

**Contemplative and Embodied Worship as a Mediating Agent in Faith Stage Transition in YWAM Communities in Africa and Asia**

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Perhaps one of the greatest hurdles Evangelicals face in pursuit of spiritual maturity is a lack of understanding about the human development process and that it cannot be disregarded; it is integral to discipleship, spiritual transformation, and healthy spiritual formation. Alister McGrath (1995) notes, "My concern is that Evangelicals have not paid anything like the necessary attention to this major theme, spiritual development of Christian life and thought. As a result, evangelicalism has become impoverished" (p. 125). Much like the natural stages of cognitive and psychosocial development, faith also develops in stages, often at certain ages. Healthy spirituality is not divorced from its embodied, human dynamic. In 1981, James Fowler published his research on a theory of six stages of faith development in all human beings, and his findings that most, including Evangelical Christians, will halt in what he calls Stage 3 (Synthetic-Conventional). Research following Fowler's theory suggests expert agreement that the Western Evangelical church is primarily a Stage 3 institution and is replicating Stage 3 faith globally. Though largely unaware of development theory, Youth With A Mission (YWAM) works primarily with Stage 3 young adults, encouraging them toward Stage 4 faith. This can be a tumultuous transition, marked by spiritual crisis.

This article summarizes a master's level capstone project exploring how to facilitate upward faith stage transition and healthier spiritual formation for Evangelical or Pentecostal or Charismatic Christians (EPC from here on in this article). Emphasis is placed on the critical exploration of belief systems, self-reflection, and the practice of embodied and contemplative spiritual rhythms emphasizing awareness, presence, silence, rest, and beholding (sanctified imagination). This project was implemented through the creation, facilitation, and evaluation of a curriculum called *Life as a Worship Experience*, involving classroom as well as small group and one-on-one formats in five and six week timeframes on two YWAM locations, one in Asia and one in Africa. This project assumes that all believers will come to a point where they subconsciously choose either to move toward the next stage of faith or stagnate. It is this subliminal choosing, usually determined in the midst of great personal upheaval or spiritual crisis, that this project was ultimately concerned with and aimed at shaping.

**Literature Review****The Complexity of Upward Faith Stage Transition for Evangelicals**

The journey through stages of faith is universal, prolonged, and difficult for all human beings. Paula D'Arcy's statement, "God comes disguised as your life" (as cited by Rohr, 2011a, p. 65) indicates that human life and experience, properly understood, can be viewed as a series of invitations toward upward transformation. Yet, Fowler (1995) says it is natural for humans to resist transition because the process is protracted (often years), painful, dislocating, and alienating; transition can be aborted or stall at any point (p. 74). Spiritual transformation is not linear or predictable, although no stage can be skipped over. While development experts define the stages with precise language, the pace and path taken will be distinctive to each individual. Most will only move forward once the way behind them has

been fully closed by life circumstances, such as a death, divorce, cross-cultural travel, higher education, crisis of faith, or another transformative, extended experience (Jamieson, 2002, p. 112). Richard Rohr states, "If one is not prepared to live in that temporary chaos, to hold the necessary anxiety that chaos entails, one never moves to deeper levels of faith or prayer or relationship with God" (2003, p. 158). With this understanding, it is no mystery that the majority of humans naturally resist transition; the path to transformation is one of suffering and uncertainties. Jamieson argues that we tend to stay where we are until the pain of staying there "becomes unbearable" (2002, p. 112).

Faith, according to Fowler, is deeper than what we understand by belief, and is only partially thought out, but gives "purpose and goals to one's hopes, striving, thoughts and actions," and can give way to conscious belief, sometimes in ritual, symbol, myth, or story (Fowler, 1981, pp. 14, 28). Faith is the way one orientates oneself to the world, is mostly pre-cognitive and pre-reflective. Fowler chronicles a change in our use of the word faith over the centuries (1995, p. 12), arguing that words for faith in ancient Hebrew, Greek, and even 16<sup>th</sup> century Latin, cannot mean what we mean by faith today. The Enlightenment impacted Evangelicalism such that belief is now viewed primarily as cognitive assent to a list of ideas regarding the transcendent. The modern mind encounters a dualism the ancient did not, the modern mistakenly thinking cognitive or conceptual belief is the same as faith. The ancient understood *how* one lives reveals what one truly believes. It is this latter tacit faith Fowler's research addresses.

### **Overview of James Fowler's Stages of Faith with Emphasis on Stages 2 through 6**

**Pre-Stage.** Undifferentiated faith (0-2 years). Primal faith is characterized by early learning of the safety of the environment; faith is experienced as a connection between child and caregiver. If consistent, safe nurture is experienced, the child develops a trust of the universe and the divine. Negative experiences cultivate distrust.

**Stage 1.** Intuitive-projective faith (3-7 years). Faith is not a thought-out set of ideas, but instead a set of impressions largely gained from parents or other significant adults. Children learn through and from the members and rituals of their religious community. This is the stage of preschool children in which fantasy and reality often mix.

**Stage 2.** Mythical-literal faith (7-12 years). Jamieson (2002, p. 113) calls these the "literalists." When children become school age, they start understanding the world in more logical ways, sorting out the real from the make-believe. There is a quality of literalness with an inability to step outside their communities' narratives and reflect upon meanings. Justice, equated as fairness, is a central theme. A few people remain in this stage through adulthood. M. Scott Peck suggests that twenty percent of the adult population may be in this stage of faith (1993, p. 121). One adult I worked with in this project primarily engaged with his faith from this stage. It is important to note many coming out of a background of tribal belief (or similar systems) may shift the contents of their faith to align with Christianity, but engage Christianity through the same faith stage. Adults in Stage 2 faith experience do not formulate reflective, conceptual meaning from faith narrative but exercise a literal appropriation of beliefs, moral rules, and attitudes. Symbols are seen as one-dimensional and literal, sometimes magical, in meaning, and God is bound by structures of reciprocity built into the order of things. They relate to God from a posture of bargaining or appeasing, often leading to perfectionism, works righteousness, and rigid or authoritarian personalities.

