

Episode Four

Tools for understanding how faith grows

Fiona Hammond

Welcome to episode 4 of Faith Formation Essentials! We're into the second half of the course now, so I hope you feel like you are learning some things! There always seems to be so much to talk about. We're making very careful choices about what to include, to give you foundations that will help you to invigorate your faith formation work. Remember, there's a notes section in the back of your workbook, so if you have questions along the way, jot them down!

In this episode we'll be thinking a little about the ways that human beings develop as they grow. Having a handle on some of that helps you to understand where people are and how best to create learning experiences for them. That human beings develop in particular ways is a pretty obvious observation. It'll be interesting to think about that! And it leads us to some fascinating stuff about Faith: does faith develop in particular ways? If it does, what does that mean for our faith formation activity? Hint: it means a lot!

First though let's start with some prayer. In order to get to that, here's a little question for you.

Think of a person who has been significant to you in your faith journey. Can you think of someone who stands out to you, who helped your faith grow in a significant way? Once you have, what was it about them that made them significant to you?

Pause the video and jot down some ideas about this in your workbook. There are three steps.

- Who is the significant person?
- Why?
- Say a prayer, thanking God for these people and their ministry. You can do that in a group or on your own if you are solo.

Sound okay? Okay, pause the video now...

Okay, back now? You might remember we gave thanks for good learning last episode and this time it's about faith inspirers, you might say. We'll work up to issues about faith. First, let's talk about developmental issues.

Jonathan Sargeant

Think of a little baby in its first few weeks. Little sweetheart! If we were to take a bird's eye view on that child, returning every few months, what would we notice?



What would be different?

Well, most obviously the child grows. Size increases, hair grows, there are physical changes. That kind of development is very noticeable. In fact, the evidence of growth is so obvious and measurable, that people have kept data on child growth for a long time. This data means we can compare a child's age to the collected data and suggest that the baby is at a particular percentile in terms of growth. And we can use those measurements to prescribe particular actions if the child is not progressing along those broad trajectories.

In a sense this is what all development theory is like. The underlying idea is that human beings develop in particular ways. You can divide the time periods of development and call them stages. These things are very general and there are always exceptions but there is a core of objective truth in these things in various ways.

So we can talk about the idea that human beings develop physically. There are definitions for what is an infant, a child, a teenager and so on. Like we've been saying, that stuff is pretty obvious to observers.

Dom Fay

But humans develop in other ways as well. Here are some examples...

As well as physically, we develop socially. For instance you can generally say that children from ages 5-8 years may face challenges mixing with peers of diverse backgrounds and needs. There's a self-focus that means that children of this age always don't see the perspectives of others.

We develop morally as well. The developmental expert Kohlberg talks about this kind of growth. To follow our growing child, from the ages of 8-10, generally children observe or follow laws mainly to avoid punishment or earn reward. This is not a criticism. It's partly how our brains function. The idea that we should follow rules for the good of the community, or just because they ARE laws is something that comes later on.

We should note, however, there can be developmental factors that mean we don't reach those latter stages or are delayed in doing so. If we all reached the point of following laws because it's for the good of us all, then there would be no need for red lights or speed cameras, more or less! Those cameras 'encourage' us to obey the speed limit to avoid the fine.



Danni Clark

Okay, physical, social, moral, then there's intellectual development. Educational theorists have written about this extensively and their work still shapes how we see the teaching-learning process. People like Piaget, the mid-20th century Swiss developmentalist.

You might have experienced a young child who watches you pour two identical glasses of their favourite drink. Then you take one of those glasses and pour it into a taller though slimmer glass. The liquid rises higher. The small child will be keen on choosing the tall glass because they think there is more in it, even though they saw the amount as equal in the first two glasses. This is part of what we call pre-operational thought. Logic for the young child is based on their own personal experience of the world so far, rather than conventional knowledge. In the same way, one piece of cake, cut into two is now MORE cake! The child will learn as they grow that the mass of an object does not change when it is re-arranged. But in the realms of pre-operational thought, the child does not know this.

Fiona Hammond

So our exemplar child is now, 10-12 and growing into the capabilities of operational thought. They become capable of processing abstract or hypothetical ideas. You no longer need to hand over 4 oranges and take away 2 to make concrete the idea that $4-2=2$. This may all sound curious but it is important for us faith formers who work with children. Our ideas about God, for instance, are a combined bundle of abstract ideas and concrete experience. We've read about God in the Bible. We've experienced God through our church communities, but it does take a mental link to do that, to associate one with the other.

