

# FAITH DEVELOPMENT

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## OUTDOOR MINISTRIES PROGRAM LEADERSHIP MANUAL

## FAITH DEVELOPMENT

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As human creatures, we each develop—physically, emotionally, mentally, morally and spiritually—from our birth until our deaths. It is probably easiest to see the outward signs of our physical development as we grow from infants, to toddlers, to preschoolers, to school age, to adolescence, to the various stages of adulthood. Each of these stages of our physical development is accompanied by measurable and predictable changes. They effect our body shape, strength and functions. These changes happen without any conscious effort on our part.

Developmental theory also believes that we develop in the same way in the emotional, mental, moral and spiritual aspects of our lives. The development theories of Erik Erikson, James Fowler, Jean Piaget, and Laurence Kohlberg describe the measurable and predictable stages we go through as we develop in these other aspects of our lives. Developmental theory is a fairly new field, coming to the attention of those who study human behavior during the last 35 years. It is interdisciplinary in the ways that the theory of one area inform the theory of another. For instance, as we will see, Fowler’s theory of faith development is informed by the work of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson. For additional information about developmental theory, please see the chapter in this manual entitled “Human Development and Program Progression.”

The various theories are similar in several ways. Each theory describes stages of development which are sequential. There are characteristics for each stage which are descriptive. None of the stages have more or less value, and their description is never meant to compare them in terms of worth. The theories are based on observation and frequently make use of a narrative approach to gather information. The theories are useful to anyone who works with people because they inform the expectations we can have of persons at certain developmental periods in their lives.

In this article we want to pay attention to the faith development theory of James Fowler and the way that theory can inform us as we work with people within the camp and conference setting. If you want to study Fowler’s theory in greater depth, I direct you to *Stages of Faith and Life Maps*.

Although Fowler is a Christian, his theory describes what he believes is a human process of faith development. All persons, regardless of their religious affiliation or lack of it, develop through the stages he identifies. Faith is not defined for Fowler as Christians would tend to do it in relationship to the God of Abraham, Sarah and Jesus. Rather faith is the patterns of mental activity that sort out what gives our lives meaning and purpose. There are developing patterns that are consistent among humans whether they are Christians, Moslems, Jews or atheists. Faith, he says, is a verb, an active and imaginative process, a unifying force that gives shape and direction to how we live our lives, how we relate to others, and what we believe is the ultimate reality.

Fowler identified six stages of faith development. There is a pre-stage period of infancy that is pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic. The first stage includes children ages 4-7 in which fantasy, facts and feelings are fused and knowing is dominated by perception. The second stage begins about age 7 and lasts until abstract thinking skills emerge about age 12. This stage is characterized by literal thinking and a need for fairness. In Stage Three the beliefs of the individual are synonymous with the beliefs of significant others, whether those others are people with authority or peers. During Stage Four, which usually begins about age 18 and continues into

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adulthood, individuals begin to form faith systems of their own as they developed an identity separate from others. Stages Five and Six occur at midlife and beyond.

Unlike some developmental theories, not all persons will pass through all six stages in their faith development. Some adults will stay in Stage Three for most of their lives; few adults reach Stage Six. It is very important in interpreting this theory that no value be placed on any stage as better or worse than another. The theory describes characteristics of the patterns with which we make meaning of our lives. The patterns work for us until internal or external crises make growth necessary. Then we move toward the next stage.

For the purposes of this training manual we will be using a chart of Fowler's stages developed for the first Leadership Notebook, which is based on descriptive terms for the theory from *Faith Passages and Patterns* by Thomas Droege. To understand the relationship between Fowler's names for his theory and those on the handout, please refer to the chart below.

| Fowler's Stages                     | Stages Named on Handout                         |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Primal Faith (0-4)                  |   |
| Stage One: Intuitive                | Stage One: God is Like Mommy and Daddy          |
| Stage Two: Mythic-Literal           | Stage Two: What's Fair is Fair                  |
| Stage Three: Synthetic-Conventional | Stage Three: I Believe What the Church Believes |
| Stage Four: Individuative-Reflexive | Stage Four: As I See it, God is...              |
| Stage Five: Conjunctive Faith       | Stage Five: More than Just Words                |
| Stage Six: Universalizing Faith     | Stage Six: I have a Dream                       |

In order for any theory to be useful to us, we must be able to understand it in terms of the people with whom we work and the programs that develop in response to their needs. Faith development theory becomes useful when we use it to begin asking questions about our practices. It can enable us to plan appropriate activities, to set reasonable expectations, and to choose methods and content that are consistent and congruent with the developmental need of our learners.

Within the camp and conference setting, faith development theory can assist leaders in understanding their own faith and the faith of participants. It will enable them to plan well and not expect from learners thinking skills or behaviors of which they are not yet capable. We tell biblical stories to junior campers and ask senior highs to think about the concepts of their faith. A knowledge of faith development by leaders can strengthen relationships and make faith sharing more meaningful.