**Stage 3.** Synthetic-conventional or conformist faith. Jamieson calls these “loyalists” (2002, p. 114). This stage is entered around 13 years of age, but a large portion of the population stays in this stage through adulthood. Jamieson found this stage the most common among adult Evangelical church members (pp. 114-115). Stage 3 is marked by a pre-critical, deep emotional investment in values, religious symbols, images, and loyalties, not easily separated from what they represent. Faith is tacit and received as a whole; demythologization is seen as an assault of the sacred itself, a fundamental threat to meaning. A Stage 3 person easily thinks of those in Stage 4 as “back-sliding.” Personal identity is gained from conforming to norms and practices of the group, being one with the community. Beliefs are held within the group. There is an exaggerated reliance on external authority. This person is acutely aware of expectations and judgments of others, and not yet able to maintain an independent perspective. Those outside the community are not seen so much as individuals but as collectives; identity and value are gained by separating self from the “other.” Interpersonal betrayals can destroy faith or give rise to fanatical faith.

**Stage 4.** Individuative-reflective faith. Jamieson calls these the “critics” (2002, p. 116). This stage should begin when a young adult leaves home but can be entered at any age. Those entering this stage later in life often define the transition as “mid-life crisis.” This can be a prolonged and difficult stage and most will never fully transition beyond. Jamieson (2002) interviewed over 100 long standing church members and 50 church leaders who left the EPC Church. In his evaluation most who leave do so as they transition out of Stage 3, becoming “reflective exiles,” which is a difficult, if not an impossible, journey on one’s own. For many it will become a permanent state, and they will never find a way forward with the Christian faith (2002, pp. 73, 93). During the course of the present project I met with four students on the verge of becoming “reflective exiles,” expressing a desire to leave YWAM or the church as they felt they could not continue their faith journey within their confines. Stage 4 is marked by critical reflection on identity (self) and outlook (ideology/world view), a demythologizing of “sacred symbols and stories” by interpreting faith and life through an examined system of meanings, and an individuality versus being defined by a group or group membership. In this stage there is a relocation of authority within the self, such that this person chooses a social group that reflects their new ideological perspectives, to assist in life-redefining.

**Stage 5.** Conjunctive faith. These are Jamieson’s “seers” (2002, p. 188). This stage rarely begins before mid-life, but most never get this far. Its markers are not as simple to describe. This person knows the sacrament of defeat (failure) and the reality of irrevocable commitments. Stage 5 faith is non-dualistic in thinking, is alive to mystery, paradox, and truth in apparent contradiction. It is critical in thought, but no longer reductionist; the symbolic is powerfully reunited with conceptual meanings. This faith stage cultivates I-Thou knowing (Buber, 1970), and is ready for closeness to the different, confident that encounters with the “other” might complement or correct their own faith. This person has been apprehended by the imperative possibility of an inclusive community of being; their commitment to justice is free from confines of class or community. This person remains divided by the personal cost of pursuing a transforming vision in an untransformed world.

**Stage 6.** Universalizing faith. Jamieson calls these “saints” (2002, p. 120). Persons who reach this stage are exceedingly rare. Only 1.6 percent of Fowler’s case studies, over 61 years of age, exhibited this stage. Stage 6 faith *incarnates* absolute love and inclusive justice for an enlarged vision of human community, spending and being spent for the transformation of mankind. These people embody radical leaning into the coming kingdom of God, heedless of threats to self and the present institutional order. Their initiatives often

include non-violent suffering, as visions born of personal identification with suffering persons. These can readily become martyrs. They have a vivid taste for transcendence, for oneness with God and humanity, yet remain lucid, simple, and fully human. Stage 6 must not be confused with perfection. Fowler's list includes Jesus, Mother Theresa, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Abraham Heschel.

Fowler is convinced Christian discipleship brought to full maturity will express itself in universalizing faith (Stage 6). Those in Stage 6 possess a "radical commitment to justice and love and of selfless passion for a transformed world, a world made over not in *their* images, but in accordance with an intentionality both divine and transcendent" (1995, pp. 225, 201). Fowler's work is not concerned with the "what" of faith (cognitive beliefs), but with the quality, or "how" one engages with and lives out faith. Fowler restates Jesus' question in Luke 18:8:

But when the son of man comes, will he find faith on earth? ... The question is will there be faith on earth and will it be a *good* faith – faith sufficiently inclusive so as to counter and transcend the destructive henotheistic idolatries of national, ethnic, racial and religious identifications and to bind us as a human community in conventional trust and loyalty to each other and to the Ground of our Being. (p. 293)

As beings who cannot live without meaning, we all - regardless of professed beliefs - *faith*. Like Fowler's research, this project is primarily concerned with *how* we faith. The contents of one's faith can be expressed through rigid legalism, thought control, and exclusive superiority toward those not "in" their faith community, while in another person the very same content may be expressed through grace, open dialogue, and loving inclusion. This is the grand experiment of this project: can I move EPC believers toward *good* faith?

