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a forum for people struggling with faith and church issues

**values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God**

Stages of Faith

From the Biblical writers urging their readers to advance from 'milk' to 'meat' to John Bunyan describing the 'Pilgrim's Progress' to James Fowler putting forward the model of stages of faith, there has been a recognition that faith is not static but changes over a lifetime.

In this edition one person tells the story of the internal and external events and processes that led to a profound change in personal understanding and expression of faith. And Alan Jamieson gives an introductory summary of Fowler's Faith Stages and puts forward a new analogy for understanding different ways of being people of faith.

Reflections from an exile

My faith journey began as an adolescent seeking identity and a framework of meaning on which to build a sense of connectedness in the world. I recall a deep sense of belonging when around a group of young Christian people who attended an evangelical, Pentecostal, charismatic church (EPC church). At the age of 15, I made a decision to enter this EPC sub-culture and found it full of life, friendship and experiential faith. My sense of self and my place in the world became neatly packaged in concepts, values and beliefs that made sense to me personally, and made sense of the turmoil of world events that characterised the later part of the Cold War under the shadow of a nuclear holocaust.

This snug "meaning" fit between my outer world and the inner world of experiential faith culminated in my accepting an invitation to continue my faith journey as a full-time minister. This involved ministry training and mentoring and resulted in formal recognition by an EPC national structure. I had a special interest in how the church might seek to equip younger people to make sense of an emerging post-modern society. A world that was moving rapidly away from the suspiciousness and monoculturalism of the Cold War era to a society that embraced and validated other cultures because it was beginning to recognise its own culture, colonialism and dominant/minority socio-political issues.

However, after 10 years of ministry, I returned to working in the public sector, disillusioned, angry and with a disintegrated sense of life's purpose, the existence of God, and deeply suspicious of organised religion.

On reflection, several factors contributed to this meltdown. First, a good friend, mentor and

ministry colleague committed suicide, leaving a young family, friends and faith community to deal with significant trauma. It would be safe to say this suicide shattered my neatly packaged framework of life and faith and challenged my values and beliefs about death, ministry and life. Secondly, I began to detect serious divergence occurring between the way New Zealand children and young people were being educated and the way faith was communicated to them by the EPC church I ministered within. Thirdly, I enrolled in an undergraduate programme of theological reflection with a major focus on contemporary pastoral studies. Lastly, I began to explore this growing disquiet within myself with the assistance of a skilled spiritual director.

The suicide of a ministry colleague forced me to examine my own mortality and to ask deep questions about what kind of person I was, and what kind of person I wanted to become with what remained of my life. These questions centred on my identity, intimacy needs in my relationships and a wider understanding of adult spirituality. The tidy package of values and beliefs I had developed during my early Christian experience was utterly unable to assist me with the shattering suicide of a mentor. How could well-meaning Christians expect god to answer a prayer for a car-park outside Queen Street when others find car-parks to purchase goods they later use in their suicide! I began to notice a growing disparity between my outer world, shaped so neatly by the EPC church, and my inner world screaming for a spirituality that made sense of the mess and uncertainty of my life.

Also at this time, education philosophy was undergoing a shift from being shaped by a one-

size-fits-all concept of life-span development (Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Kolberg), towards ecological frameworks much more interested in the local, contextual (cultural) and narrative concepts of knowledge and cognitive learning (Rogers, Vykotski, Bronfenbrenner). Young people from Christian families were being educated in environments of collective exploration rather than authoritative informing. Like me, many Christian young people began experiencing chronic internal conflict.

The EPC church in which I ministered continued to provide a 'talking-head' model of authoritative informing. Instead of the church rediscovering that its roots are buried neck-deep in narrative, local theology and experience with god, it preferred to beat harder on the authority drum.

Scripture, rich in the story of local relationships, continued to be used as an explicit and unchallengeable authority on everything from dating to the proliferation of genetically modified organisms.

The EPC church's self-imposed monopoly on truth became increasingly divergent in relation to young peoples growing tolerance of others' perspectives, their accepting the validity of another's experience and their unprecedented confidence to find a voice in an increasingly multicultural, and multiple-meaning society.

