

Stages on the Journey of Faith, August 14, 2014
Hutterite Educators Conference. 1:00 – 2:30 Embassy E
Elsie Rempel

Slide 1: Introduction

Slide 2: Who I am.

Why do we care about children's journeys of faith?

Because we want them to grow in faith, to claim it as their own and stay in our faith communities.

There's a growing body of research that identifies these essentials for effective faith shaping

Slide 3: Be

- Authentic
- Available
- Affirming

Slide 4: This includes nurturing our own faith

- Letting go and letting God
- Naming God's presence
- Responding in faith

Slide 5: It also helps to understand how faith tends to grow and how to tell the difference between faith and belief.

Slide 6: Faith goes beyond belief and convictions, and lives in the realm of the spirit and spiritual relationships. We have a life-long sense of and ability to relate to the divine. Faith is about relationship with God. It is a tender mystery, ineffable reality, gift of grace, sturdy, saving embrace, freedom to change and partner with God.

Slide 7: Belief centers on convictions and concepts and depends on cognitive maturation and health. What we believe about God, Our ideas about how God wants us to live.

Faith and Belief work together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in adulthood, recent research shows that children have faith, and that faith outlasts our cognitive abilities and lives on during dementia.

Slide 8: As Christian teachers, one of our deepest desires is for our children and grandchildren to be in a life-giving, saving relationship with God. But we also know, sometimes from painful personal experiences, that we can obstruct that process.

Take this example from Kindergarten Teacher Nancy’s life. She was an eager teacher who wanted to have a really deep knowledge of her students and their families. When she visited the family of one of her students, she prayed aloud at the supper table that her five- year old pupil Megan, would grow to know and love the Lord, Megan was upset. Later, Megan drew her mother aside to say that her beloved teacher Nancy had just prayed a dumb prayer.

“Oh really,” her mother responded, “and what did you think was dumb about it?”

“Well, Mommy, I already know and love God! I don’t need to grow up first.”

We don’t want to erect barriers between children and God. Nor did teacher Nancy. Thankfully, Megan was able to process what happened with her mother, who understood that faith is alive and well in children long before they can reason and articulate their beliefs. It is sobering to realize how easily we can hurt our grandchildren’s spiritual growth, even as we try to nurture it.

This vignette—which has been modified slightly to protect privacy—must not discourage us from praying aloud for and with our pupils, or from engaging them in spiritual conversations. Rather, it can encourage us to learn about the process of faith development. Equipping ourselves with a primer in faith formation and children’s spirituality allows us to step more confidently into the awe-filled and holy role of faith journey guides for the young. With our experience, we can share language and practices to help them express their awareness of God. And they, in turn, can offer us fresh perspectives on precious truths that may have become somewhat stale for us.¹

¹ The downloadable booklet *Forming Faith: Prayer Journeys with Children*, by Elsie Rempel, <http://www.mennonitechurch.ca/resourcecentre/ResourceView/2/11506>, includes many suggestions for praying with and for children.

Slide 9: Children are Members of God's Family

As children's spirituality studies show, the church holds unformulated and conflicted views about children and appropriate ways of participating in their spiritual formation. Author, children's spirituality specialist, and practical theologian, Jerome Berryman, states: "Ambivalent feelings about children are deeply held, both a high and a low value."² As my father used to say, "Kinder sind alle Engel, aber, manche sind eben Engel mit ein "B" davor.

A child's faith is important, but it differs distinctively from an adult's faith. So how can we best recognize and support spiritual growth in children?

Previously, children were filled with information *about* God before they were considered capable of faith. Now, children are viewed as pilgrims on a spiritual journey that begins in the womb. We consider them to be precious members of the family of God, whether or not they have been baptized into the body of Christ.