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### About the Writer

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## Module One for Trainers of Trainers

### Expected Outcomes:

- Participants will become familiar with basics of faith development theory.
- Participants will understand the role of faith development in hiring and training staff.
- Participants will understand the role of faith development in choosing program materials.

**Estimated Time:** 2 hours.

**Materials Needed:** flipchart and markers, copies of Handout One, Bibles.

**Notes to Leaders:** It is important that the facilitator of this process has a basic understanding of faith development theory and be comfortable in explaining it to others. It is also important that both the leaders and the participants understand that stages of faith are descriptive and not qualitative. For example, a Stage Four faith is no better or worse than any other stage. If participants do not know each other, begin the session with a time of group building.

### Process:

1. Divide the participants into small groups. Ask participants to remember their own faith stories. What was God like when they were 6 years old? 14 years old? 22 years old? Now? What are the particular spiritual experiences from those times that they remember? How have those concepts changed over the years? Are there biblical stories that they associate with those different times in their lives?
2. Gather back together and share stories and insights.
3. Introduce the basics concepts behind Fowler's faith development theory. Pass out Handout One, "Faith Development." Talk about the ways in which the participants' stories are consistent with the stages of faith as described in the handout.
4. Look at the Implications sections on the handout. Discuss the ways in which knowledge of faith development informs hiring and training of staff. Make a list of the implications for both hiring and training staff.
5. Look at the Factors sections of the handout. Discuss the ways in which awareness of these factors can influence the choice of print materials, worship and other camp activities. (For additional information you may want to refer to the chapters "Choosing and Using Curriculum" and "Human Development and Program Progression" in this manual.) Make a list of the ways in which these factors can influence Bible study, worship, and other camp programs and policies.

# HANDOUT ONE: FAITH DEVELOPMENT

The material below is based on the work of James Fowler as it is described in the LEAD book *Faith Passages and Patterns* by Thomas A. Droege (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).  
Used with permission.

## STAGE 1: GOD IS LIKE MOMMY AND DADDY

**Approximate age range:** From two to six years.

People develop a basic sense of trust. They rely on those who provide care, love, and nurture. They identify God as a caring, loving parent who protects and nurtures.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Remember random segments of stories.
2. Cannot always distinguish fact from fantasy.
3. Lack abstract reasoning skills.
4. Are fragile and have limits.
5. Trust adults, usually.
6. View God as a friend to be talked to.
7. Learn best through actions of others (more so than words).

### Implications for leaders:

1. Tell simple, single-focus stories.
2. Listen carefully to detect points of confusion.
3. Don't teach abstract ideas that will be misunderstood and will need to be unlearned later.
4. Know and respect their abilities and limits.
5. Don't take advantage of their trust by overteaching.
6. Seek opportunities for spontaneous free prayer to God.
7. Exemplify God's love and acceptance.



People might view Isaac's trust in his father rather than any sense of danger.

## STAGE 2: WHAT'S FAIR IS FAIR

**Approximate age range:** From seven to twelve years.

People begin to develop a sense of fairness. They are attracted by simple stories, but their understanding is literal and often limited to seeing only good or evil, justness or fairness. Their faith is often expressed as good people receiving blessings and bad people being punished.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Tend to seek justice and revenge (Old Testament stories are popular).
2. Attracted by law more than gospel.
3. Lack the ability to reflect on the spiritual meanings of stories; tend to understand only the literal story line.
4. Look to others as models of Christian behavior.
5. Have a need to belong.
6. Tend to focus on God as a loving Father for their own personal lives.
7. Are growing in awareness of the purpose of Jesus' life.

### Implications for leaders:

1. Tell stories that present a positive image of God's action.
2. Present carefully concepts like forgiveness, stewardship, and concern for others who are not present.
3. Choose stories that have clear messages; avoid adding moralisms.
4. Tell stories about and invite people to class who do exemplary acts.
5. Involve them with many people of the parish.
6. Provide opportunities for prayer, private devotions, and worship.
7. Teach carefully the distinction between God and Jesus.



People might view God rewarding Abraham by telling him to "stop" because he obeyed the first command to prepare Isaac as a sacrifice.

### STAGE 3: I BELIEVE WHAT THE CHURCH BELIEVES

**Approximate age range:** Begins about age 12.

People rely on authorities for what they believe. There is little critical examination of beliefs. Their widening contacts begin to expose them to conflicting authorities, but their beliefs and understandings of God are as the church teaches.

**Factors which affect this expression of faith:**

1. Can begin to think abstractly.
2. Desire organized patterns of thinking.
3. Have a quest for religious knowledge.
4. Can articulate what they've been taught, but are not able to develop their own point of view.
5. Need acceptance and self-esteem.
6. Look for identity from others; peers are important.
7. Have strong feelings of trust.
8. Are easily indoctrinated.