These issues played heavily on my mind. On the one hand I felt it was important for Christian young people to develop skills to live in a post-modern secular society, and on the other, I was a chief spokesman for a tradition of certainty, absolute authority and one-size-fits-all evangelical spirituality.

For me, my crisis of faith was centred in a crisis of integrity. Integrity demanded integration. My experience of life needed to fit into a framework of meaning, even if that framework included uncertainty, doubt, mystery, magic and story. I have a distinct memory of standing before the congregation one Sunday morning and looking out upon a sea of sincere faces and saying to myself "I just can't do this shit anymore". I doubted

a dominantly male god, I doubted a divine conception, I was suspicious that Christian concepts of hell, sin, salvation and forgiveness were no more than linguistic constructions designed to hold people in moral infancy. I increasingly found church to be more like an infomercial for childish faith, an exercise in holding people back from experiencing mature faith through repeated exhortations (usually from a male leader) to jump higher, live more virtuously, give more, die more. If I had a dollar for every time I heard the word "really", I could have eliminated world poverty by now!

It was not long before these internal issues got the better of me. I ejected from EPC faith like a pilot ejecting from a fighter-jet moments before it is hit by a missile. I could not peddle EPC faith and keep a straight face! I could no longer muster the inclination or energy to teach impressionable people that the earth was only 7500 years old and that Christian faith was the only way to avoid the horrors of a hellish afterlife. Most importantly, I could no longer be an active participant in a system of socialisation that appeared to prevent people from engaging with their faith as adults instead of being held in parental social transactions.

Through my theological reflections and self-analysis, I began to appreciate that it was indeed possible, and necessary to find new faith pathways, places to stand, points of confluence that addressed my need to discover a larger vista. Through the acceptance of others on a similar journey, I am learning to trust my instinct and inner search for adult forms of beauty, goodness and truth. For me, the revelation of god is not a closed set of values to dogmatically define and defend, rather a large landscape to explore. While I continue to have doubts about many things, I feel that my journey so far has produced in me a deep appreciation of culture, faith commitments, myth, custom and ritual as significant and valuable features of a physiologically healthy individual and wider community.

Anon

Off-road faith

“Essential for mature religion is the constant willingness to shift gears, to integrate new insights and revise our positions.”

Henri Nouwen

Many people have attempted to describe how faith changes, matures and develops throughout life using different analogies to explain the process of faith development. Teresa of Avila used the analogy of a journey into an interior castle which involves moving through a number of different **rooms**. Each room has its own challenges of faith and new experiences and ways of relating to God. Each move to a subsequent room brings us to a closer and more intimate connection with God. John Bunyan in *Pilgrims Progress* described the journey of faith as a travelling adventure through many different types of **terrain**. The adventure includes places of danger and risk as well as times of being at home and secure.

James Fowler, the leading researcher and writer in the area of faith development for the last three decades talks of **stages** of faith. He likens the stages of faith to the stages in other areas of human development – e.g. cognitive development and moral development. In today’s society many people feel uncomfortable with the idea of moving from one stage of faith to another. Stages sound like boxes; and moving through stages sounds like a logical hierarchy when life and faith are experienced in a more chaotic, organic and less hierarchically structured way. Picking up on this discomfort Heinz Streib (Professor of Faith development at Bielefeld) speaks of **styles** of faith rather than stages. Sam Keen uses the idea of **dimensions** in order to move away from the ‘staged’ idea of Fowler. Recently, at Spirited Exchanges training event, Adrienne Thompson suggested the notion of **zones** of faith. Zones are less rigid and more fluidly interconnected and overlapping than stages.

We may think of rooms, terrains, stages, styles, dimensions, zones, spaces or places of faith. The reality is that for many people their experience of faith changes during adulthood. These changes are not uncommon and have similar elements. But most importantly our faith is radically and unalterably transformed as we move into a new ‘phase’ of faith.

The crucial adult faith-shifts involve a move from conventional faith (which Fowler would call stage 3 faith) into a period of faith dislocation, exploration, self ownership and expression (Fowler’s stage 4) and on into a new embracing of faith and life as intimately entwined and inseparable, a desire for mystery, ritual and symbolism and a relishing of the paradoxical nature of truth (Fowler’s stage 5). This is the move from a conventional faith to a post-conventional one. The move is from a pre-critical faith through a period of hyper-critical reflection to a post-critical faith. Or, as the French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur described it – the move from a naivety of faith through a ‘desert of criticism’ and into a second naivety of faith.