For young children, whose only way to understand the world is through concrete experience, how do they know God?

Well, stories about Jesus, a relatable person, are helpful. But even more directly, children know God because of their experience of people who they know also believe in God. Metaphors are difficult for the youngest because they rely on abstract thought. As an aside, it's worth noting that the active, imaginative life of a young child helps with this process. But that's a whole other kettle of fish! What we know is that the most effective person to work on faith formation with small children is loving and nurturing, always modelling care and acceptance. That's how a child knows God!

Anyway, more on this faith stuff later. Soon actually!



Peter Branjerdporn

Let's consider how human emotions develop. From the age of 12 on, with the onset of puberty, there is accompanying emotional change. It's possible that physiological changes are sometimes accompanied by acute and unpredictable emotional responses. Have you experienced that in young people you've lived with??

Alright, these are broad categories of development: social moral, intellectual and so on.

Other experts have looked at these various theories of development and seen the interplay between some of them. You could say that Erik Erikson did this when he published his work about the psycho-social development of people. He suggested 8 stages that humans move through from birth to the end of life. These are fascinating because it is very easy to see examples of them in the lives of those around us, even ourselves! We've included a table of these eight stages in the [workbook](#). We're not going to go through each stage but it's worth thinking about the people we work with through this lens.

The key idea is that in each stage there is said to be a binary conflict between two different states. The person subconsciously tries to resolve the conflict, and so makes progress through to the next stage. An example might make this clearer. In the first stage, infancy, the so-called conflict is about trust Vs mistrust. The child experiences the world around them and grows to learn whether they can trust the world or not. So if the child cries, what happens? Is someone there to look after them, discerning why they are crying, what need is being expressed? Or do they experience the opposite? If they learn that they live in a secure environment, with access to food and affection, and trust that this will be maintained then Erikson suggests they gain the key virtue: hope. They have learned that the world they live in is a place where optimism is possible. If mistrust wins out, then the child learns the maldevelopment, (Erikson's word), of withdrawal. The world is a dangerous place, that cannot be trusted, so withdrawal is the better strategy.

Fiona Hammond

Another example: our good old friend, the adolescent stage. Here Erikson suggests the conflict is between identity and identity confusion. The psycho-social task for the adolescent is working out who they are, where they fit into to the world, where they might be heading. Who am I? and alongside that: Do I like myself as this person? That sounds right, yes? Based on previous life experience and their current



situation, the teen tries to make sense of themselves, what society seems to expect of them and the values they try to hold and finds themselves.

If they manage to do this, or at least experience some satisfaction with the degree to which they can do this, they're on the way to finding themselves, Erikson suggests the virtue developed is 'Fidelity', a kind of loyalty to the community to the world they live in and to themselves. If the task is incomplete or unsatisfactory, then the maldevelopment is 'Repudiation'. In other words, a rejection of themselves and their community.

The world has changed since Erikson first published this stage theory last century. You might have heard the term "delayed adolescence" as a description of the idea that, these days, young adults are still exhibiting some of the traits of teens. Sometimes adults as well! One of the ways this might be expressed is that the sense of finding yourself is no longer mostly achieved during teen years. Instead it is a much longer process, sometimes even postponed until later in life. If you asked Erikson about this, he might suggest that this means the next stages become more difficult, if you haven't achieved the task of THAT stage. What do you think?

Jonathan Sargeant

Now let's skip over to the final stage: Integrity Vs Despair. In the old age period, we look back over our years and decide if we've lived a life we can be justifiably happy with. Sinatra sings, "Regrets, I've had a few, But then again too few to mention". Now the number of regrets is not the measure, but the passage of our days, the ups and downs: are we happy with how we've travelled them? If we've made mistakes, have we recovered from them, redeemed situations that were negative and so on, more often than not? Did we waste our lives or use them wisely? That last word is apt, because a positive outcome to the conflict of integrity V despair is wisdom. The flipside of wisdom is what Erikson calls Disdain, looking back over life and reaching a negative response.

Have a look through these stages in Erikson's Psycho-social theory of development. I think there's a lot of truth in these!

It seems to me that the church can play a significant role in enabling people to work with these so-called life conflicts, targeting faith formation activities that help people grow. I know for myself that my struggles with understanding myself in my teen years were deeply shaped in positive ways by the church community I had become part of. Those people and that positive way of seeing the world helped me at every step of the way then and still does today.



