what one believes, how one perceives the stories of one’s religion, how one symbolizes one’s deepest longings and convictions.

(If the above paragraph does not sound like a definition of a

college bull session in the dorm late at night, I know not how to define it!)

Faith is not simply trusting or the accepting of certain beliefs. Both of these are involved in the meaning of faith, but they join with other dimensions to form a complex pattern.

Fowler believes that the typical faith-stop for adolescents is Synthetic Conventional faith, although not all youth are in that stage, and many adults stay with that style. This faith-stop is essentially a conditional style that is moved beyond the earlier stage in which the child faces religion uncritically and almost innocently, yet even this conventional faith is not independently critical and reflective.¹⁰

Faith is rational; there is always another in faith. An individual's formation of faith, that is, one's first experience of faith and faithfulness, begins with birth. But as a person grows, he may develop a relationship with God that is based on faith and trust. Faith in God is not a separate dimension of life; rather it is an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions. Fowler defines Christianity as "that which involves an ongoing process of conversion, from self-groundness and the pursuit of one's destiny or self-actualization for receiving and claiming one's life in vocation and partnership with God."¹¹

In the overall construct of Fowler's theory, Stage Three, Mythic-Literal, faith finds its true beginnings. Faith formation occurs as a person begins to take on for himself the stories, beliefs and observances that symbolize belongings to his community.¹² Gary L. Chamberlain, in *Religious Education*, says that in terms of faith-development stages, faith moves from a concrete literalism of Stage Two, through the interpersonal relationship and dependence upon conventional understandings of faith, as seen in Stage Three, and on to the beginning of independent faithing in Stage Four.¹³ Bailey Gillespie, writing in *Religious Conversion and Personal Identity*, quotes James Pratt who said, "Religion is not so much theology as life. It is to be lived rather than reasoned about."¹⁴

Fowler's emphasis of moving from the synthetic, conventional faith to individuated-reflective faith is of particular significance to the transition from later adolescent to early adulthood. However, four understandings need to be applied when considering Fowler's stages of faith formation:

1. The stages are not pigeon-holes in which to stuff people. They are lenses through which to see and identify some aspects of a person's attitudes, beliefs, values and actions;

2. The stage sequence is not to be an achievement scale against which people are to be graded. People are not "better" in the different stages—they are different, and go about the business of making sense of their world and shaping actions in different ways;

3. A stage is a kind of still photograph of what in life is a very dynamic phenomenon. A stage is an "idea type" of model for means of comparing the features of faith. Real people usually exhibit some characteristics of one stage, and either or both the previous or the next stage;

4. Stages are not "there" as a stairstep to climb. To make transition from one to another is often a painful process on both minister and student.

John Westerhoff says that faith is like falling in love; it is the disposition of the heart that determines what is seen in another. Experience is crucial in one's understanding of the faithing, and the individual's perceptions of faith determines what is experienced. If one does not believe in God, he will not perceive certain experiences as indication of God's presence. An individual's perceptions tend to be labeled and filtered out of the experiences he encounters.¹⁵

In a second work by Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith*, he expresses that our lives as people of faith can best be understood as a pilgrimage that moves slowly and gradually through ever-expanding expression. His analogy is that faith grows like a tree adding rings. A one-year-old tree is truly and completely a tree, and as it develops, it does not become more truly a tree, it only becomes more complex. Likewise, one stage of faith is not better or more truly faith than the other, because faith grows in response to a person's experiences he encounters in the world. As faith matures, it does not become greater; rather, it is an expanded faith.¹⁶

Faith formation involves crises and conflicts just as self-identity development does. The identity experience, inclusive of developing faith, is considered normal and even necessary for youth to determine a role. The identity experience also involves movement. The movement in crisis is toward resolving it.

One of the tension points in talking about faith formation and conversion is that they are not the automatic results of education. Education during the adolescent years is essential, but it cannot replace the individual growth experience. Faith formation is a radical response which is often described in terms of dramatic religious experience.

Faithing has been described as a dynamic process involving the appropriation and interpretation of the content of faith tradition according to the development structures of the individual. Only when the college is understood as a total environment which informs, supports, challenges (or perhaps contradicts) the faith of individual students, will the content of the Christian tradition provide nourishment and growth for the individual Christian.