It is this shift of faith from conventional to post-conventional, from a first naivety to a second naivety, from pre-critical to post-critical that is vitally important in our present context. Why? Because the culture we live within fosters, supports and encourages this shift in our thinking, understanding and living out of our faith.

Fowler’s Six Stages

Fowler’s theory of faith development divides the faith journey into 6 stages. Below is a summary of the key aspects of three of these stages. Stages 1 & 2 are not included as they are generally early childhood and teenage expressions of faith (although for a small minority of adults stage two is their dominant adult expression of faith and life). The final stage is left because only a very small percentage of the population could be described as living out of this stage.

Stage 3: people are generally committed workers and servers with strong loyalty to their church (christian community). They are acutely tuned to the expectations and judgements of others, often holding deep but unexamined convictions. Often their focus is on relationships with God and the important people of their lives; they feel that they are living up to the expectations of these important others. They have a strong sense of the church as an extended family, there to support each other. Because of this, conflict and controversy are often threatening to them.

Stage 4: Here the individual begins to emerge from the encircling influence of significant others and groups. They hold themselves, and others, more accountable for their own authenticity, beliefs, actions, and consistency. They no longer tolerate following the crowd; their reference group widens and they are increasingly comfortable with diversity and conflict. They want a leadership that acknowledges and respects their personal positions and allows them to contribute to decision-making. The danger of this stage is that they typically see themselves as self-sufficient, self-starters, self-managing and self-repairing units and it is easy for them to become isolated.

Stage 5: people who move into Stage 5 begin a new stage where earlier boundaries become less fixed. They become aware of paradox and more able to accept it; allowing different perspectives to co-exist. They resist forced synthesis or reductionist arguments, being more open to ambiguity, mystery, wonder, and apparent irrationalities. People at this stage are less dogmatic, more willing to listen, less inclined to label those who don’t agree with them.

How does contemporary culture foster and support such a personal faith shift?

- Through new approaches to education focused on learner sensitive approaches and new pedagogies and through greater participation in tertiary forms of education that foster critical thinking, and analysis.
- Through immersion in a media saturated culture in which the media's approach is often adversarial, agenda-driven and conflicting in its presentation of 'news', information and entertainment.
- Through increasing dependence on global information communication systems (internet, web, phone and live TV coverage) which make an ever growing ocean of opinions, 'facts' and information instantly and cheaply available.
- Through greater participation in overseas travel and greater interaction with people of different cultures, religions and philosophies 'at home'.
- Through the pervasive presentation of values, life-styles and beliefs in the arts, music, film, video and DVD.
- Through a reduction in personal security and stability previously more readily available in families, work and employment, sports and cultural clubs and church. Each of these institutions has significantly changed in recent decades.
- Through the sense of powerlessness generated in the wake of the powerful face-less markets controlling currency rates, share prices, interest rates and the value of commodities, businesses and skills.

Through these changes a global culture is emerging which fosters the personal shift from conventional to post-conventional faith. And simultaneously we also see the exact opposite of this happening. Because for a sector of people this shift also creates the opposite response: into religious, political and ideological fundamentalism. While the shift toward fundamentalism has been significant, especially in the wake of 'September 11', it is not as expansive nor, I would argue, as significant, as cultural fostering of a post-conventional, post-critical, second-naivety towards faith. While Fundamentalism may be a powerful faith shaper for some people for some parts of their lives it is not the key shaper for most people through-out most of their lives.

At the church I go to two large paintings hang side by side at the front of the auditorium. The first depicts a road through the countryside. The road is clearly marked with a centre line and white lines at either edge. It is a straight road leading down a slight descent and across open country. In this picture the journey of faith is clearly marked in front of us.

The second picture shows open countryside with foothills and mountains in the background. There are no roads, tracks or markers. Here each traveller is free to, and must, make their own way. For the first picture an ordinary vehicle and moderate driving ability is all that would be needed to make your way down the road. On the other hand the open country of the second picture would require a four wheel drive vehicle and considerable off-road driving experience to traverse.