**Implications for leaders:**

1. Encourage their developing ability to question and think for themselves.
2. Provide increasingly complex ideas to fit their expanding world.
3. Recognize their growing understanding of God as a personal friend and adviser.
4. Help them feel good about what they know. Use factual information and encourage the expression of opinions.
5. Affirm and encourage them as individuals and stress God's grace.
6. Give special attention to relationship building. Use group-oriented teaching styles such as teamwork, projects, and so forth.
7. Encourage their prayer and devotional life.
8. Don't take advantage of their willingness to rely on authorities.
9. Express your own Christian witness and faith experiences. Help them see the faith experiences of other Christians.



People might view God's command to "stop" as a reward that Abraham earned because he obeyed the first command to prepare Isaac as a sacrifice.

### STAGE 4: AS I SEE IT, GOD IS . . .

**Approximate age range:** Begins about age 18

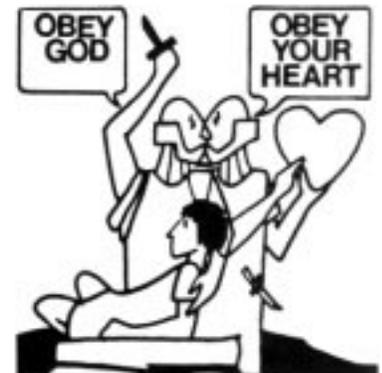
People become more independent in their thinking. They weigh the alternatives and take a personal stand. Individual reflection and thinking help them sort out conflicting viewpoints in order to form their own. Beliefs and understandings of God are very personal.

**Factors which affect this expression of faith:**

1. Establish a personal identity.
2. Seek independence.
3. Trust their own intellectual ability.
4. Are concerned about individuality.
5. Like to debate or argue points of conviction.
6. Are confronted by conflicting authorities.
7. Engage in objective reflection.

**Implications for leaders:**

1. Recognize that traditional values and ideas may be rejected.
2. Encourage their personal reflective thinking.
3. Listen to the challenges, questions, and ideas which come in searching for a personal expression of faith.
4. Affirm, accept, and support them as individuals.
5. Use group processes which encourage personal reflection, challenging and questioning one another, comparing and contrasting information, and sharing ideas.
6. Help them think about their faith and sort through the various messages they receive.
7. Present a wide range of topics and issues, and encourage dialogue.
8. Express your own Christian witness in open and nonjudgmental ways.



People might view Abraham torn between sacrificing Isaac and his religious understanding of the sanctity of life.

## STAGE 5: MORE THAN JUST WORDS

**Age range:** Adult years, if at all.

People are concerned about dialogue. They are open to new ways of looking at things and to seeing other viewpoints. They search for deeper meanings in their lives. Their understanding of their religious beliefs and of God is part of their search.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

1. Seek interchange with others.
2. Have confidence in own positions and convictions.
3. Are nonjudgmental.
4. Search for meanings and revelation in such things as symbols, rituals, and life experiences.
5. Can compare and contrast experiences.

### Implications for leaders:

1. Be prepared for questions which explore the paradoxes and tensions of faith.
2. Encourage reflective sharing of personal faith-life stories, including defeats and commitments.
3. Encourage "critical" questions about inherited traditions, symbols of faith, and so forth.
4. Invite struggle with mid-life issues of shattered dreams, limits and possibilities of vocation.
5. Affirm dialogical encounter with issues of ministry in the world.
6. Provide opportunities for self-directed learning and affirmation of searching.
7. Involve learners in selecting curriculum based on their expressed needs.
8. Affirm and encourage participants to take leadership roles.



*People might view the story as a means to explore deep cosmic, moral and religious questions.*

## STAGE 6: I HAVE A DREAM

**Age range:** This stage is very rare.

People sense a wholeness of faith and life. They have a view of what is good for all people everywhere. They act out of these deep commitments. They have a dream and act it out, often at great personal sacrifice. They are willing to die for their faith and beliefs.

### Factors which affect this expression of faith:

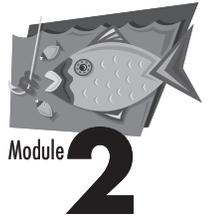
1. Have a vision which is not limited.
2. Are concerned for all of humanity.
3. Have a world view which includes examination of issues based on what is the good for all.
4. Live lives committed to transforming and unifying the world.

### Implications for leaders:

1. Encourage leadership by participants.
2. Invite the challenge and risk of commitment to new directions of faith and life.
3. Facilitate intellectual efforts toward purposeful ministry in the world.
4. Expect curriculum to be all of life and chosen by participants.
5. Provide assistance for self-directed learning and sharing.
6. Facilitate ministry and sharing with others.