As a teacher who led children in daily morning worship for 13 years, I gained a deep appreciation for the faith of children. My theology of children evolved from that practical experience, along with constructive conversations with current theologies of Childhood the Anabaptist theology of my Mennonite denomination, which is often referred to as the "Believers' Church tradition." In this tradition, children are accepted as part of the family of God from birth, but are not baptized or become members of the church—the Body of Christ—until they are believers who freely declare their faith as adolescents or adults.

As children participate in actions of worship and service, they develop a spiritual toolbox that includes vocabulary, symbols, and actions. Faith grows best in children when teaching and preaching is combined with activities like worship and quiet times that encourage encounters with God.

² Jerome Berryman, "Children and Mature Spirituality", in *Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives, Research and Applications*, © 2004, Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 22

As children mature, their understanding of spiritual practices deepens, especially if they are included in worship and mission, and are familiar with related musical and symbolic actions. For instance, consider children who serve at a food bank as soon as they are physically able to be helpful. This experience will allow them to respond on a deeper level to the hospitality of Jesus at the tables where they gather, especially if they are introduced to the language and actions that acknowledge Jesus as host.

Slide 10: Response time1:

1. What expressions of faith and wonder by a child have added sparkle and vitality to your faith community?
2. What has distressed you?
3. What questions do you have about children and faith?
4. What keeps us from taking their faith seriously?

Slide 11: Understanding faith development

- How do children grow in faith?
- Faith development guidelines offer us a direction of growth toward spiritual maturity.
- The dance between development and conversion.

Slide 12: Response time: What do you remember about your faith as a child?

- What activities helped you feel close to God?
- What places felt sacred?
- What do you remember about ‘thinking as a child?’
- What Bible stories appealed to you?

Slide 13: Stages of Faith

This section describes the process of faith development through different periods of childhood for those who grow up in Christian families and attend church. Those who are introduced to faith later in life move through most of the earlier stages in this process quickly, with more mature minds and personalities.

Since it was first published in 1981, James Fowler’s classic reference book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, remains important in the church’s discussions of faith development. Fowler’s book describes faith stages as “a succession of ways of constructing and interpreting our experience of self, others, and the world in light of relatedness to God.”³ The stages of faith referred to in this presentation are based upon Fowler’s observations, but I’ve simplified the categories and included current developments and insights.⁴

To illustrate how faith development can take shape in the very young, I’ll draw from my experience with my grandchildren. One evening, as I babysat my three-year-old granddaughter, Sophia, she picked up a Christmas card with the nativity scene on it. She asked me to sing the song out of this “book.” I sang *Away in a Manger* for her, and showed her some simple accompanying actions. She asked me to sing it with her repeatedly over the next few weeks.

At first, Sophia imitated my actions. Soon that wasn’t real enough. She became the “pretend Mary,” and held the wooden Jesus from the Christmas crèche in her hands. When it was time for Jesus to “lay down his sweet head,” she lay down on the floor with Jesus, just like her mom would lie down with her at nap time. Then she pointed out the stars in the bright sky to her baby, bent over him in a pose of adoration when I sang “looked down where he lay,” and snuggled in to sleep with him.

Current understandings of primal faith assume that the “hunger for a personal relation to God in which we feel ourselves to be known and loved in deep and comprehensive ways,”⁵ which Fowler ascribed to

³ James W. Fowler *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, N.Y. Harper Collins 91. An updated book of Fowler’s theories, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith Consciousness in the Public Church*, was published in 1991, N.Y.,

⁴ Robert J. Keeley, “Faith Development and Faith Formation: More than Just Ages and Stages,” in the Fall 2010 volume of the quarterly, *Lifelong Faith*, by LifelongFaith Associates, LLC, is particularly helpful for reflecting on Fowler’s theory from our current context, or the chapter “Step by Step: Faith Development and Faith Formation” by Robert Keeley in *Shaped by God: Twelve Essentials for Nurturing Faith in Children, Youth, and Adults*, Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2010).

⁵ Fowler, 91

later faith stages, are already experienced intuitively at early stages. This happens before a large vocabulary and the ability to think in concepts become part of the child's toolbox for making sense of the world, as was illustrated by the anecdote about Sophia.