Recently I've been thinking about these two pictures and the comparison between conventional driving and conventional phases of faith and off-road driving and post-conventional phases of faith understanding and expression. With both there are similarities and yet big differences. Learning to drive a four wheel drive vehicle is helping me to understand the extent of these differences.

The first mistake we make is thinking we can travel through this new phase of faith in the same conventional road vehicle we are used to driving. Sadly this doesn't work. To successfully traverse beyond the tar sealed road an off-road vehicle is needed. Equally, to successfully traverse beyond conventional faith a new vehicle of faith is needed. The old must be left at the road side or else it will very quickly become stuck or dangerous in the new conditions. Not realizing how essential this change is leads to huge disappointments.

The second thing we need to be aware of is that an off-road vehicle is quite different to a conventional two wheel drive car. Sure there are similarities but there are also big differences. The way you use the gears, use the brakes, the tyres and the equipment needed to get out of trouble when you get stuck are all new.



While one mistake is to assume that the old conventional vehicle of faith will get us through this new terrain of faith the second is equally important. Being in the right kind of vehicle (in this case a four wheel drive) doesn't mean we are equipped or experienced enough to drive in off-road terrain.

Off-road driving and off-road faith are both similar. When you begin four wheel driving there is a whole new world of learning ahead. So too the world of off-road or post-conventional Christian faith forms. In four wheel

driving speak we need to learn about driving in high and low ratio, how to use manual and automatic hubs. What the difference is and the risks and strengths of both. New appreciation for the right kind of tyres and tyre pressures for different terrain is needed. Different types of hooks and strops, winches and jacks are needed for extraction. But you don't just need the gear you need to know what to use when and how to use them quickly and safely. You need to learn how to pick a route through mud, across a rutted path or through a river. You need to know about approach, departure and ramp angles, centre of gravity, and how to use engine braking, cadence braking or over-drive braking. And more importantly still you need to know what you and your vehicle can do and what you can't. When it is safe to cross a river and when it is best to find another route.

Entering the world of post-conventional faith is very similar. There are a whole range of things to un-learn and equally demanding new learnings, understandings and experiences to grasp. Yet the uninitiated observer notices little difference between on-road and off-road driving. The same is true for the uninitiated observer of peoples' changed faith experience and expression from a conventional faith to a post-conventional faith form. This is understandable. You can drive a four-wheel drive vehicle on conventional roads just as you would a 'normal' two-wheel drive vehicle. Equally a post-conventional Christian faith seems in many ways the same as a conventional faith expression. It is only when you move into uncharted territories of faith or track that the differences become apparent. And then they are substantial. The following table presents in generalisations the depth of change that occurs between a conventional, pre-critical naïve faith and a post-conventional, post-critical second naivety of faith. Both can be distinctly Christian but they are fundamentally different.

This analogy of shifting from four-wheel drive to two-wheel drive by changing gears helps me because it deflects one of the great criticisms of the staged faith model: the inherent sense that the later stages are better or more mature than the earlier ones. When we think of *stages* this is hard to dispute because while Fowler is very clear that no stage is better than another and no Christian is any more saved or loved by God than someone at another stage; there is the inherent reality that the later stages are broader and deeper in their faith experience, understanding and expression than earlier stages. They may not be better but they seem so. Because of this apparent hierarchy people at the later stages may see themselves as somehow better or more mature than they used to be and also more mature than others. I want an analogy that recognizes that different places on the journey of faith are distinctly different but not evaluatively better or stronger. Thinking in terms of on-road and off-road driving with appropriate gear changes from four-wheel to two-wheel drive gives me this analogy.