### **Curriculum Design and Methodology as Informed by Literature**

The curriculum's overarching aim is to invite participants to engage with a model of healthy Christian spiritual formation, to encourage Stage 2, 3, and 4 Evangelicals to transition upward. This aim is implicit within the curriculum design, not explicit, as the majority of students have no context for stages of faith development; those firmly in Stage 3 may be threatened by the idea, as upward stage transition requires a willingness to question the community of faith in which a Stage 3 believer's identity is firmly embedded.

*Life as a Worship Experience* was designed to take place within a YWAM school whose purpose it is to train worshippers, performance artists, and worship leaders; thus, all the content was assimilated to fit this framework. J.B. Torrance (1996) states, "More important than our experience of Christ is the Christ of our experience" (p. 34). With that in mind, the curriculum content endeavors to deconstruct doctrines and tacit beliefs that will ultimately limit faith development while constructing a Trinitarian vision of God and human purpose. The process of spiritual maturing is grounded in human development and through broadened experiences of embodied and contemplative worship.

#### **Curriculum Title Rationale: *Life as a Worship Experience***

This title captures the overall behavioral aim for students: to engage their human life experience as God's main means of discipleship. It was also chosen because worship, especially in its contemplative and embodied forms, is a powerful vehicle for Christian transformation. *Life as a Worship Experience* teaches and equips Evangelicals to commune

with God through their human embodied experiences, unique personalities, questions, personal histories and pain as a form of prayer and worship.

### **Rationale for Embodied and Contemplative Practices (Spiritual Rhythms)**

The spiritual rhythms practiced in the classroom and as weekly homework played a central role in the transformative potential of *Life as a Worship Experience*. Their importance was not secondary to the content delivered. The spiritual rhythms were selected or designed in light of discoveries in neuroscience regarding how human thought, senses, and social imagination shape neural pathways. The curriculum presents the spiritual practices as a means to cooperate with Holy Spirit and the human cognitive design toward “renewal of your mind” (New Living Translation, Romans 12:2).

The use of the term “rhythm” as compared to “discipline” was intentional and defined as “an adopted beat by which you walk until that rhythm is like your heartbeat, simply a part of you.” This phrase was chosen to encourage the attitude of training and enjoyment, rather than mastery and perfectionism. According to James K. A. Smith (2013) our heart is shaped by concrete rituals performed repeatedly, which speak to our social imaginations (inner-narratives). He states:

And this is how worship works: Christian formation is a conversation of the imagination effected by the Spirit, who recruits our most fundamental desires by a kind of narrative enchantment - by inviting us narrative animals into a story that seeps into our bones and becomes the orienting background of our being-in-the-world. Our incarnating God continues to meet us where we are: as imaginative creatures of habit. So, we are invited into the life of the Triune God by being invited to inhabit concrete rituals and practices that are "habitations of the Spirit." As the Son is incarnate - the Word made flesh meeting us who are flesh - so the Spirit meets us in tangible, embodied practices that are conduits of the Spirit's transformative power. (Introduction, section 4, para. 5)

In other words, our minds are not primarily renewed by thoughts we consciously think, but by habitual rhythms we live by, with their accompanying stories told to us. Most of this is lived at an unconscious level with accompanying chemical and bodily reactions.

Orthopraxy (repetitious experiences and practices) is important because it moves heady doctrines and dogmas into daily, lived-out, practical experience and expressions, rewiring old neural pathways and forming new ones. According to Curt Thompson's (2010) research in *Anatomy of the Soul*, our neural pathways can be rewired toward abundant life:

While it's true that established neural networks are most likely to fire, it's equally true that recent research demonstrates that our brains were created with beautiful and mysterious plasticity. That means our neurons can be redirected in way that correlate with joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Instead of automatically following the wired sequence of our old memory, with reflection, we can choose to create new pathways. (p. 88)

As the movement forward in faith stage is largely a subconscious one, spiritual rhythms create an essential space within the believer for stage transition, not only by redeeming our inner narrative, but also by creating reflective space. To transition forward, a

quiet space must be created for true self-reflection and awareness to develop. Additionally, at Stage 3, identity is defined more by what you are *not*, rather than what you are. If one's identity is attached to the rightness of one's beliefs and community, examination can be threatening, unless one finds a safe space for critical reflection. This contemplative space and the perspective it gives are essential to move upward from Stage 3.

Contemplative attitudes were encouraged through various spiritual rhythms and in-class exercises, including presence, a grounding of spirituality in the body and senses; awareness, the use of ordinary, daily human experiences as a reminder we live inside Divine Union (Abiding); inner silence, an opening of mind and heart to God beyond thoughts, words, and emotions (Keating, 2006); beholding, to establish the believer's place of rest in the biblical, redemptive story by use of images; and rest, to emphasize a theology of journey and practice versus willpower and mastery.

By the end of *Life as a Worship Experience* the students had experienced a minimum of fifteen new spiritual rhythms and habitually engaged in Breath Prayer for the entirety of each seminar. Additionally, students were directed to select spiritual rhythms of their preference to continue to practice after the seminar.

### **Rationale for Curriculum Content and Course Environment**

The content, course environment, as well as the spiritual rhythms included in *Life as a Worship Experience* aimed to facilitate the following markers of healthy Stage 5 and 6 spiritual formation as detailed by David Benner (2015).