All of us are at different stages on a journey of faith formation. As Christians, we can claim with Paul "All things have been created through [Christ] and for him... [and] in whom all things hold together" (Col1:16b, 17b). We can claim that Christ is the center. We are all are on a journey toward that center, whether we recognize it or not. ⁶

Individual faith journeys differ widely. Because we see life most clearly from our own perspective, we can be tempted to consider our faith stage the norm, and use it to judge others.

Perhaps the story of Sophia, above, and other stories shared here will help you remember stories about the children you love and care for. Together with summarized research findings, these stories will provide windows into the faith of children and adolescents.

Slide 14: Infant and Toddler Faith. According to Fowler, infants and toddlers who have yet to develop rational thinking are still capable of expressing an innate spirituality. They share several key characteristics:

- They are intuitively conscious of and trusting toward God.
- They sense great awe, wonder, and curiosity about the world.
- They respond to Jesus somewhat like they respond to a favourite stuffed toy or doll.
- They understand love as having ones' needs met.
- They experience "Mother," or the primary caregiver, as God with skin on.
- They distinguish between fantasy and reality with difficulty. Imaginary friends are common and seem real. Jesus and angels can be experienced in this way, but so can fairies and storybook characters.

⁶ This need not impose Christian ideas on other religions, but it does claim that their spiritual journey is ultimately headed toward the same center.

Fowler's contemporary, Jean Piaget, who influenced educational practices for a long period of time, did not consider pre-rational children capable of faith. However, experts in child theology and spirituality for the last twenty years have come to agree with Fowler's assessment: the capacity for faith is innate.

When my granddaughter, Clara, was 20 months old, she loved looking out of her parent's second story bedroom window to watch the birds and squirrels in the tall elm trees lining the street. I'll never forget her awe when first she became aware of the size of one of those majestic elms. She looked down to the grass and then up, and up, and up, at the big tree. Filled with wonder, and using her emerging words for an expression of praise, she said, "wow!"

Betty Shannon Cloyd relates a similar incident with her fifteen month old grandson, Samuel, who whispered a similar "wow!" as he watched a squirrel run up a tree.⁷ Infants and young children lack the vocabulary to share their sense of astonishment, but occasionally we are given verbal windows into that lively spiritual space.

Imagine or remember holding a contented infant in your arms. Reflect on the awesome mystery of the gift of new life with which God regularly entrusts us. Now add a few months to the child you are holding. The child is full of amazement as he or she discovers the world and begins to verbalize that experience.

What other characteristics of primal faith are illustrated by this imagined child? Do they chime in with a hearty "Amen" at the end of a prayer?

If you have such a child, jot down your observations in a memory journal so you can share them as she or he gets older.

As we rediscover the world with infants and toddlers, they bring out our inner playmates and renew our ability to wonder. And, as infants and toddlers discover the world with their parents, extended family, and the church community, they absorb a specific context for faith.

⁷ Betty Shannon Cloyd, p 101. *Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides*, © 2000, Nashville, Tennessee, Upper Room books.

They experience the love of God through their caregivers. Our responsiveness to their expressions and needs will help to build their trust toward God and their caregivers. The vocabulary we surround them with provides descriptive tools for their experiences, including their innate consciousness of the divine. As language skills develop, and as we introduce to spiritual practices such as singing and praying, they gain tools for interacting with the world around them. Infants and toddlers, who often inspire us with the trusting way they depend on our care, bring out the caregiver in us.

Children will not distinguish well between reality and fantasy until the age of seven or so. This is the age where “kids say and do the darndest things.”⁸ The anecdotes about Sophia, Clara, and Samuel give testimony to the innate reality of primal faith.

Slide 15 Response: Infant and Toddler faith

1. Describe and share experiences with children at this stage that came to mind.
2. If the blending of fantasy and reality in young troubles you, what are some constructive ways of encouraging children’s faith that honour their way of engaging with life?
3. How have children blessed and encouraged you through their expressions of primal faith?