Okay, moving on from Erik...

The big picture for us is this: theoreticians have studied all of these kinds of development, moral social, emotional etc for many decades and have conceived stages for each of these in the same way we know there are stages of physical development. We grow, we move through these stages, mostly. Stage one, stage two and so on. Understanding them, even in broad ways can be helpful to educators and faith formers. If you understand people, you can do more effective teaching/learning with people. It's as easy as that.

Danni Clark

Now all of that information and theory is useful, but the broad brush strokes of it are also going to come in handy up next. Let's use these terms to talk about faith now.

You remember at the start of this episode when we were talking about people who were significant to us in our faith journey? I want to focus a little on the idea of faith: JOURNEY.

That's a term we are very used to hearing, so that we may not think too much of it. We're used to hearing it and thinking of faith in that way.

Faith (pause) journey.

What's interesting to me is that this is a relatively new term, actually. People of faith have had the idea of pilgrimages for many centuries. But that's possibly more, language-wise about a special physical journey. To think of day-to-day faith, its up and downs, its growth as a journey is much more recent.

So let's start before that, the word 'faith'. What does it mean? Now's the time for a bit of activity. We use it so often we may never have thought to define it! Here's what we're going to do. In a moment we'll pause the video, you'll turn to page of your workbook you'll see on the screen. There you'll find a bunch of different sections from Scripture where faith is mentioned. I'd like you to sit with those different passages and use some symbols to note your reactions to them.

- What passages or sections or words appeal to you?
- What passages or sections are difficult?
- What questions are raised for you?
- What surprises you?
- What links or common ideas about faith do you see?



If you're on your own, sit with your annotations and reflect on what they're telling you. If you're working in a group, there's opportunity for some sharing. Maybe pick one or two things to discuss if you're happy to do that. Make space and time for everyone to contribute if they wish. Just a minute or two each. Sound good?

Peter Branjerdporn

Okay, how was that? Faith is a word used in many different ways in scripture. Sometimes it refers to belief. Sometimes it's about expression of belief, actual lived out action. Sometimes it's a thing that some people have, implying that others don't. Sometimes it's a pre-requisite to an action by Jesus, whether that's healing or otherwise.

In many centuries since those words were used in scripture, the way the word is thought about has grown and developed too.

It raises one question. Is faith a noun, in other words a thing you have, that you get, or is it a verb, a thing you do? Hmmmm...

Back in the 80s a guy called John Westerhoff wrote a book called "Will our Children Have Faith?" As an episcopalian Priest, he was concerned about how the Church was ministering with children and had some ideas about that. In one small section of the book, just a few pages really, he outlined an idea about how faith develops in really practical ways. Around this time, another person, a Roman Catholic educator called James Fowler was writing about the same ideas. Westerhoff's few pages on this topic got a lot of attention and Westerhoff has written more about them ever since. Let's focus on them and see what we can learn.

First, how did Westerhoff see faith: noun or verb?

Okay, he definitely saw it as a verb. For him faith is a thing you do, not just a set of ideas. The creed is fine as a list of beliefs that we say in church, but how do you live out what it says?

So, point number one: faith is a doing thing.

2nd, what makes it grow? Westerhoff says faith grows and changes through interactions with others. It might be fine to be a hermit out in the wilderness, but for most of us, faith grows by being part of a faith community through interactions with others.

3rd idea: what is a good metaphor for understanding HOW faith grows? Westerhoff uses the metaphor of a tree, how a tree grows. Let's look at that.



Dom Fay

For Westerhoff, growth in faith can be understood using the analogy of growth of a tree, with concentric circles marking rings of growth. There are 4 ideas here.

One, Integrity. The essence of a tree is the same in a sapling as it is in later years, as a mature tree. So it is with faith. A more expanded faith is not necessarily more worthy. The faith of a child is just as important and worthy of attention and serious thought as an adult's. This is important because the evidence these days is that maybe the church doesn't totally or always believe this. Where do the resources of our churches mostly go? To maintaining the faith of adults. The adults get most paid staff members, church services written in adult language, lecterns at adult height and so on... But if faith is worthy whether it is new or more developed, there is some rethinking to do. Imagine if lecterns were accessible to ALL. Imagine if liturgies were written so all ages could participate fully. Hmm...

Two, Environment.

A tree needs good soil, sunlight and water, to grow, right? Just as a tree requires a nurturing environment for growth, so does faith development. Faith develops through interactions with other people of faith and requires a supportive environment in which these interactions can take place. That means a physical space but also safe emotional, intellectual spaces to for growing, questioning, and seeking.