It is to be kept in mind that faith development is not to be confused with just the content of Christian faith. Faith development implies how to understand and reinterpret that content. Faith development offers formal evaluative criteria which any religious education program must meet if it takes the development perspective seriously.

Westerhoff may have been on target when he described two kinds of religion. One he calls "Religion of Involvement" and the other a "Religion of Escape."¹⁷ The former is dedicated to the pursuit of the meaning of life with purpose. Admittedly, this is a difficult road and risky. Adherents to this faith practice don't use religion as an escape nor to condemn others, but strive to live faithfully with others. This Involvement Religion meets the intellectual struggler head-on by seeing reason not as an end, but as a process in the discovery of truth. Involved believers push back the horizons and move on to explore with child-like openness. These are open-minded individuals whose faith ebbs and flows with a balance of reason, emotion, intellect, and intuition. Such individuals don't know all the answers and are not knocked off balance with the uncertainties. Westerhoff's words best conclude this style: "This does not mean they are free from fear, but they fear the slavery of the known more than the price of freedom."¹⁸

The Religion of Escape is defensive, aiming to defend the faith from aliens. The "cult of the comfortable" might best describe these escapees because it gives answers without any questions. Tragically, these devotees exhibit intolerance and

moralistic dogmatism with rigidity. "Truth" is known to them and others get it from them. The collescent cannot question (although Jesus, as an adolescent, did when he was in the Temple). Teachers and leaders proclaim, "You sit still while I instill!" These two models of religionists are omnipresent. I fail to see the collescent of our day finding much ministry from the latter.

It is not unusual to find young college students who lack broad experience, folding their hands and accepting their faith with comfort and laziness. This laziness shows a resistance to analyze in any coherent sense, and an unwillingness to scrutinize life critically.

So many young people I have met have been put to sleep, anesthetized, at least in their consciousness, not by coke, pot, heroin, alcohol, but by media hype, by slogans, by the stock situations of evening TV comedy and afternoon melodrama. They do not actually stand for anything.¹⁹

Faith formation never occurs in a vacuum! The crucial goal of the campus minister is to recognize the student who is holding a conventional fixed faith style. The thrust of ministry to these who are imprisoned with a certain system is one of patient love. Most of this faith is borrowed and void of ownership. Are we not to motivate them toward the deeper aspects of salvation and discipleship? Gleason's interpretation of Erickson suggests that intimacy is one of the stages of development and that intimacy is the capacity to commit oneself to concrete affiliations and partnerships while developing ethical strength to abide by such commitment.²⁰ The primary theological focus in this stage of life hinges on a Christology, proving the most appropriate role model for a relationship built on love and intimacy.

For youth to be in a conventional stage of faith is not absolutely good or bad; conventional faith is not inherently more advanced than the literal faith, most typical of childhood. However, when the content of faith and the style of faith are moving progressively with age and experience, there is a sense in which the campus minister is justified in initiating an older youth toward a later stage. Nudge them toward knowing! Sometimes rebellion is a healthy movement of independent faithing against the conventional or dogmatic.

As Kenneth Stokes states, "As they perceive themselves as

being essentially responsible for their own lives."²¹ Identity is not something that is discovered, but built. It is developed from experiences, choices, circumstances, environment and temperament. In my opinion, there is scriptural basis for the realization that the first step in identity formation of the maturing individual begins with discovering "whose" we are! In Luke 2:41-52 is recorded the "coming-out party" of Jesus. The Passover celebration was the rite of passage into adulthood for Jewish boys. At twelve years of age, the law required a year of instruction to become a Son of the Law. Jesus' mother was flabbergasted when Jesus took the word "father" out of his mother's mouth, meaning Joseph, and transferred it to mean the "Heavenly Father." Consistency demands that to insist upon his miraculous physical birth, also demands recognition that Jesus grew socially, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually! So must every person. Jesus belonged to God and his parents. It was *them* to whom he was obedient upon his return to Nazareth.

College is a variable input into a student's development. Campus ministers should seek to gain a perspective of the principles governing this development as a guide for facilitating faith formation in the lives of their students. Ironically, these principles often impact all ministers in their personal pilgrimage. Irony number two is that most of those who have been trained to work in campus ministry, from a Southern Baptist perspective, have received excellent theological education, but have had almost no guidance in human growth and development. Could it be that many of the frustrations in working with students, council members, pastors, and laymen is brought on by the lack of understanding of the overall maturation process?