- Mature faith has Divine Union as its aim and God's inclusive love as the ultimate means of transformation.
  - The curriculum engages in exercises to change inner narratives, social imaginations, and neural pathways toward participation in Trinitarian fellowship.
- Mature faith is an examined faith, but not one lived primarily from cognitive thought. It does not use analysis as an attempt to control, but rather to inspire awe and worship.
  - The course encourages question asking and dialogue to reveal tacit beliefs that limit stage transition, while also offering contemplative/silent/embodied ways of engaging God.
  - The curriculum offers differing theological viewpoints as valid voices, sponsoring higher stage faith by encouraging inner authority and a widened identity within Christian community.
- Mature faith embraces our humanity and grounds us in physical reality to increase connection with Trinity, creation and all of humankind.
  - The curriculum includes embodied worship through use of our senses, awareness and examined, sanctified imagination.
- Mature faith teaches the believer to live authentically and honestly, moving toward knowledge of the true self, within a community of faith that honors individuality.
  - The course community is encouraged to affirm voices of students expressing metanarrative doubts, critiques, and struggle and to normalize this as part of the human faith journey.
- Mature faith has a theology of journey that includes suffering and mystery, and results in

increased meaning, courage, and purpose.

- The curriculum's theology and spiritual rhythms encourage students to see personal brokenness as avenues of worship and prayer.
- Mature faith has a theology of ever-becoming (as opposed to mastering) to encourage wholeness and love, instead of perfection.
  - The curriculum presents a vision of spiritual maturing (stage transition) and redefines spiritual disciplines as rhythms.
- Mature faith connects all facets of the believer's being – body, soul, spirit, senses, imagination (conscious and unconscious) to the redemptive, biblical story.
  - The class practices embodied and contemplative worship experiences encouraging a posture of beholding (sanctified imagination).
- Mature faith uses Christian symbols, worship, and practices to create space within the believer's life to abide within the grace of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in transformational communion.
  - The curriculum uses *Lectio Divina*, centering prayer, and other spiritual rhythms to experientially reengage the symbols of the faith (the Bible, the cross, Trinity, etc.) in an experiential manner beyond the realm of ideas and theologies or behavioral modification, and into an intimate knowing (abiding or Divine Union). Palmer posits "We must recover from our spiritual tradition the models and methods of knowing as an act of love" (1993, p. 9).

### **Session 1: Worshipping through our Humanity, Personality, and Brokenness**

The goal of this session is to awaken students to God's loving presence; there is never a moment his children are excluded from Trinitarian life. The location of this Divine Union is our embodied human selves, our unique journeys, and the present moment. Session 1 aids stage transition by working to repair a theologically maligned facet of identity within the EPC church, the body self. "The aim of Christian maturity is not to become 'other' or more than human; it's to become fully human, which was God's great desire and delight at the moment of creation. Only in embracing God through our humanity can we be authentically connected to the Divine" (Benner, 2011, p. 3).

### **Session 2 and 3: Worshipping God versus Getting to God**

The goal of this session is to affirm that the dream of God for human existence is Divine Union with him. The most important tacit belief this curriculum seeks to address is "What is your ultimate aim for being a Christ follower?" Sessions 2 and 3 of *Life as a Worship Experience* adapt Skye Jethani's (2011) five postures from *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* in order to explore each student's tacit beliefs in this area, and to present the healthiest motivation for spiritual formation as the pursuit of relationship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the sake of God and humanity - what Jethani calls "Life *with* God" (p. 97). Other noble and worthy aims of the Christian faith, such as personal holiness, mission, inner healing, self-love and knowledge, will form in our lives if we single-heartedly seek Divine Union. Jethani reminds us that "the goal is not to *use* God, the goal *is* God. . . . Relationship with God is not a way to gain treasure; instead, God is our treasure" (2011, pp. 100, 102).

### **Session 4: Transformation through Worship: God doesn't need our worship. We do.**

The goal here is to grasp the transformational power of worship and spiritual rhythms via the lens of neuroscience, attachment theory, and social imagination. Worship and spiritual

rhythms grounded in God's redemptive story and practiced in Trinitarian love carve neural pathways toward attachment, intimacy, and life. It is not God who needs our worship: humanity was designed to worship to assimilate Triune life and love into mind and body. Worship transforms us neurologically. Smith (2013) speaks to the centrality of the inner narrative we live from: "Of which story am I a part? It is story that provides the moral map of our universe. It is narrative that trains our emotional perceptual apparatus to perceive the world as meaningful. Liturgies are compressed, repeated, performed narratives that, over time, conscript us into the story they 'tell' by showing, by performing" (Ch. 3, section 2, para. 1). Worship transforms social imagination.

Practically the aim is for students to engage spiritual rhythms with new commitment and grace, understanding the process of transformation their social imaginations and neural pathways are undergoing through the habitual, embodied, imaginative engagement with story, symbols, images, language, and metaphor. They see that inner-healing and spiritual growth come by practicing as opposed to mastering; resting as opposed to striving; and beholding (sanctified imagination) as opposed to merely taking in information. As well, they gain a vision for ministering in the same way they have learned to worship. Scott M. Boren (2013) states: "The Spirit of God works with restful force. . . . Restful force allows us to flow with what God is doing. The means of the ministry line up with the end. The way we make a difference must line up with the results we want to see from our ministry" (Ch. 15, para. 4, 6).

### **Session 5: A Date with God**

The students in the African context were given a packet of spiritual rhythms and instructions to spend three hours on a date with God in an artistic neighborhood, experiencing Father, Son, and Spirit through creative means, beginning at an art gallery. This exercise was intended to give them an extended period to practice their choice of spiritual rhythms in a busy, urban environment, toward the habitual pursuit of God in the ordinary distraction of life.