Three, Process.

A tree grows gradually, and you can see the rings. Okay so you need to cut it open to do that but you know what I mean! Faith is the same. Growth might not be recognisable moment to moment but more so over a period of time. Westerhoff says faith grows through different styles, rather than stages. More on that soon. Each style grows out of, and expands from, the last.

Last, Expansion.

When we grow into a new style, previous styles of faith aren't discarded. They remain within us, as it is with the rings of a tree.

So that gives you a picture of the process of growth. But what are these styles themselves?

One thing first: other stage theory tends to be linked to particular ages of people, you know, infant, 0-2 years etc. Westerhoff's styles are not linked to a person's age. Whenever you come to have interactions with a faith community, you start at the first style. That's whether you're 5 years old or 55.



Jonathan Sargeant

Alright, enough of that: here are the four styles

First off the rank is EXPERIENCED Faith. You'll note with Westerhoff that the names of these styles accurately describe what's going on. Experienced faith is the style fully based around the newcomer's experience of the church as a community. The person in question will feel loved by God, if they feel loved by the community. It's all about love and trust and acceptance. God is experienced through the actions of others. This is why the art of welcome is so crucial for churches because it lays the foundation for all that's to come. And it reminds us that welcome is not just something you do for newcomers that first time, but it is ongoing; all congregants need to feel welcomed and loved and accepted every time they walk into the church.

For some this style of faith is what we call pre-conscious faith, in that a person in this style might not consciously state they are a part of this community. Rather they are experiencing the rituals, the customs, the culture, often more so through their senses in an intuitive sense than with full cognition or understanding. The experienced faith person, whether young or older, participates and through this participation, they come to value the community. So a church community that takes this seriously might train their parishioners to participate more fully.

Picture this: a new family comes one morning to church. They sit with their young children and during the service, their child drops a toy. Horror! It clatters to the floor. What happens next? At Church 1, a number of people around the church whip around to stare at the child. They grimace at the parents. Their experience of worship has been wounded! Probably wisely the child has dived under the pew, the parents feel mortified, no love trust and acceptance here. At church no.2, the toy drops to the floor. Maybe they've thought this through and have put carpet down so no clatter. But even so the toy drops. The parishioners have been trained. A few might turn around. They look with an understanding smile to the parents. Someone dashes down the back and gets a pre-prepared play bag for the child with activities based around the lectionary readings. The person in front of the family reaches down and hands the toy back to the child. Love. Trust. Acceptance.

Danni Clark

The second style is AFFILIATIVE Faith. The key word here is belonging. Belonging takes the form of copying, in the best sense of that word, and assuming the expressions of faith found in the community. Imitation and participation in the rituals and symbolic activities of the faith community is sustenance for the



newly-developing faith identity. This is the beginning of a sense of the corporate nature of faith, that it is not just “I” who believe but “we”. If the needs of love, trust and acceptance are met during the experienced faith style, the participant moves to the affiliative style. And by affiliating we’re not just talking about the experience of worship but the full gamut of what the church is, liturgically but also socially, missionally and beyond.

There is more of a conscious sense of joining the church community now. Having said that, Westerhoff still calls this style and the one before it ‘Religion of the Heart’. In these two styles, experience of faith is much more about how it makes one feel. This is why music, ritual, dance and symbol are a powerful means of faith communication for those in the affiliative faith style. Story-telling is key. The sense of acceptance and belonging are more heart-based than intellectual propositions.

It’s funny that it is often during these two styles when we want people to be admitted to communion based on an intellectual program of learning. Westerhoff’s idea is this: He says, “As time has progressed, I have increasingly become convinced that determinism – the belief that we can produce the results we desire in Christian formation if only we know enough – is not true.”

Instead, we become part of the community based on doing, being part of these liturgical actions, not because we initially understand them, but because we have been welcomed into them as the binding practices of the community. Understanding comes through reflection on doing, not because we did a 6 week course.

Having said that, this doesn’t mean there shouldn’t be any learning experiences for people in these two styles. On the contrary, the foundation of Bible study and learning and liturgical practice is crucial, providing the stabilising concrete slab work for all that is to follow.

Okay, so we’ve put some emphasis here on the idea of religion of the heart. In the next style, we see something of a transition.

