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Teaching faith in the twenty first century: Pointers for Christian Schools

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Why Faith?

The Apostle Paul makes the statement that "If you confess that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9). In light of this verse of Scripture it is not surprising that Christian educators strongly pursue the development of student faith. But although teaching faith to assist the "salvation" process is a lofty ideal for schools, and although ideas about how to achieve this goal seem obvious and straightforward, they appear less so when it comes to making tacit knowledge work in classrooms. What is faith, and how do we go about teaching it in the subjects, relationships and life of schools?

What is Faith?

Over the centuries the word "faith" has taken on numerous shades of meaning, and aspects of this meaning constantly change so that it has become a complex concept, impossible to define neatly. For example Fowler (1987) argued that faith is not always religious. Among other things he saw it as "a state of being ultimately concerned," a worldview that provides life meaning, a person's way of responding to transcendent value and power, trust in and loyalty to the transcendent, about which beliefs are fashioned, imagination, a relational enterprise, an orientation of the total person, an alignment of the heart or will, and commitment to a life centre. In contrast to Fowler, Gillespie (1988) saw faith only as a subset of religion. Some of Gillespie's definitions of faith were a lasting persuasion, a commitment to living out God's will, an experience of God's presence, a letting go of self to see its object Jesus, a trusting kind of self-surrender, faithfulness, God's gift of grace that leads us to him, and a mystical experience of God. This "starter list" of faith definitions confirms that faith is multifaceted and hard to clarify, and consequently that teaching it could be a challenging task.

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Before discussing how faith might be developed and taught, I need to trace its roots, describe some of its attributes, and discuss how it manifests itself in human experience. The linguistic roots of faith reveal much about its character. One root Latin word for faith, *fides*, meant trust, faith, confidence, reliance, credence, and belief. In Hebrew the word for faith, *aman* meant firm, something that is supported or secure. *Pistis* was the Greek root word for faith, and meant belief, firm persuasion, assurance, firm conviction, or faithfulness. The old French word *feid*, conveyed the notions of faith, belief, trust, confidence and pledge (Online Etymology Dictionary). A second Latin word for faith was credo, a word that centred more on the belief of faith. Smith, (1979, cited in Fowler, 1987, p. 12) shows that in ancient times the Latin word credo, in secular usage meant "to entrust, to commit, to trust something to someone."…A secondary meaning was "to trust in," "to rely upon," "to place confidence in."

According to Smith (1979) the Hindu equivalent to *credo*, *sraddha*, and the old English version of "believe" both basically meant to "set one's heart on." Meanings of the old English verb *geliefen* included "to hold dear," "to love," and "to consider valuable or lovely." *Geliefen* developed into the current German word *glauben*, which means "to have faith." So the history of the word "believe" demonstrates that it conveys much more than belief in some truth or commitment to a set of propositions. Rather it includes various aspects of trust, whose broader and deeper meaning can be seen in expressions like "be loyal to," "commit oneself to," "set one's heart on," or "pledge allegiance to."

The above summary shows that trust in its various shades of meaning was the key component of faith in ancient language usage. The idea of belief also figured strongly, and showed much similarity with the idea of trust. From these words we can see how the credence, firm persuasion and conviction of belief merge into the reliance, security, confidence and assurance of trust, and how together belief and trust express themselves in commitment, faithfulness, loyalty, desire and love. Given this history, it is not surprising that in current

usage belief is defined as "trust or confidence (in)," while trust is defined as "firm belief in the honesty, veracity, justice, strength etc. of a person or thing" (The Shorter Oxford Dictionary).

The etymology and history of faith show why it is so rich in meaning, and why its elements collectively make it important for Christian schools. The diverse shades of meaning of faith also provide clues about how it may be transmitted and taught. The historical definitions of faith have provided a springboard for exploring nine of its aspects that have a bearing on how we might teach it.