### **Evaluation and Findings**

To gauge the success of *Life as A Worship Experience* in creating a foundation for forward faith stage development, I used a series of assessment tools, small group debriefing, and one-on-one dialogue. Each evaluation tool was amended slightly to accommodate language and cultural barriers, translator bias, and student arrivals and departures. We used a Faith Development Scale (hereafter FDS) both Pre and Post, developed by Leak et al. (1999) as a measure of faith development correlating with Fowler's stages two through five. I also included a mid-course evaluation questionnaire, a post-course evaluation questionnaire, and on-going, informal, personal interviews of students and staff (Pre, Mid, Post). For this article, only the FDS, final evaluation and portions of interviews are considered.

### **Final Student Evaluation Form**

An anonymous self-evaluation was given to the students at the end of each course; they rated their own experience in each course objective. The actual evaluation forms were worded differently for the two different host cultures and had a varying amount of questions in order to encompass each course objective. There was also room for open feedback.

The student's self-evaluations were consistent with the feedback I and the staff team received from them. Every student indicated growth in the majority of the course objectives. Overall, the vision of living life as a worship experience and an increased understanding of the ways this is done was grasped across the board. One student commented on the

evaluation form: “He [God] does not reside only in the worship service, but in every moment of our lives, through the beauty and the pain and the brokenness and the small moments of simple joy.” Encouraging movement from an unexamined, tacit faith toward an examined one was the most challenging course objective, but overall successful. One student commented: “I found it very releasing from religion, and it gave me the courage to explore my beliefs further. It was very encouraging and a challenging look at faith and relationship with the Lord.”

Some students embraced contemplative spiritual rhythms with natural ease and passion. For most, experiencing God outside of cognitive thought or corporate, musical worship was a step-by-step training, finding some spiritual rhythms more readily engaging than others. Exposure to and the practice of many ways to encounter God was valuable. *Lectio Divina*, Breath Prayer, corporate sensory worship, and the Joy Day seemed to be most readily understood and engaged with by both classes. Most impactful were the practices engaged by students for the entire 5 or 6-week duration of the course because students began to glimpse the inner transformation these practices bring in daily life. Overall, there was an enthusiastic willingness to adopt spiritual rhythms experienced in the class. One student wrote on the evaluation form, “I now view spiritual rhythms as a joy and as an expression of my own unique self, coming into alignment with the Trinity, rather than seeing them as an act of self-defeating disciplines that squelch any expressions of personal enjoyment/passions. I feel FREE to be with Jesus – no striving.”

Before the course, nearly all students (all nationalities) were unaware or unconvinced of God’s desire to include every moment of their human life in his Trinitarian family. Most could not image a Godhead family ever-present and committed to their human journey. The nature of sin and God’s response was a vital topic; their view of sin and God’s response could be classified as Stage 2 at its formation and Stage 3 in its unexamined acceptance as adults. Much of their faith walk focused on attaining the presence and approval of an offended, withdrawn God. Of all the course content, the Spiritual Foundation of Rest (the active practice of resting in our beloved identities versus achieving spiritual growth through striving and willpower) was most eagerly received and pursued as an avenue of transformation.

Previous to the course, the majority of students (all nationalities) had never been exposed to the contemplative or sensory/embodied worship. The exposure to new ways to experience God (spiritual rhythms) was enthusiastically received by most. For some, they were received as the answer to a sense of lack they had felt in their EPC practice.

Asian believers’ lack of exposure to contemplative and embodied modes of worship and prayer evidenced that their discipleship into the Christian faith was based on a Western model of knowing God (heavily cognitive). I had expected Asian students of Buddhist background to have a foundation in mindfulness, awareness, presence, and meditation (and possibly some resistance to or lack of need for some of the course content). However, those students expressed that the content was entirely new as their Buddhist experience was religious in nature rather than practice-based. Divine Union (abiding) as a basis for the Christian life was an abstract idea with little prior concrete application, both for Westerners and Non-Westerners alike in both Africa and Asia.

Using Jesus’ discipleship style as a source of authority encouraged Asian students (for whom it is culturally impolite to question the teacher in public or private) to speak out. As a class, we dialogued about Jesus’ use of questions: he both asked them and provoked them (of religious leaders and followers) as a form of discipleship and teaching methodology. Once

Asian students were given permission, through the example of Jesus, they enthusiastically joined in with their own questions and dialogue.

Using nature in worship was a culturally sensitive topic for Africans coming from a history of ancestor worship and animism, which needed class discussion, but it was not an obstacle to learning or receptivity. It was important to affirm that the ocean, the tree, the stars do not contain the presence of the divine but point us to the Divine One, and thus, are a tool for increasing awareness of God's presence already with us. One African student, whose church is wary of animism, had always experienced God through nature; she expressed feeling affirmed and set free to deepen this avenue of communion.

In Africa, students born to collective-identity cultures struggled more to engage in silent contemplative exercises than others. Yet, these students also expressed a great sense of freedom to be "given permission" to worship God outside of an official church service, especially through otherness, celebration, Joy Days, and sensory awareness.

### **Faith Development Scale**

**Background and Scoring.** The FDS was developed by Leak et al. (1999) to measure faith development correlating with Fowler's stages two through five. Stages one and six were excluded due to the infrequency of encountering these stages in adults. The FDS is an eight paired-item forced-choice questionnaire. With each question, there is a less mature and more mature response. The questionnaire is scored by counting the number of times a respondent chooses the more mature faith development response. Scores range from 0 to 8 with scores at or below "4" representative of lower developmental stage (Fowler stage 2-3) and scores above "4" indicative of higher developmental stage (Fowler stage 4-5).

**Administration and Results of FDS in Asia.** The questions for this group were slightly amended to accommodate language nuances and culture. The breakdown of student evaluations indicated a total of 11 points gained on the FDS scale overall. Seven student scores indicated forward stage transition.