Slide 16: Early Childhood Faith. By the time they are four to five-year-olds, children express these key characteristics of faith:

- They have an intuitive trust and awareness of God’s intimate presence.
- They learn the vocabulary and basic habits of faith through imitation.
- They express their faith with the words they hear in their homes and congregations.
- They relate to images of God as a miracle worker, as baby Jesus, and as angelic.
- They distinguish between fantasy and reality with difficulty.

⁸This expression is drawn from the CBS radio show feature, “Kids Say the Darndest Things,” hosted by [Art Linkletter](#), airing from the mid 1940s to the late 1960s..

As a five-year-old preschooler, my granddaughter, Johanna, tried to stretch out her bedtime conversation for as long as possible. She asked me, her *Omi*, if I were born in the olden days. “Yes, I was,” I answered.

That made sense to Johanna, because after all, she told me, her dad was old and he came out of Omi’s tummy a long time ago. After a reflective silence, Johanna added, “That’s like Jesus. He came out of God’s tummy a long time ago, too.”

This was no time for a lesson on the Trinity; this was a chance to delight in the way Johanna’s young mind made comparisons between the mysterious realities she understood—that her father had been a baby—and the mystery of God becoming flesh in Jesus. To use Fowler’s approach, Johanna was projecting what she understood about her father and her Omi to try and make sense of the relationship between God the Father, and Jesus. Her faith remained strongly intuitive, but she layered her understanding of family onto her emerging idea of how Jesus and God are in relationship.

Eden, a four-year-old, became my friend when I stayed in her home for two nights. Eden wanted me to read a bedtime bible story to her, and get her ready for sleep. In the process I introduced her to the glad-sad-sorry prayer ritual. Through this prayer, we reflected on the day’s highlights and lowlights, wondered if there were things Eden or I needed to say “sorry” for, and listed others who needed God’s help. The ritual ended with the Aaronic blessing; “The Lord bless you and keep you, make his face shine on you and give you peace.” Then I traced the shape of the cross on Eden’s forehead and spoke the words; “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” I concluded by giving her a kiss on that same spot.

Eden took to this ritual immediately, and proceeded to use it with her stuffed animals and dolls in the coming weeks. She was learning the vocabulary and practices of faith through imitation. The fluid line between her fantasy life with her toys and what adults refer to as

“reality,” provided her with an opportunity to lead a simplified form of evening prayer known as *consciousness examen*.⁹

Slide 17: Response: Early Childhood faith:

1. Describe and share experiences with preschool children that came to mind.
2. When preschool children make statements that do not match our understanding of God or otherwise ring true, how can we bless their present level of insight and still encourage their growth?
3. What opportunities do the young people in your lives have to learn and practice Christian vocabulary and practices? Are there some grace filled ways you can increase those opportunities?
4. How have the gifts of children at this stage blessed and encouraged you?

Slide 18: Primary school age faith. The faith life of most six to eight-year-old children tends to be expressed through these key characteristics:

- They learn and memorize easily.
- They need freedom to express emerging beliefs.
- They often think about Jesus in super-hero terms.
- They often love biblical stories about the weak conquering the strong.
- They identify with favourite Bible characters.
- They enjoy participating in worship, singing, and belonging to the community.
- They identify strongly with the faith community of their family.

The last year that I taught grade three, I had my students keep prayer journals.¹⁰ Their prayers illustrated their growing ability to articulate,

⁹ The *consciousness examen* is an ancient form of prayer in which one reviews the day in the presence of God, acknowledging those things for which we are grateful, those things we lament, and those things for which we request forgiveness. With younger children this can easily be adapted as a “glad, sad, sorry” chat with each other and God.

