

Summary of Faith-development Theories: Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Fowler, and Westerhoff

For those ministering with children/youth:

- **Stage 1** (*Imaginative-Projective*—app. 3-5 years) Child experiences wonder, joy, and imagination; lack of development in cognitive skills leads to fluidity between imagination and grasp of reality (e.g. *Santa delivers presents by coming down the chimney*). Young children live in the present now, lacking historical perspective; rooted in the concrete; learn best through imitation and play, repetition, and hands-on activities using all their senses.
- **Stage 2** (*Mythic-literal*—6-8 years) Literal approach to the stories of faith; not fully capable of reflecting on meaning or implications of stories or “reading between the lines.” Still rooted in the concrete but have a strong desire to explore everything and want to know and ask “why?” Learn best within structure and routine in a supportive environment, with sense of belonging; beginning to want some identity of “group” beyond family, although family still primary; also capable of exploring “right” from “wrong;” learn new things with less repetition.
- **Stage 3** (*Synthetic-conventional* – app. 12-13 years) Beginning to appropriate group conventions; i.e., pattern of beliefs, values, and behaviors of others. Hallmarks of this stage can serve as an adequate faith perspective into adulthood; many continue in this stage throughout an entire lifetime.

For those ministering with adults: (also refer to **Stage 3** above since many adults never develop beyond the conventional level.)

Expanding experiences expose him/her to contradictions in established worldviews; conventional answers to life’s questions no longer adequate in face of the challenges one encounters; realization initiates movement toward . . .

- **Stage 4** (*Individuative-reflective*—early 20s). Less reliance exclusively or primarily on external sources of authority; begins to rely on own inner resources. Stage 4 involves de-mythologizing symbols, myths, rituals; personal appropriation of meaning. Person works through de-mythologizing; recognizes value of the truths of one’s tradition; appreciates power of symbols and rituals by personal appropriation, not because one is supposed to or expected to. Begins transition to . . .
- **Stage 5**. Realizes that life is more complex, is more willing to live with ambiguity; can acknowledge that each articulation of truth only partial and always in need of review and of the complementarity of new insights and truth. Openness to appreciating truth from other traditions signals movement to . . .
- **Stage 6**. Persons at stage 6 work to give expression to the most inclusive worldview and to mitigate against structures that oppress. Criteria for Stage 6 include a sense of inclusiveness, a radical commitment to justice and love, selfless passion for transforming the world (e.g. *Ghandi, Bonhoeffer, Day, St. Francis, Martin Luther King, etc.*)

Important to remember that process is at service of God’s grace, NOT a prerequisite for the gift of grace