**Administration and Results of FDS in Africa.** I returned to the original wording of the questions as I felt it forced a more accurate reading of the internal process. However, I predicted less individual movement up the scale as a result. Evaluation indicated a total of 6 points forward on the overall FDS scale. Seven student scores indicated forward movement.

**Evaluation of Faith Development Scale Results.** Collectively, both classes moved upward on the FDS. The Asia class gained five more points than the Africa class. It is my opinion that the FDS did not reflect with accuracy the growth of each student but did prove accurate to gauge the classroom as a whole. (Private and small group conversation was the more accurate gauge for individual faith-stage development).

### **Interpretation of Results**

**Significance of cultural/religious embeddedness.** The Asia class gained five more points on the FDS. Why? In comparing the two groups, most students in the African context were raised Christian and many had stayed in the same church community most of their lives. In the Asian context, most of the Asian group members had left Buddhism to become Christian and the other group members were foreigners serving cross-culturally. Being transplanted into new cultural or faith support communities may prompt a greater awareness

of one's tacit way-of-being-with-God, thus eliciting greater openness and eagerness to critically assess that way-of-being, creating stronger foundations for faith stage advancement.

**EPC shame stifles vulnerability.** Faith stage transition requires a sense of need EPC Christians feel shameful to acknowledge. At the beginning of the school in the African context, the question was asked: "What are three things you feel are essential to spiritual growth?" "Hunger," was the most popular response. Students defined hunger as wanting more of God, but were careful to insist that this hunger did not come from a place of lack, as that would be a sign of poor faith and a betrayal of the EPC system of belief. The class concluded that all of life's answers should be able to be found within the EPC way of knowing and engaging God, Scripture, and the world. This tacit belief hindered honest and authentic dialogue in the class. Room had to be intentionally made for the vulnerable, yet valuable, questions Stage 4 believers had to offer, as it is precisely a humbled and desperate acknowledgment of internal lack that spurs EPC believers on to Stage 4 and 5 transition and consequent transformation into a fuller sense of faith. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. . . . Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:3, 6, NIV). The students who exhibited the most substantial faith-stage development were also the ones feeling the lack within the EPC faith-support system that held their current, growing, identities. All expressed great relief at being assured that this angst was not only normal, but necessary growing pain for the maturing of faith.

**The group can hinder transition.** Just as an individual can operate in one particular stage of faith, so can a group, such as a para-church organization, church, family, or even a workplace. Fowler (1995) defines this as the "modal development level," which indicates the "average acceptable level of development for adults in a given community" (p. 294). People are attracted to faith-based groups that operate at their same stage or the stage they are transitioning into. Equally, the process can be stifling for the individual who is transitioning beyond the group's stage of faith (as cited by Jamieson, 1998, p. 84). Jamieson's (2002) research finds that 30 percent of committed, active believers who left a church did so because they transitioned out of its modal development level. They had no offense or disagreement with their church but felt they could not continue their faith journey within it. In particular, they did not feel they had the permission or safety to raise destabilizing metanarrative questions, much less the space or equipping tools to explore alternative answers to those questions.

As a facilitator, my greatest area of learning in the classroom was in how to shift modal development level upward; the group's level was a constant presence in class and became obvious once I began to probe the students' tacit belief systems. As Stage 3 faith is bold, Stage 3 students were often the most vocal when tacit beliefs were challenged. Their comments or questions seemed phrased to reform concepts taught in order to reduce conflict with their current way of knowing. Others, in the midst of Stage 4 demythologization, desperate for new ways to relate to their faith, longed to ask controversial questions and engage differing perspectives but were acutely aware of the likely judgment of their peers. Stage 4 voices were stifled by the modal level unknowingly maintained by those in Stage 3.

As this capstone project was implemented entirely within a YWAM context, I made several observations and generalizations regarding the modal development level of faith at the two YWAM centers in which the project took place. The observations are specific to those two locations, but are likely also relevant elsewhere.

**YWAM is Stage 3 and 4.** YWAM's value of diversity in nationality, ages, and church

background gives room for many voices, and is YWAM's single greatest catalyst for breaking through the modal development level of faith toward forward stage transition. YWAM's adult education program is Stage 4. Emphasizing self-reflection, critical thought, and exposing tacit beliefs, YWAM adult education programs effectively sponsor Stage 3 (Conformist) believers to enter Stage 4 (Individuative-Reflective). YWAM community life, however, is Stage 3. YWAM may be contributing to the stagnation of spiritual development in areas where the organization retains or encourages a Stage 3 culture, most obviously in community life. YWAM appears to encourage the Stage 3 mode of peer-derived identity and value by encouraging the attitude, "I am my community." According to Benner (2012), a key attitude to moving successfully through Stage 4 is to disassemble one's identity from a communal self, otherwise the impact of the community's perceived judgment will overshadow the need to form independent, examined belief. The emergence of executive ego can be hindered. A healthier view is "I have a community, but I am not my community" (Ch. 7, section 3, 4). The inner space this creates is necessary for critical examination of community beliefs, values, and practices without being forced to leave the community to do so.

**Shame.** Every person I privately met with in this project expressed guilt and shame in seeing their self-individuation as a betrayal of their YWAM "family." All but one expressed desire to leave for a season or longer. An example of this angst can be seen in a missionary whose newborn nephew died shortly after birth. She is in process of painfully demythologizing what she believes about God's response to prayer, yet she is required to pray aloud at weekly meetings. She does not feel safe to refuse or explain her process, as she experiences the common Stage 4 dilemma of being acutely aware of her ministry team's judgments while struggling to form an independent perspective. All those I met with privately believed that their Stage 4 self-individuation would be construed by YWAM community as "back-sliding."