¹⁰ They always had a choice of showing them to me or just keeping their prayers between themselves and God. At the end of the year, eight of them picked a prayer to give to me for eventual publication in my new work for the broader church, which became *Prayer Journeys with Children: a guide for parents, grandparents and other caregivers*, © 2009 Mennonite Church Canada, www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/1133.

identify with, and project the faith of their community. Reflect on a few of their prayers as you think about faith at this stage:

God, please help me be nice today and stay awake.

Dear God, you are the most powerful Lord. You created humans and animals from a tiny mouse to a blue whale. I love you.

Dear God,

Thank you for sending your son to us on earth and thank-you for your son dying on the cross to save us from our sins.

Thank-you that you helped the Israelites win the battle against Rome. And thank-you that you did not give in to the devil's temptation of revenge and hatred and went on loving them even when they did things they knew they shouldn't do.

And I am glad that some of those people who crucified him turned back to loving you and those priests went back to you.

Amen.

From early preschool attempts to understand and talk about their faith, children progress in their ability to think logically. They start to separate reality from make-believe, and truth from lies. They begin to consider the perspectives of others.

For thousands of years, the age of reason has been recognized in children at about the age of seven. As children learn to reason, they start to understand that sin is more than doing things that get them into trouble. It includes attitudes and actions that make it harder to connect with God.

Primary school age faith is already filled with many similarities to adult faith, because it readily accepts the ideas of loved and trusted caregivers. It sounds and is experienced as deeply owned, but it will face challenges as children establish critical thinking skills, and grow independent of their caregivers.

Many children feel deeply connected to all of God's creation at this stage. They do well at caring for pets and plants. What a great opportunity for teachers to include them in activities such as planting a garden, marvelling together at the miracle of growth! Children at

this stage also love stories of animals with human qualities, such as the Berenstain Bears books, to name but one popular example. Many of these stories provide opportunities to talk about good behaviour choices, or to develop a commitment to creation care.

At six to eight years of age, children's passion for the created world provides an excellent opportunity for teachers to help them learn and practice the ethical aspects of following Jesus. So do Bible stories of faith heroes. If children in this stage are regularly acquainted with the stories of Bible characters, they will often develop a deep affinity with some of them. When Sophia was at this stage, she became very fond of Queen Esther. Several years later, we still include references to Esther when we talk about wisdom, beauty, and courage.

Slide 19: Response: Primary school age faith

1. What stories of children in primary school can add to your understanding of faith at this age?
2. How do you understand the difference between faith that expresses, identifies with, and projects the faith of their community; and more mature faith?
3. In your school and community, what opportunities exist for teachers and primary age children to talk about faith and belief? Can you imagine and promote some new ways of encouraging this dialogue?
4. How have the gifts of children at this stage blessed and encouraged you?

Slide 20: Upper elementary school aged faith. For nine to twelve-year-old children who are approaching adolescence, new factors shape their faith lives:

- They are growing in their awareness of others.
- They question and respond to perceived unfairness.
- They participate in mission and service projects creatively and enthusiastically.
- They welcome involvement in leadership roles as ushers, readers, singers, etc.
- They describe their own belief in ways that are similar to those of their faith community.

- They analyze and synthesize the beliefs of their community.
- They respond to God as Creator and Jesus as friend in deeply personal ways.

In the fall of 2010, while the news media covered a devastating flood in Pakistan, several grade six girls from Winnipeg's Home Street Mennonite Church initiated a fund raising campaign. They sent out emails inviting their peers to bake cookies and sold them to their congregation after worship for a period of several Sundays. The youth pastor provided encouragement and helped out with a few logistics, but the project was a direct expression of the faith of these pre-adolescent girls. Encouragement from their local faith community nurtured their faith, while it provided some relief resources for a needy corner of God's earth.

During the upper elementary and middle school years, the rational mind develops. Children are usually interested in learning about the wider world they live in. We can expect children between nine and twelve years of age to accept, understand, and synthesize the faith of parents, grandparents and trusted teachers. When I asked children this age in my congregation where they learned the most about God, they answered unanimously that it was from our pulpit!