First as already mentioned, **trust and belief are the central components of faith**. In Fowler's terms faith is "trust in another, and loyalty to a transcendent centre of value and power" (1987, p.14). Smith's analysis led Fowler to conclude that although belief is one way in which faith expresses itself, people do not have faith by merely believing in concepts or propositions. Belief can also involve a strong emotional component that includes notions of trust, commitment, reliance and confidence. Fowler's discussion of belief and trust led him to declare that faith involves "an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart in accordance with a vision of transcendent value and power, one's ultimate concern" (1987, p.14).

Second, expressions such as "trust in," "rely upon," "commit to," "be loyal to," and "love" show the importance of relationships in facilitating the faith formation process. The trust and belief of faith are always directed to someone or something, meaning that they are relational in nature. McGrath (2010, p. 3) wrote that "Faith is fundamentally a relational matter: it is about trusting God." In Tillich's words, "Faith is the relationship to that which concerns us ultimately" (cited in Fowler, 1987, p.18). In summary, much **faith is formed within the social and emotional connectivity of relationships**.

Third, faith as trust and belief not only **grows** in relationships, but **through commitments that result from changing value priorities**. Fowler (1987, p.18) showed how faith expressed as trust, loyalty and commitment becomes aligned with persons, causes and institutions that in effect become centres of value and power. These centres in turn support a "vision of transcendent value and power" referred to above. His view was that any centre of value and power, whether or not religious, has "God value" for believers and promises to provide them with meaning and confer worth on them as well. Centres of value evolve from peoples' values systems and value priorities. In fact Fowler's faith development model is largely built around the process of valuing (p. 269-281).

Fourth, faith can be seen as being **a quest for life meaning**. Fowler (1987), emphasised that besides its trust component faith was "our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives" (p. 4). In other words we cannot develop our faith's centre of values and power or our life direction without trying to make sense of things, without grasping after the big picture, the big pattern, the meaning of life.

Fifth, faith initially c**omes from God as a gift to every human being**. The gift is revealed in manifestations of human spirituality and religiosity expressed in the human desire to sense God's presence in life's experience, in the quest to find transcendence through feeling something spiritually real "out there," (James, 1958) and in "a radical attitude of openness to the supreme mystery of our life" (Gillespie 1988, p. 37).

Sixth, **the gift of faith is received spiritually when humans seek God**. For either Christian believers or non-believers, spirituality is a connection between spirits, whether between human spirits, or between the human spirit and the spirit of a divine being. Gillespie saw spirituality as an enabler for the part of faith that embraces the human sense of the presence of God in life experience (Gillespie, 1988, p. 31). McGrath (1999) wrote that "Christian spirituality concerns the quest for fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith" (p. 2). It may be understood as the way in which "Christian individuals or groups aim to deepen their experience of God, or to practise the presence of God" (p. 3).

For some, spirituality manifests itself as a kind of "conversation" between spiritual beings. Here I refer to a spiritual conversation as being either direct, or as being those thoughts and internal dialogue that humans experience as having some reference to God or a supreme being. One perspective of this conversation is that it is a "voice" that God places within humans, a still small voice that guides decision-making and prompts the quest for transcendence. Another perspective is that the conversation is a type of internal dialogue that shapes the faith journey, whether it occurs in prayer, meditation or some other form of communication.

However it is conceived, the conversation of faith is a process that can be either dynamic and thrive, or passive or one sided and atrophy. In the context of pursuing a conversation, to have genuine faith means to "live in the active voice" in the conversation with God. This active living happens through agency, reciprocity, awareness and anticipation. Agency means that believers willingly keep engaging in the conversation with God and reciprocity with him happens through searching and observing, listening and talking. Willingness to converse leads them to continually seek an awareness of God's presence in

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their experience and to live in anticipation of God revealing himself to them. Faith is the willingness to listen to God's voice, respond to it, and "maintain the conversation." In summary the human search for God including the ensuing faith conversation with God is a spiritual faith-oriented experience.