**YWAM's public treatment of cognitive belief and values is Stage 3.** Generalizing on a YWAM base's treatment of cognitive belief and values is difficult. Firstly, there is a discrepancy between the manner of dealing with cognitive belief systems in a classroom (Stage 4) versus in a community meeting (Stage 3). The modal development level regresses. An example would be when the MC at an open community night began the evening by joking about those who believe in evolution, and many in the community responded with the expected laughter. A Stage 4 treatment of faith would display sensitivity to the many in the audience that are in a process of self-individuating their belief on this issue or may hold other views. Other issues commonly wrestled with in a Stage 4 transition were presented by speakers as assumed community-held belief, such as homosexuality as a sin and the nature of hell. One student I met with is questioning her gender-identity and shared she has learned to "check out" during community sermons in order to emotionally protect herself. Faith-based organizations do need to operate from an agreed-upon system of values and beliefs; however, this presents a special challenge to an organization made up primarily of members 18-34 years of age who are (or should be) in process of individuating those beliefs and values. I suggest that the sensitivity and understanding needed is currently not offered at a community level. Therefore, my primary concern is "Does the community environment at YWAM allow for self-individuation or does it discourage it?" My experience working with those in Stage 4 is that community worship gatherings are often anxious experiences, leaving them feeling marginalized and shamed, rather than positively challenged to self-individuate by modeling from the platform an honor for the diversity of belief and journey within the room.

**Safe groups.** Liminal (safe) groups or faith sponsorship is necessary for those transitioning beyond the modal development level of faith of their group. The course content

served as a “fishing net” for students in stage transition. Seven of these students approached me, asking to meet privately. All were dealing with metanarrative questions, unresolved ministry disillusionments, as well as experiencing deep angst with what they perceived as inconsistencies in the practice of faith. None felt safe to grapple with these issues in front of a classroom. One student went so far as to hand-select a group of “safe” peers with whom she felt she could consider Scripture and faith from a different perspective and not feel threatened. Gravitating toward a liminal group is a marker of one moving from “reflective exile” to “transitional explorer” and imperative to further faith development. All involved in this environment greatly benefited from the freedom to question, critique and verbalize their inner processes. From my perspective, the greatest growth was exhibited by the students I processed with outside class, especially those who formed the small group.

**The danger of offense.** Offense can cause faith stage regression. There was only one student whose FDS score regressed, for whom I felt the score may have accurately reflected his experience. He dropped from a six to a three. At the start of the course, personal communication and enthusiasm for the curriculum evidenced a person in stage transition, ready to move beyond his community’s modal development level. However, toward the end of the seminar, we became aware that this student was complaining about staff, angry at how the class project had been handled. His evaluation of the course and my teaching was uniquely low. On it, he wrote: “Try not to change the Bible too much cause peoples’ beliefs can be messed up because of too much information.” On his second FDS evaluation, he adjusted his answers to bring his faith back inside community boundaries (Stage 3). It is my opinion his response is similar to that of a “disillusioned follower” who leaves his supporting community because he is offended, hurt, disappointed, or angry at leaders, possibly for not receiving the expected care. Additionally, “disillusioned followers” tend to label doctrines “unbiblical” or “incorrect” according to their own understanding. Stage transition was thwarted due to an interior threat to his understanding of Scripture and compounded greatly by personal offense. Consequently, he retreated backward to align his identity with the faith community he previously complained about, but, ultimately, is most comfortable with.

**Good fruit from contemplative experiences.** Contemplative experiences create openness to examination of tacit beliefs. For some cultures, religious implicational thinking is a new concept and skill. For some in Stage 3, critical examination of their belief system or community of faith was akin to dissecting the purpose of their existence. The spiritual rhythm experiences, both in class and out of class, created openness within students. Those who had positive encounters with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit felt an increased safety to examine beliefs within themselves and their faith-supporting communities if they felt those beliefs were hindering themselves or others from knowing God in this intimate or transformative manner. Contemplative and embodied worship often transcended the modal development level of faith, opening students to the new ideas behind the encounter.

### **How Do We Disciple a Stage 4 Culture in a Stage 3 Faith Supporting System?**

This project made me acutely aware of the discipleship dilemma YWAM and EPC organizations face. My experiences agree with faith development experts who believe modern culture is pushing humanity toward Stage 4. In private meetings with students, the topics driving their stage transition were the very ones they felt unable to bring up in class because it meant challenging community-held belief. These included (without exception) evolution, homosexuality, hell, inerrancy of Scripture, and deep disillusionment over unanswered prayer. The students sincerely sought intelligent explanations to allow them to retain their community-held beliefs, or at least, an alternative view perceived as allowing them

to remain Christian. For many, the only choice modeled for them is to believe as the EPC faith community believes in its entirety or not believe any of it, to conform entirely or to be rejected. Alternatives to this dualistic impasse must be modeled.

Culture is forcing Christians to self-individuate on key, controversial topics; however, in our classrooms and churches, we are not allowing for the process of individuation to take place, nor are we equipping teachers to handle this process. I believe this is because there is a strong pressure for community-held belief to reign on these topics, so much so, I would assert that YWAM is giving students all the interpersonal and critical thinking skills to move into Stage 4, but insists their actual beliefs remain in Stage 3, peer-defined and based on external-authority that has not been reconciled with personal experience. In my opinion, the formalized discipleship process of the YWAM bases I observed is an effective sponsor to move Stage 3 faith forward but stalls in Stage 4, and this contributes to spiritual crisis. My recommendations for discipling Stage 4 culture in a Stage 3 faith supporting system follow.