As children continue to mature, they begin to explore their faith through the lens of critical thinking and the bigger questions of life that arise. This critical examination helps them move beyond an acceptance of inherited faith toward claiming a faith of their own.

As children mature and engage those questions in upper elementary or middle school, their faith grows in its awareness of others. As this happens, many children engage in group projects where they can energetically advocate on behalf of larger social issues.

As society becomes more secular, the need to explore and examine faith with a critical eye becomes more common. Because today's society prizes rationalism, children's natural creativity can be repressed.¹¹ Dynamic club leaders and teachers, as well as family

¹¹ For an interesting reflection on how our educational system tends to squelch creativity in children see <http://suchasthese.wordpress.com/2010/08/26/educating-out-of-spirituality/>

service projects, can help them counteract that trend, grow in faith, and develop the creative skills that are needed to stand up for the underprivileged.

If faith is encouraged and inherited faith, values, and ideas, are synthesized after being analyzed, children may claim them as their own. Synthetic-conventional faith continues to mature. In fact, many people who grow up and stay in closely knit Christian communities will remain in this stage for much of their lives—until they spiritually integrate life crises as mature adults.

Slide 21: Response: Upper Elementary school aged faith

1. What stories of preadolescent children can you share to add to understanding of faith and belief at this age?
2. How can you help children in this phase of life respond to Jesus' instructions to care for the underprivileged as an expression of faith?
3. Critical thinking is so necessary for preadolescent growth toward an owned faith. How can you help children you know deal with the challenges that will arise as they engage in critical thinking?
4. How have the gifts of children at this stage blessed and encouraged you?

Slide 22: Adolescence: Towards an Owned Faith. The next stage of faith development correlates with the duration of adolescence, which can last for a lengthy period of time these days. Today's society encourages young people to explore all of their options, and may require them to take more and longer periods of training than we needed. As a result, they settle down with families, careers and other long-term responsibilities at a much later date than we did. Some sociologists claim that adolescence now lasts until thirty years of age instead of sixteen or even eighteen, as was the case until the 1960s. This may be different on the colony.

As children approach adolescence, their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual lives intertwine on a rollercoaster of change. Children enter puberty at a wide range of ages, but broadly speaking; beginning at roughly thirteen years of age, they exhibit certain characteristics:

- They critique, question, and claim faith and belief systems.
- They value belonging to their church community above belief or behaviour codes.
- They articulate their own beliefs and examine other faith traditions.
- They use thinking that confirms their gut feelings to make well ordered faith decisions.
- They often relate to Jesus as confidante, guide, and counsellor.
- They desire friendships in which they can test the values, faith and beliefs that have formed them.
- They look for those that walk the talk.
- They keenly detect and resent adults who are not truthful with them.
- They often work enthusiastically as service workers (camp, mission trips).
- They bless us with testimonies, questions, insights, skills, and emerging leadership.

A student at a private high school in Warrington, Florida, wrote the following prayer, which illustrates how he relates to Jesus as confidante, guide, and counsellor.

Lord, give me your courage, for I cannot stand up against the forces that strike my soul.

Give me your will, so that I can use the gifts that you have given me

confidently and wisely, every day of my life.

Give me your love, so I can break through the shackles of my hatred and live in love and peace.

Give me your faith, for I doubt the almighty when things go wrong.

Lord, help me to live as you did. Amen.¹²

Cognitively, adolescents have the relatively new skill of being able to imagine what others think. As a result, they notice, question, and compare the different worldviews of their church, school, and virtual

¹² Sam Tatel, St John the Evangelist School, Warrington, Fl., in *Life can be a wild ride*, ed. by Marilyn Kielbasa, St. Mary's Press, 2001, 96.

communities. No doubt your mind will fill rapidly with anecdotes about this tendency!