If faith in the early high school years is emerging from the Narrative Heroic Literal form of Stage Two, and is searching for an embodiment in real adult models, then every adult in the life of an adolescent, whether teacher, administrator or staff person, campus minister, pastor, or whoever, becomes a faith model of either bad faith or good faith. If the adults in a collegian's life are models of faith, then their faithing examples are found in their actions as well as their words. If faith is a way of trusting in and remaining loyal to an ultimate reality, then the models who exemplify that reality must be worthy of the trust and loyalty of the collescent. They must have a visible trust in

and loyalty to God.

One of the keenest challenges of the campus minister is to help the collescent relate once again to God, parents and significant other adults and learn to love each of these. Programs which inhibit development, restrict growth to accommodate the particular needs of the church would be inconsistent with the words of Jesus when he said, "I have come that they might have life and have it to the full" (John 10:10b, NIV). One tough problem in ministry with students is dealing with churches who methodically fail to appreciate what the campus minister does because sometimes that work doesn't perpetuate the status quo of a local congregation composed of mostly children, middle and senior adults. The agenda items of the pastor are often related to tithing emphasis and worker enlistment, while the campus minister is struggling to guide a collescent to gain intimacy and commitment in his environment. Pastoral training for campus ministers is not necessarily the answer nor is it making pastors into campus ministers. We are to see the campus as a mission field, not like the church field, but an arena unto itself where faith formation happens. Religious education with collescents, based upon faith development, must provide a variety of models in faith, role-taking opportunities, reinterpretation of symbols, cognitive challenges, and honest appraisal of other religious traditions, while supporting structures for movement beyond the comfortable, conventional faithing.

Since we see campus ministry as a "community," then the faithing person must include a primary emphasis on church, beyond that of being the embodiment of rules which foster loyalty to the institution. Unless this is the basis, then the "faithful" person is one who conforms to the rules, and violation of the rules and disloyalty to the institution constitutes unfaithfulness. The painful and difficult transition from the child-like faith to young-adult faith is found best and nourished most significantly in a non-conforming environment. Collescents must continue to develop, but without "wobble" from within the structures of the church for individual expressions of faith, faithing can be limited.

What is the role of the campus minister? How do we perform this "midwifing" ministry in helping to birth "new" adults into dynamic faith? If we go back and pick up the Erickson idea of the intimate person, then this is the highest

form of the interpersonal development for the collescent. It is reached when a student comes to appreciate the intrinsic value of relationships (or parents or peers), a sense of commitment, autonomy, freedom, trust, openness, and self-awareness that characterizes a relationship. This kind of mutual satisfaction grows out of a community of open, nondefensive, free and warm interpersonal relationships. Isn't it strange that we call this "growing in grace" in relationship to the Heavenly Father?

In this ministry of midwifing, then the older generation must face the task of expressing faith to the younger ones. Two dangers are present on this trail. One is that the older may expect exacting compliance to the faith content. The second danger is even more severe; the expectation of immediate compliance to that content. Ministers don't "give" faith, for collescents must do their own believing. Because the growing, groping mind of the collescent is so dynamic and volatile, it needs to be approached as if it were a well-armed castle. The drawbridge is down and will remain so, unless the castle of the mind is attacked. Ministry is not castle attacking—quite the contrary. If it is demanded that the younger generation believe exactly like the older, and do it now, then the drawbridges will be lifted! Does this not insure that their intellect will be missed? The campus minister may have to let the student be wrong for a while without condemnation about what the student believes.

You and I are to exhibit by example a maturing faith. Daily, we must make decisions and reveal attitudes, all the while confronting the questions of life's meaning. Sometimes the demands of the circumstances and the norms of faith seem to collide. It is then that we need to exemplify the Christ-like principles of liberating and reconciling love. All about are those peddling an enslaving faith. Our relationship with Jesus Christ will give us the opportunities to spotlight the promises of God and what God has done.

We have not arrived. We are becoming. But this is not just a theological stance. It is psychological as well. "Yes, we will all develop naturally, inevitably, but the missing ingredient is grace in the natural. There must be the coming together of the person's potential for partnership—synergetic involvement with the Holy Spirit."²² Faithing is not so much a teaching as it is a catching; not a stand, but a stance; not a position, but a posture of Him who permeates our life.

NOTES

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