Other conceptions of the spirituality of faith abound. For example Heschel claimed that "to have faith in God is to reveal what is concealed. Our task is to bring God back into our lives" (cited in Brussat and Brussat, 1998). Spirituality is also found in the deep inner need and hunger for an explanation of life's mystery, and in the accompanying search for personal meaning, significance, identity and wholeness. In its capacity to help people find meaning in life and explain its mystery, spirituality also helps to enable the formation of a human worldview.

The spirituality of faith is also described as the experience of the supernatural or divine. For Godin, (1985) "experience of the inner God or recognition of the spirit is always indirect, mediated by signs which in the end are interpreted in faith" (p. 65). Godin explained how that for Jesus' disciples, their experience of Jesus as God was a synthesis of their perceptions, a human meeting in a deep sense, and their interpretation of their interaction with him based on trust and faith. Through this synthesis in their experience the disciples gained greater certainty and assurance of God's presence in their lives and moved from seeing Jesus the man to believing Jesus the God. Godin (1985) claimed that this synthesis "is the highest and most complete form of experience accessible to man, whether in religion or in love" (p. 66).

> *Having faith is more than believing: it is living in such a way that the results of faith are evident.*

Seventh, the experience of faith often contains the idea of **"knowing" God at a deep level**. The Greek word gnosis was the original noun for knowledge, but knowledge that was personal, experiential, spiritual, insightful or enlightening rather than being purely intellectual (Wikipedia). Proverbs 2:6 mentioned the Lord giving wisdom, knowledge and understanding to those who sought it. Such terms conveyed the idea that genuine knowledge signified that the knower knew something at a deeper level, or that he/she knew it completely. In the process of moving beyond superficial belief, human faith becomes an experience of God through a kind of deeper knowledge that is "richer than 'notional' learning (namely learning through thought or imagination and not based on experiment or demonstration) and more lasting than emotion" (Godin, 1985, p. 66).

However deep, the knowledge of faith is not only experiential but also intellectual. While experiential knowledge may carry more emotional certainty and conviction than intellectual knowledge, we should not discount the importance of intellect in developing faith. McGrath (2010) argued that faith involves working out why we believe what we do, allowing God to reign in us by guiding our thinking. He claimed "We cannot love God without wanting to understand more about him. We are called upon to love God with our minds, as well as our hearts and souls" (p. 5).

Eighth, the beliefs, trust, value priorities, experience, spirituality and knowledge of faith bear fruit in the faithfulness of faith. **Faithfulness is the active "doing" part of faith**. We learn faith partly by "doing" it through our behaviour and service to others. In the words of Zacharias (2010) "Having faith is more than believing: it is living in such a way that the results of faith are evident" (p. 171). Zacharias cited the prophet Habakkuk who described the "righteous person" as one who lives "by his faithfulness" (Habakkuk 2: 2-4). John Westerhoff III (2007) wrote, "We are not saved by our knowledge, our beliefs, or our worship in church; just as we are not saved by our actions or our religion. We are saved by the anguish and love of God, and to live according to that trust is to have faith" (p. 23).

Finally **faith is an orientation of the total person**, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes, strivings, thoughts and actions (Fowler, 1987, p. 14). The value priorities of faith, spirituality of faith, trust of faith and the deep knowledge of faith draw commitment and loyalty from believers and express themselves in lifestyle and good deeds. Collectively these are strong enough to shape the whole direction of human lives. This direction or orientation is shown in the life story people tell through their collective behaviours and smaller stories.

To summarise the discussion so far, faith is initially a gift. As our faith in God grows we believe in him and trust him at the deepest level. Such belief and trust not only entail a rational belief in his existence, but a strong affective more emotional trust component. Consequently we may commit our time and resources to him, seek him, converse with him, rely on him, place our confidence in him, pledge our allegiance to him, show loyalty to him, try to align our will with his will, set our hearts on him, hold him dear, and in effect love him. Such faith embraces our emotions, will, deepest knowledge, experience, relationships, worldview, commitments and behaviour, and ultimately reveals itself in our spirituality, value priorities, character, and in the story we tell through our life orientation.

This brief summary shows faith to be rather values-oriented, relationship-oriented, meaning-oriented, spirituality-oriented, knowledge-oriented and lifestyle-oriented. These attributes start to point to how we might teach faith in schools.