Because adolescents need to figure out what they think and believe, in relation to what *others* think and believe, they tend to be preoccupied with themselves. Experiencing this stage is essential for the adolescent to progress to an owned—or individuated— set of beliefs and values.

Today’s world is also more secular and diverse than the officially “Christian” culture in which the boomer generation matured. This presents many obstacles for people whose faith is not thoroughly owned and personalized. As the introduction outlined, many of the young people we know and love live in settings that are much more culturally diverse than the ones we knew as youth. This more diverse context involves them in repeated examination and defence of their values and belief systems—and over a much longer period of time than was the norm for us

If the young people who are dear to you fall into this category, being a good and loving listener is critical, even when you’d much rather give advice and answers.

Additionally, today’s children and youth are part of the “iGeneration,” with digital tools at their fingertips. They connect with a wide range of communities that offer competing sets of values. It is likely that their faith will face challenges we never experienced. As they face and integrate these challenges spiritually, they will examine faith more critically. As a result, they may progress to a more strongly personalized faith. When such faith develops alongside a personal relationship with God—in which they feel themselves to be deeply known and loved by God and the church community—the adolescent forms a solid set of beliefs, values, and commitments. This foundation prepares the way for baptism and membership in the church.

There is great reluctance among many of today’s youth and young adults to step forward, articulate their faith, and make baptismal commitments. Even seminary students I have interviewed are shy about praying aloud; they aren’t sure that church is a safe place to expose their spiritual reality. They fear being rejected because their

faith won't sound traditional enough. This is a clear example of placing value on belonging over belief or behaviour.

Teachers have a unique opportunity to encourage and mentor youth toward confessing their faith and preparing for baptism. With God's grace and wisdom, teachers can often build relationships of integrity and trust with youth. They can provide safe places for them to air their doubts and test their emerging, personally owned faith. With prayerful discernment, they can also use the strength of those relationships to speak the right words at the right time.

Slide 23: Response: Adolescence: toward owned faith

- What stories of youth in this critically testing stage can you share with each other to increase your understanding of this part of the faith journey?
- If you shared your own faith journey with youth in your community, how might the process start conversations that would build trust and help them share their faith with you?
- What stories of apparent or real rejection by dear people of this age do you need to offer to God in a lament?

How is your life blessed by people at this age and stage of the journey of faith?

Conclusion

Understanding each phase of your students' development can go a long way toward helping you encourage them on their faith journey. As you reflect on the gifts and nature of children's faith and normal developmental patterns, the puzzling aspects of your students lives will fit into the broader context of how faith changes in the developmental stages of life.

All of us live in rapidly changing circumstances that bring confusion along with new opportunities. However, it is good to remember that the Holy Spirit is known to be particularly active in periods of rapid change. Consider the history of the early church, of protestant denominations during the Reformation, the Great Revival during a tumultuous era of American development, or of the emergence of Pentecostal movement during the wild years of the early twentieth century. They are full of stories about the movement of the Holy Spirit

in people's lives. Coming generations may well look back at our time in a similar way.

It is also good to note once more that the general faith growth guidelines described here will not describe each person's spiritual journey. Spiritual growth remains a dance between predictable maturation and unpredictable encounters of the Holy.

Slide 24: So, how can teachers guide students on their faith journey?

- being authentic, available, affirming people of faith
- responding to our students stages of faith
- sharing appropriate personal faith stories
- teaching traditions and Bible stories
- praying for and with them.
- blessing

A Prayer for Teachers

**Slide 25: God, we are Christian Teachers who love the young;
May you bless our relating, speaking and listening,
So that our words, thoughts and actions bless our students and the
church's children.**

**Slide 26: May we and those we love be sheltered and nourished
by a deep awareness that we are all part of God's big story;
that we are loved, treasured, and gifted
By God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.**

**Slide 27: May your love and truth be ever
In our hearts and minds
To help us walk in your ways and know your peace, healing and
hope,
So that God's blessings can keep flowing through us to our
students
As long as we serve as teachers. Amen.**