*People might view the story in relation to Jesus' willingness to die in order that others might have eternal life.*



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## Module Two for Trainers

### Expected Outcomes:

- Participants will become familiar with faith development theory.
- Participants will understand how faith development is working in their own live and the lives of staff and campers.
- Participants will be able to develop guidelines for planning Bible study for each stage.

**Estimated Time:** 2 hours.

**Materials Needed:** Bibles, copies of Handout One, flipchart and markers, pencils/pens and paper for each participant.

### Notes to Leaders:

It is important that you are familiar with faith development theory and can help others to interpret the stages for themselves. If the participants do not know each other, begin with introductions.

### Process:

1. Ask each participant to read individually the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. Ask them to consider the following questions as they read: What happened in the story? What is the point of the parable? What did Jesus want us to learn/think about? How would you answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” What image of God is present in this story?
2. Come back together as a group. Ask participants to share their responses to the questions. Then ask them to imagine they were 6 years old, 14 years old, 22 years old, 50 years old and 80 years old. How would a person in those age groups answer the questions in section 1? There are really no right or wrong answers. Record the group’s responses for each age group on the large piece of paper.
3. Introduce the concepts of developmental theory in general and faith development in particular. Talk briefly about James Fowler and his stages of faith. Use the information in the narrative and your own reading. Pass out copies of Handout One, “Faith Development” and discuss the stages as they are explained in this chart.
4. Refer back to the chart you did earlier based on how different age groups would interpret the Parable of the Good Samaritan. How were the observations and insight of the group consistent with the information about stages on the chart? Ask the group to identify the characteristics of the different stages they identified for the various age groups.
5. Divide into small groups and assign each group an age group that they will be working with during camp. Using the Factors and Implications on the handout, ask the small groups to develop guidelines for counselors to use in planning Bible studies for the different age groups.
6. Come back together and share the guidelines. If more than one group worked on the same age group, combine the guidelines and eliminate ones which are the same. Review the guidelines for faithfulness to the stages of faith development.
7. As a final step, you can arrange for the guidelines to be printed and made available to staff during the summer.



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## Module Three for the Practitioner

### Expected Outcomes:

- Participants will become familiar with the stages of faith development.
- Participants will recognize these stages in their own experience.
- Participants will be able to use the stages of faith development in planning a Bible Study.

**Estimated Time:** 1½ hours.

**Materials Needed:** Large pieces of paper and markers for each person, as well as a copy of Handout One for each person, Bibles, paper and markers for the small groups.

### Notes to Leaders:

It is important in leading this event that facilitators are familiar with the stages of faith development and understand the theory behind it. The stories of each participant and his or her own sense of their place in the stages should be well-received by the leaders and the group. It is important that at no point should anyone feel inadequate or immature about his or her faith. There is no better or worse about these stages. They are descriptive not qualitative. It is important that this tone be set for counselors, so they can have the same attitude with their campers.

### Process:

1. Give each person a large piece of paper and a marker. Ask them to divide the paper into three equal parts. Within each part, draw or make a word picture of their concept of God at age 5, at age 14 and now. Give participants about 15 minutes to do this.
2. Divide into small groups and invite participants to share their drawing/word pictures as they feel comfortable. It will be helpful to the process and the comfort of staff if leaders are willing to share their pictures, too.
3. Come back together as a large group and on a large flipchart list common concepts of God for each age: age 5, age 14 and their present age.
4. Distribute Handout One, "Faith Development." Give participants some information about developmental theory in general and faith development theory in particular. Ask participants to find themselves on the chart. Ask them to share if they would like where they are and why they placed themselves at that stage.
5. Ask each participant to read individually the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37. Have them consider the following questions as they read: What happened in the story? What is the point of the parable? What did Jesus want us to learn/think about? How would you answer the question, "Who is my neighbor?" How are the concepts you find in the story consistent with the stage of faith development at which you think you are?

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6. After about 15 minutes, gather the group back together. Ask them to share the answers to their responses to the scripture. At the end of this discussion, give participants an opportunity to ask any final questions or to make comments about faith development theory.
7. Identify the age groups you will have in your camp. Divide the participants into small groups and assign them one of the age groups. If you will only be working with one age group, divide into small groups of 3 to 6 people. Taking the Good Samaritan story, how would you present this parable to the different age groups you will have at camp? Ask the small groups to plan a Bible study on Luke 10:25-37 for this age group. What stage of development will the campers probably be in? How will the plan need to be adapted for that stage and its concepts? (You could also use one of the scriptures you will actually be using during the summer for this exercise instead of the Luke passage.)
8. Come back and share the plans. After each group shares its plan, ask the rest of the group to evaluate the plan for its faithfulness to the stage of faith development.

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## RESOURCES

Droege, Thomas A. *Faith Passages and Patterns*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983.

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