The Faces of Faith in Schools

I now return to faith's complexity. Although we may see belief and trust as comprising its essence, faith remains a complicated concept. For example how do we best teach trust in the life of a school? Fowler's own considered definition of faith (1987, p. 93) is so formidable that I have bypassed it here. Even his succinct definitions imply that there is no easy short cut to developing faith. How do we guide and develop "an orientation of the total person," and how do we shape loyalty to a clear and desirable "transcendent centre of value and power?" Further, faith includes numerous attributes that even all of the definitions together do not clarify.

Given the nature of faith, it is clear that schools cannot hope to develop all of its myriad attributes in students. Therefore I propose that we see faith as a many-sided polygon with an essential nature that shows itself in many faces, a few of which can be addressed by teachers.

Figure 1: Faces of faith

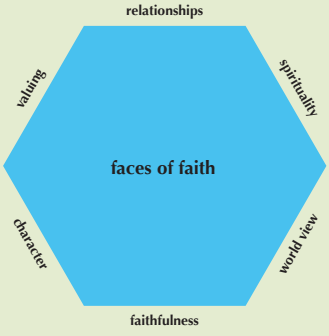

Figure 1. Faces of faith

Figure 1 is a hexagon whose six faces each represent a major element of faith that includes contributing components. These six faces are relationships, valuing, character, worldview, spirituality and faithfulness. Each face also identifies with a key aspect of the Christian school curriculum, whether hidden or overt, and is so named to help teachers conceive of ways to direct their teaching at it. The figure does not attempt to show the full complexity or scope of faith, but rather restricts itself to six broad faces where faith and learning can meet in schools.

Following the structure of Figure 1, I will now briefly discuss these six faces of faith and some possible teaching responses to them. Although somewhat overlapping, the faces are sufficiently diverse to require us to use different types of teaching strategies if we are to address them all. Therefore the following section of this paper is an introductory summary of some possible teaching approaches that together create a framework of how to develop faith in schools. Unfortunately the teaching strategies cannot be developed in any depth here because each part of the framework requires a paper to do it justice. The discussion will hopefully provide some pointers for teachers willing to grapple with the process of developing student faith.

Faith as Relationships

The first face of faith, relationships, is the face of faith that deals particularly with trust, loyalty and commitment. It not only embraces trust as the essence of faith, but is also the face where I believe most faith is taught. Fowler (1987), repeatedly showed how faith is not only a verb, "an active mode of being and committing," but also that it "is always relational; there is always another in faith" (p. 16). Gillespie (1988) made a similar point, citing Lewis Sherrill and George Coe whose work on relational theology showed how faith is felt through the encounters of human relationships (p. 77-78). We trust in people and are loyal to people and God in these relationships. And when we trust people we start to share their visions and values. So in summary much of our faith grows through our experiences of trust and faithfulness as they weave themselves through our relationships.

> *"… [faith] is always relational; there is always another in faith."*

Christian teachers have a mandate to first ensure that their relationships with students are warm, caring and supportive, and that they build trust and love in these relationships. Secondly students need to learn a range of social and emotional relational skills to help them develop their trustworthiness, empathy and love. They need to experience trust, loyalty and commitment and return these elements of faith to others including God.

The relationship face of Figure 1 is a large part of social learning that happens in classroom interaction and management, and in the social life of the school. Good relationships are somewhat contingent on teacher personality and consistent teacher modelling of their own faith. I note that good modelling goes beyond simply being good people up front in classrooms. It is deliberate, selective of certain behaviours, and rewards student efforts to imitate it.

Faith as Valuing

Valuing, a second face of faith shown in Figure 1, is the face of faith that makes students aware of their value preferences, and helps them to prioritize their values and make choices to create a worthwhile life centre. Valuing addresses the human quest for wellbeing and quality in life. In my view this face is most pivotal to

> *Character development not only embraces these values as moral virtues, but also activates them into actions, behaviour and life orientations.*

Fowler's model of faith development. Given that faith is partly loyalty to a transcendent centre of value and power, one of its vital components is the centre of values that claim each of us. Consequently teaching valuing becomes a mandate for Christian teachers.