Dom Fay

The next style is SEARCHING Faith. Faith is still heart-based, but we see the addition of a kind of religion of the head, too. Previously, the participant has accepted beliefs because these are the beliefs of the community. They have been largely unquestioned. But in the searching faith style, the questions take a higher focus. This is a style that can appear a little challenging to the church community if they don’t understand what is going on. But this kind of searching is only natural in



this model.

This is where the person starts to wonder about how it is the Old Testament character, Jonah can be swallowed by a large fish. Or why Jesus preaches a sermon on the mount in one gospel, but that sermon happens earlier in Jesus' time, and on a plain in a different gospel. Belief is questioned, not with the intent of destroying belief but rather to come to terms with it. Even so there may be a moving away from established traditions and traditional thought of the community to new and rapidly-evolving experimentation with alternatives, sometimes in an apparently abrasive or dogmatic appraisal of the faith community. Due to this, unsupportive communities often brand those in this style as "losing faith".

But if we see this as a natural part of the evolving nature of faith, maybe a different response is helpful. Instead, what if we realised that Searching Faith participants need space, space in which to be critical, to doubt and question without losing the sense of acceptance of the group.

Once upon a time, maybe these searching faith style people would be put in a special small group where they can ask all of their questions. We've realised it might be more helpful to include a range of different people in each of our small groups, so that the searchers can ask their questions in a supportive environment where more experienced members of the group can help the searchers explore, offering answers or going in search together. Without that space for searching, what may have been temporary withdrawal may become permanent. This can be a time when people fall away. We don't want that. Instead, we continue to show love and trust and acceptance -that stye (like a tree's growth ring) is still there inside the person and the needs are too. We still value participation and the sense of belonging from the second style. But now we show all of that in the caring, nurturing sense that we take the questing of people seriously. We take the questions seriously as a mark of growth, not as evidence of doubt. We make space so that with the questions and the search for answers, people can internalise their faith in practical ways.

Fiona Hammond

Okay, if we get all of this going then the person will enter the fourth style of faith: Owned Faith. Owned faith is where there might be a sense of enlightenment! In fact, Westerhoff talks about true conversion happening here, rather than back in the first style. This is where we truly have a sense of our OWN faith, not, say, the



faith of our parents, or the faith of others. It is OUR faith. It is MY faith. The doubts and questions might still remain, but there is a sense in which people want to walk the walk as well as talk the talk. The struggle to be consistent and act with the integrity of our faith becomes apparent. We want to live our faith out in social action, in personal commitment and so on. With the addition of this ring of our tree, this style faith becomes central to our lives, not because others are doing it, but because we choose to live this way. We do so not just to belong... We are a part of a faith community to truly contribute.

Jonathan Sargeant

Alright, four faith styles. I sense truth in this model, because it reflects the way I see faith growing in the people and church around me everyday.

And it reflects things that make sense. Westerhoff's different idea about conversion rings true to me. His model also reflects the idea of journey. It seems right to me that although I know of a time when I personally, consciously said to myself I'm now going to follow a Christian path, I can also see the pattern of moments leading up to that over years when God was already at work, in the love of people around me.

I like the idea of faith as a verb, a doing thing, rather than a static noun, a thing, an object you have or don't have. I like the emphasis this model puts on taking growth seriously, on taking welcome seriously, on taking questions seriously, on making space for people to learn and learn to love others.

What do you think? Does this model ring true for you? It is very widely accepted but I do hear a criticism here and there. Some have said this model describes what happens rather than being based on quantitative evidence. Some have said it describes the western liberal experience of faith. Hmm, what do you think?

For now, I'm happy with this model. As with any theory like this, the purpose is not to put people in boxes - (exaggerated voice) "Oh look, they're just affiliative faith people, how simple!"

Instead, it gives us reasons to celebrate people at each style and gives clues for the kind of faith communities that encourage faith to be formed and grow, whether in schools, parishes or elsewhere. Sounds good to me!

Ok, episode 4 done! We've thought a little about stage theory. We met Erik Erikson, still a great name, and looked at his psycho-social theory of development. We thought a little about faith as a word and then explored Westerhoff's idea of Faith Styles. I think we've all earned our pay! There's a lot to cogitate over here. I wonder



what the implications of Westerhoff's four styles are for the faith forming ministry you do or aspire to do? That's a big question worth some reflective thinking time!

Next time, something completely different. We've lined up a swag of the best thinking strategy tools you've even seen. We'll run through a good pattern for a learning experience and give you tools for each step of the way. It's going to be great! I'll see you then.

