

James Fowler's and John Westerhoff's Stages of Faith Development

... children possess naturally the essential elements for having faith. The kingdom of God is first perceived in the world children know best. Children, therefore, have as much to offer adults as adults have to offer them—perhaps more. As parents, we are not responsible to give our children faith; faith is a gift from God given to both us and our children. We are called to live faithfully in childlike ways with our children so that we both might know the gift of faith and live in its grace.

Our responsibility is not to offer our children information, advice or guidance. But children do deserve a response to their questions; an affirmation of their quest. We need to help them come into touch with the struggles, pains, doubts and insecurities their questions reveal. The most profound questions of life have no answers; each only opens new questions that lead even deeper into the unspeakable mystery of and ultimately to the mystery of God. What our children are really asking is for us to reveal and share ourselves and our faith, not to provide dogmatic answers.... You see, it is in the relationship between us during our shared quest that God is revealed.

Critical Openness
This concept was adopted in the report: *Understanding Christian Nurture* as a distinguishing feature of a faith-fostering mainstream church. It could be defined as an attitude that refuses to exclude any idea, concept or belief without first offering an honest and discerning examination of its 'content'. It also means (I think) that the examiner is open to his or her own position being moved as a result of the exploration of new or different ideas and values. This perspective will usually be marked by a respect for the views of others, whether or not those views are embraced or incorporated into one's own.

0 years	4 years	8 years	12 years	17 years	30+ years	Middle age
<p>0 <i>Nursed or Foundation Faith</i> Not so much a stage as a pre-stage. The foundations for faith are here laid down in the early experiences of being picked up and nursed, when trust is formed. 'We are loved into knowing and feeling, as we are loved into being.'</p>	<p>1 <i>Unordered or Impressionistic</i> At this stage a child's relatively uninhibited imagination yields a chaos of powerful images. As thinking is intuitive and episodic, reality is perceived as a scrapbook of impressions, barely ordered logically. Symbols are viewed magically and treated as being what they represent. The powerful symbols of Christian experience, tradition and liturgy can contribute deep and lasting images in this stage. So it may be that children who are excluded from experiencing ritual and sacrament alongside adult Christians, on the grounds that 'they don't yet understand', are being cut off from a vital form of nourishment. Dependable, structured parenting continues to be crucial at this stage.</p>	<p>2 <i>Ordering</i> At this stage the individual's power to think, to unify experience and to trace patterns of cause and effect enables her to order her experience. Story-telling is important, including telling the story of the Christian community to which the child or adult belongs. 'True stories' are now distinguished from others; but we are always 'in' the story rather than 'outside' it, and have no viewpoint from which to compare and criticize stories. People at this stage are very much 'belongers'. (We may recall how junior school aged children are so keen to belong to a club or group; and how their self-image is to a large extent constituted by such belonging.) By this stage individuals have achieved a measure of simple, concrete perspective-taking, overcoming the egocentricity of the smaller child.</p>	<p>3 <i>Confirming</i> The ability to think abstractly has fully developed by now, and there is a new capacity for (mutual, interpersonal) perspective-taking, as the adolescent or adult begins to see him- or herself as others do. Interpersonal relationships are now very significant. What our peers think and say is regarded as particularly important. But the same is true of other 'significant others', including parents, teachers—and sometimes church leaders. However rebellious we may view ourselves to be, at this stage we are actually little (or, if adult, big) conformists. 'It is a time of going with a particular faith-current or faith-crowd. The ability to reason in a new and more powerful way, which is a key feature of this stage, provides us with exciting opportunities for more abstract teaching and discussion. The scope of this remains limited, however, because the circle of people to whom we relate still does so much to provide our meaning-making, and we are largely unaware of that process. Those who are at this stage are not yet able adequately to reflect on their beliefs and values, or the way in which these are held. So when views are challenged we may respond very defensively, without really knowing why.</p>	<p>4 <i>Choosing</i> The transition to this stage can be long and traumatic, taking many years of struggle. We need to be very sensitive here, allowing people space to grow out of Stage 3 'faithing' into this new way of meaning-making. Now, I am able to take a '3rd person perspective' from which to evaluate my own beliefs and relationships, as I distance myself from my previous value system. Now 'I can no longer tolerate having my faith at second hand. I must know who I am for myself, when I am not being defined by my relationships with other people.' Beliefs and values that previously were rather unexamined can now be deliberately adopted. For the first time I explicitly and consciously take charge of, and accept responsibility for, my commitments, evaluations and worldview. At this stage faith can become my own. The certainties of the person who is at this stage arise from and contribute to his or her newfound autonomy and maturity. This can be seen as the beginning of a true 'adult faith'. But there are dangers here, including that of an 'avid over-intellectualism... a concealed autonomy', and an unrealistic sense of independence. There is also a tendency to caricature the faith of others in order to justify one's own truth, and an oversimplifying, either/or determination to create a tidy faith. This may result in collapsing the inevitable paradoxes and tensions within our belief-system.</p>	<p>5 <i>Inclusive</i> Many adults are content with Stage 4 faithing, but others find that their desire to resolve the tensions and to strive for clarification is becoming a psychological burden. Such people may be heading for a fifth stage of faith that is characterized by a much greater openness to, and mutuality with, other worldviews and perspectives. This faith stage is a marked development from the more rigid concerns for definition and conceptual clarity that are so characteristic of Stage 4. This stage is a more balanced and inclusive style of faith. It shows a way of knowing that keeps in tension the paradoxes and polarities of faith, allowing us to live with ambiguity in our meaning-system. These people are truly—but discriminatingly—open to other people and their viewpoints; they recognize that truth is too complex and many-sided for it to be adequately ordered from any one perspective. 'This person is willing to engage the other and to be changed by the other in a way that was not possible before.' Such people also recognize that reason needs to be supplemented by other ways of knowing reality (especially intuition), and that our instruments of coherence and clarity are too blunt to work the raw materials of faith adequately. The capacity for self-criticism, self-questioning and self-doubt develops fully. This stage often results from our coping with failure and/or our living with the consequences of earlier decisions. It is often characterized by a new humility and a fuller recognition of our inevitable interdependence.</p>	<p>6 <i>Selfless</i> This way of being in faith is essentially a relinquishing and transcending of self. Such people often go out to transform the world. And they often die in the attempt.'</p>
<p>Experienced Faith (Pre-school and early childhood) At this stage, theological words and doctrines are unimportant. Experiences of trust, love and acceptance provide opportunities for faith to form. Patterns, routines and ways of being are established at this stage. The important thing is not what you tell the person but their experience of you being a Christian.</p>	<p>Affiliative Faith (Childhood and early adolescence) Stories, experiences of awe and mystery, feelings and religious experience combine to give a sense of belonging. Members of the faith community are observed and copied. What they say is important. Creative activities and sharing help to deepen faith. There is a strong need to belong, to participate and to identify with the community of faith.</p>	<p>Searching Faith (Late adolescence) This is a time of questioning, doubting, experimenting with other ideas and finding alternative suggestions and explanations. Elements of doubt and critical judgment are essential to the development of a personal faith that replaces expressions of faith borrowed from other people.</p>	<p>Owned or Mature Faith (Early adulthood) This is a combination of the Affiliative and Searching styles of faith. People now want to put their faith into social and personal action, to stand up for what they believe. They are secure enough to be open to other points of view. Owned faith is enriched and developed by the challenge of different perspectives on the truth. People now find new meaning in and through story, symbol and ritual.</p>			