Valuing includes both form and content. In order for students to understand their priorities and centre of values they need to practise a range of cognitive and more emotional valuing processes that comprise the "form" of valuing. For example they may identify and clarify their values, make sound value judgments and good choices, affirm, prize and act on their values, evaluate moral authorities, grapple with their life's value laden issues, learn to empathise and so on.

Teachers can choose from a wealth of values to provide the "content" of their values curriculum. Virtues like courage, fairness and integrity link easily with spiritual value clusters such as Colossians 3:12-15 where Paul lists the values of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, peace and love as being desirable.

The enterprise of learning about values continually touches faith as it addresses student value priorities that become their life "centre," and that consequently shape their life direction. In the end, the faith at their centre reveals itself in who or what they idolize and worship. Tillich (in Fowler,1987) said we commit idolatry, not when we worship stone idols, but when we bet our lives on finite, shallow earthly centres of value like materialism, success and pleasure as the source of our meaning and worth.

Faith As Character

In a Christian school the shaping of character is a faith-centred enterprise. Character or moral development is the face of faith that translates ethical and other values and value systems into a life story and orientation. We build our faith via our value priorities that become our personal centre of values and power. Through this process we are also shaping our life direction and developing character.

Although overlapping largely with the values face of Figure 1, character development goes beyond much valuing to be more volitional. While values are estimates of worth, dispositions, preferences or priorities, character development not only embraces these values as moral virtues, but also activates them into actions, behaviour and life orientations (Huitt, 1996).

Character is defined in various ways. Lickona (1991) has argued that character is the expression of values through action. In a similar vein the Character Education Partnership defined character as "understanding, caring about, and acting upon core ethical values" (Berkowitz, 1997, p. 65). Heenan, (2007) described character as being "that inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is" (p. 2). Applied to a person it is "the essential stuff that one is made of, the inner reality in which thoughts, speech, decisions and relationships are rooted" (p. 2). Understandably the ideal expression of character for Christians is Christ-likeness.

Now turning back to the link between character and faith, Smith (cited in Fowler, 1987, p. 11-12) described it as being "a mode of knowing, of acknowledgement." He said "one commits oneself to that which is known or acknowledged, and lives loyally, with life and character being shaped by that commitment." Here Smith has provided some insight into how faith becomes translated into character in daily living, through one's ongoing commitment to what is known, acknowledged and trusted in.

In the school setting this translation process is broad ranging. As demonstrated by Lickona (1991 & 2004), character development in schools is a broad ranging complex social enterprise. In the context of binding it to faith, character can be developed more directly in schools through religious studies and physical education, and more incidentally in all teaching including the organization of learning and classroom life, and through the broader social life of the school. Its' moral, emotional and performance elements can be addressed in basic skills like goal setting, and in moral reasoning, self-motivation, moral behaviour, emotional competence, valuing, building identity and self-worth, and developing a personal life orientation.

Faith As Worldview

The worldview face of Figure 1 is the face of faith that searches for the meaning of life. This face also contributes much to the development of a life orientation, a task shared substantially with valuing and character building. Further, our desire for spirituality is also a quest for meaning that seeks to make sense of existence. However we pursue it, our quest for meaning requires us to develop a way of perceiving and making sense of our world, namely a worldview.

Following Fowler's reasoning we can argue that the meaning part of our faith serves as the core of our worldview. Conversely we can also claim that our worldview, our fundamental framework through which we view life and the world is in turn the basis of our beliefs and determines our values and guides behaviour (Rasi, 1998). Whatever our perspective we can see that the development of faith and a worldview are heavily overlapping processes. Our faith grows as we put together the experiences of life into a coherent and meaningful story via a worldview, and as we then use that story to guide our trust in people and causes that deserve our faith.