**Intentionally reengage self-individuating topics.** In regard to the divisive issue of women in church leadership, Loren Cunningham (founder of YWAM) and David Hamilton's (2000) book: *Why Not Women?: A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* fostered respectful dialogue and proactive sensitivity across YWAM globally, while opening doors to women in leadership (even in patriarchal societies) without demanding uniformity of belief. In considering this, I would not say the YWAM community has progressed to a Stage 5 way of relating to community-held cognitive belief and values, rather YWAM leadership were successful in creating community-held (Stage 3) belief around the value of women in leadership. Because this value came from perceived and external authority, Stage 3 could readily adopt it, and Stage 4 was provided maps to find meaning and faith within demythologized Scripture. YWAM's success in this area is exciting and noteworthy, hinting of the possibility for an intentional Stage 5 modal development level of faith.

**Educate on human and spiritual development.** YWAM targets youth, so the bulk of members (ages 18 to 34 years) will and should be in Stage 4 or in transition on either side. In my experience, Jamieson's words hold true: "Although Evangelical churches have been strong on discipleship, especially immediately after conversion, this has generally not led to an ongoing focus on the maturing of Christian faith, particularly in terms of major faith transitions and changes" (2002, p. 109). A greater awareness of the life events that may propel one toward faith stage transition is needed (Benner, 2012, Ch. 4, Sections 2-4). Catalysts of faith stage transition include suffering (death, divorce, illness), job changes, moving (especially cross-culturally), contradictions between valued sources of authority, and greater life disappointments (unwanted singleness or childlessness or life choice regrets).

Signs of immanent faith stage transition are often interpreted as back-sliding, and include physical distancing from the faith supporting system; less participation and commitment; a critical distancing from one's previous assumptive value system and analysis of it; disillusionment with leaders or structure of faith-supporting organization; doubt, critical reflection on metanarrative questions and concerns, an uncertainty or even depression; exploration of knowledge from groups previously considered "non-orthodox"; emotional breakdown; ministry "burn-out"; mid-life crisis. Fowler reminds us that transition from Stage 3 to 4 "represents an upheaval in one's life at any point and can be protracted in its process for five to seven years or longer. It typically is less severe for young adults. . . . When the transition occurs in the late thirties or early forties it often brings greater struggles. This is because of its impact upon the more established and elaborated system of relationships and

roles that constitute an adult life structure” (Fowler, 1995, pp. 181-182).

**Use intentional language.** Deliberate use of images to convey what the process of spiritual maturing can look like, re-grounding it in the human experience, can undo some widely held EPC assumptions that the path to maturing faith is an ever-upward climb beyond humanity and weakness to perfect belief, character, fulfillment, and destined ministry. More language like Benner’s is needed: “Transformation is at least as much about descent as ascent, death as new life, loss as new discovery” (2012, Ch. 4, section 5, para. 3).

**Pursue a public culture of sensitivity.** People in Stage 4 transition often endure guilt and shame, and isolate themselves in fear of sharing their struggle. The most helpful thing anyone can give a person in this phase is to tell them it is normal: “What they are experiencing doesn’t mean that they are losing their faith. It doesn’t mean that they are backsliding.” They need assurance they are on a “well-worn path to maturity of faith” (Jamieson, 2002, p. 130).

**Offer alternatives to assist Stage 4 self-individuation.** The EPC culture does not provide many alternative models or tools for believers in the crux of Stage 4 transition, giving the impression there is only one way to approach the symbols and issues of faith. Theologies and practices from the wider body of Christian faith and spirituality need to be offered and explored with a faith guide. Stage 5 and 6 faith guides, not destabilized by Stage 4 spiritual crisis, can find a natural place to serve in YWAM and the EPC context. Leaders should identify and refer those in the latter stages of faith to serve those in earlier stages, providing and forming safe spaces for them. Training in contemplative or embodied practices to know and engage God beyond a conceptual knowing can be key. In my experience, students who were deeply distressed theologically encountered peace and hope when offered spiritual rhythms cultivating Divine Union through inner silence, awareness, and presence.

### **Conclusion: Beyond the Current Limits of Knowing God and Making Him Known**

Why is it important for more EPC believers to traverse the full perilous journey of the stages of faith? The boundaries of early stages present limits for knowing God and making him known. While the zealous energy of Stage 3 can be a positive force for mission, those whose identity is defined by separation from others not part of their group possess significant, innate obstacles for reaching them. Those who feel they have all the answers may not engage those with different questions, nor include those who reject their answers. Those who define missionary success only as gaining converts, rather than extending the kingdom of God through inclusive, unconditional love, may lose heart. For example, a missionary working with an impoverished, marginalized people group for seven years confessed he felt he was wasting his time because he only had one convert, unable to see the value of his years of self-sacrificing love and mercy shown to so many others. The church must engage and model missions from a Stage 5 and 6 vantage point for these missionaries and for the world, pointing all toward a kingdom of God extended and established through unconditional love that defies boundaries and definitions of earlier stage faith. Those who have traversed to latter stages of faith are living signposts pointing toward inclusive community where justice, love, and value supersede tribe, class, gender, sexual orientation, religious community, nation, or political party. These beacons of faith must inspire all of us to incarnate, like Jesus, the imperatives of absolute love and inclusive justice, heedless of threats to self and to institutional arrangements of the present order, ready to spend and be spent for the transformation of mankind in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As per Fowler (1995), this is how a Stage 6 Christian engages mission and envisions the kingdom of God on earth (p. 239).

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