Conventional faith expression	Transitioning	Post-conventional faith expression
Focus on a black and white, right and wrong faith	Focus on the greys of faith and life	Focus on all shades of faith and life
Dependence	Independence	Interdependence
Answers accepted	Searching and questioning, doubt and critique	Understanding and relishing of mystery, paradox and wonder
Primary sense of relationship with God is hierarchical e.g. God's servant	Primary sense of relationship with God is relational e.g. God's friend (John 15)	Primary sense of relationship with God is intimate e.g. God's lover (Song of Songs)
Socially constructed identity and roles	Formation of self identity and roles	Giving of self for others
Want someone to lean on – e.g. a mentor or discipler	Want someone to encourage and legitimate their personal exploration – e.g. a facilitator or sponsor.	Want a co-discerner of God's will and leading – e.g. a spiritual director
Focus on external authority of leaders, the Bible and my community of faith	Focus on internal authority of self understanding, experience and self truth.	Focus on an integration of internal and external authorities of faith
The Bible, faith community or leaders are the authors –of –my-faith and life. A need to listen to the external voice(s)	I am the author-of-my-faith and life. A need to listen to the internal voice(s)	The Spirit of God within me is the author-of-my-faith and life. A need to integrate external and internal voices.
Status quo confirmed	Status quo challenged	Status quo integrated into larger canvas
What and how	Why	What is my contribution?
Specific personal examples	Hearing and telling our own stories	Working with metaphor, art and poetry

“So we are ever more confident of the message proclaimed by the prophets. You will do well to pay attention to it, because it is like a lamp shining in a dark place until the day dawns and the light of the morning star shines in your hearts”

Jenny McIntosh, the editor of this newsletter and facilitator of Spirited Exchanges, is currently travelling in the UK where she has been involved in the Greenbelt Festival. She writes:

Greenbelt 2005 was an amazing event. It is like Parachute but not like Parachute! Like in that it is a lot of people living under canvas while they attend a variety of music, worship, seminars and art spaces. Not like in that Greenbelt has a greater diversity of faith expressions on offer, has an organic beer tent, a wonderful quiet space (designated Soul Space) with numerous icons and symbols for prayer, run by a team of spiritual directors with the offer of free sessions for those who would like, and is more social justice oriented. I found it a bit like a gourmet meal - rich, diverse, and loads of options. It was certainly a place I felt I could belong. And for many in the UK it is just that sort of place also. Many described it as their 'church' which they come to once a year.

The sessions (four in all) which I did about faith outside the church, the faith journey, and Spirited Exchanges were all very well received and countless people identified with and felt encouraged by the idea of something like Spirited Exchanges. There is, this week, a group of people going to meet with me in London. I would describe them as people who know the journey and are leading people in the shifting and emerging paradigms of church who are keen to take this further and develop some sort of similar initiative to Spirited Exchanges in NZ. The time is very ripe for this to happen.

Kester Brewin, author of The Complex Christ writes on his blog his own musings of the question and answer session I did with Dave Tomlinson: "Perhaps we need a churchless Church. The body of Christ is a given - we have to belong to the Church (macro). But perhaps we should give up calling the things we are involved in church (micro). It is just such a loaded and unhelpful word to use. "Do you want to come to church?" To be honest, no I don't. And by the numbers and temper of those in the debate, there's plenty of others who don't either. Church can be something I am a part of. But it's not something I want to 'go to'."

Jenny returns to NZ in early October.

A further quote from Kester Brewin's blog
(see www.thecomplexchrist.com)

[He reflects on the research of Rollo May who has investigated causes of anxiety.]

What Rollo's work seems to back up is that the root of the anxiety is not that people are struggling with rejecting the old forms of faith, but that they are 'lied to' about that rejection: told that they are back-sliding, flirting with dangerous beliefs etc. If the routes forward onto the further stages are not open and clear for people - which is surely a pastoral task that all churches must take seriously, then people who are moving between the stages are not going to be able to 'know the world they are in and orient themselves in their existence.'

Unfortunately, this anxiety unrecognised and untreated can lead to rejection of faith entirely and, perhaps more immediately seriously, depression and psychological trauma. If this is further 'treated' by inappropriate ministry within the Stage 3 context it can actually get much worse... And I think many of us can think of examples of that.

quoted with permission from Kester Brewin

RESTRAINT

Competing agendas
The perfect dilemma
Mixing roles and priorities
Like oil and water.

True to myself, the essence of "being"
While restrained by my need to belong.

Andrew Wheatley

TOGETHER

Don't expect your pain to be understood
They will never know how you feel

Take my hand and I will cry with you
Without words and for no specific hurts
This journey is ours together

Tell me your dreams and "wild ideas"
Let us dance and sing and weep
Hand in hand we'll move ahead
Our journey has just begun.

Andrew Wheatley

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