It follows that Christian teachers can develop the meaning part of student faith by teaching students how to clarify and develop their worldviews as a key part of their life orientation and story. This worldview face of faith can be taught in many ways. Each subject makes assumptions about reality and is itself a kind of worldview, something that can be made explicit. Curriculum content is largely a web of ideas and beliefs whose larger patterns and coherence can be shown to relate to the Christian view of the world by tactics such as drawing relationships between big ideas, by concept mapping, by thematic teaching, and by identifying and exploring examples of worldviews.

Faith as Spirituality

By developing students' spirituality teachers are pursuing another fruitful pathway to building faith in schools. Brussat and Brussat (1998) explored at length the idea that spirituality is that part of faith that makes God present to us. They quote Alexander Schmemann (1996) who wrote "faith sees, knows, and senses the presence of God in the world" (p. 152). Similarly Gillespie (1988) states "The presence of God, if it is real and everywhere in this world, is always accessible, present, and transcends all living" (p. 38), so that much of what we know about God is realised and crystallised in the actual experiencing of the faith life (p. 32).

The spirituality face of Figure 1 is the face of faith that seeks to experience God as real, close and present. In slight contrast to the valuing and character building faces this face is more overtly religious for Christians. Students in Christian schools see God as their transcendent centre of value and power. In developing loyalty and commitment to their God, these students want to know that he is real and works in their lives, so they are looking for him in their life experiences. This search is the quest for spirituality.

Our task is to make God's presence real to students through discussing and exploring their life worlds, struggles and issues in class worships, religious studies, and incidentally throughout the day. For example teachers can show how God can be sensed as present in human connections (relationships with self, others, nature, the past, a higher power), heartfelt reflection on Scripture, life experiences, providential events, prayer, meditation, joy, creativity, meaning, initiation, awakening to God's presence, letting go of the illusions that hide him from believers, unselfish acts of service and so on.

Faith as Faithfulness

The final face of faith shown in Figure 1 is faithfulness. While faithfulness can be part of every other face of faith, it overlaps most obviously with character development, relationships and spirituality. And the commitment of faithfulness is found somewhere in all faces of faith as well. Gillespie (1988, p. 45) saw religion (faith) as the call to commitment for service. Through their commitment, believers' answers to questions about their religion are found in their action and interaction with life (1988, p. 74-5). Fowler (1987, p. 275) listed the operations of faith as knowing, judging, valuing and committing. In a school setting committing may express itself in acts of faithfulness such as obedience, service to the needy, and witnessing to one's faith.

Christian schools traditionally provide many opportunities for students to act out their faith in faithfulness. Examples are engaging in leaf raking, visiting hospitals and assisting the elderly, and in a plethora of other activities that comprise community service, conducting worship services in churches, helping other school students in "buddy" systems, and in Adventist schools assisting distant communities through STORM Co (Service To Others Really Matters Company) expeditions. To make the faithfulness of service work well, schools need to grasp the essential nature of service learning. Central to the quest to serve is genuine social connection. Service to others is enabled through the love, trust and warmth of caring relationships.

In summary, faithfulness is the face of faith that translates commitment into action. At this active face of faith students learn their faith by doing it.

Conclusion

The goal of developing student faith in the Twenty First Century is becoming more difficult and urgent because the post-modern world is confusing. Youth are exiting churches in droves when they leave Christian schools. And the spirituality revolution makes it fashionable to find the sacred everywhere, not just within religion (Tacey, 2003).

Given the complexity, richness and importance of faith, this paper proposes that Christian teachers pursue student faith development by employing diverse teaching strategies to address six of its broad faces in schools. These are relationships, valuing, character, worldview, spirituality and faithfulness.

In essence genuine faith in the Twenty First Century remains the same as it was in the First Century – deep trust expressed in commitment and life direction. There is no doubting its importance for all of us. TEACH

"Our task is to make God 's presence real for students by discussing and exploring their life world."

Footnote: I wish to acknowledge the influence of Associate Professor Phil Fitzsimmons on my thinking and writing about the nature of faith. Our conversations are an ongoing source of inspiration.

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