Faith Development on Christian College Campuses: A Student Affairs Mandate

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Faith Development on the Christian College Campus

Faith Development on Christian College Campuses: A Student Affairs Mandate

by Stephen Beers, Ed.D

INTRODUCTION

Today’s university is a compilation of various yet distinct departments and divisions. In fulfilling the mandate for faith development that Christian universities share, each department and division has critical roles: faculty utilizing formal and informal instruction integrating faith and learning; administrators integrating core values in the decision-making process while modeling Christ-like leadership; and student development staff intentionally engaging students and fostering teachable moments that facilitate the faith development process. Each division plays a vital role in establishing a Christian college or university.

This article focuses mainly on the role of the student development professional in the faith development initiative. For this work, the division of student development will include all of the departments generally associated with the student development areas on Coalition of Christian College and University’s (CCCU) campuses: Residential life, activities, leadership development, campus ministries, athletics, etc. First, this article will overview baseline information of faith development research including definitions and summary statements about leading faith developmental theory. Next, a review of the Christian college’s distinctive “call” and what the role of the Christian Student Development Professional (CSDP) might be in the development and continuation of the initiatives outlined will be discussed. Last, the paper will review CSDP programs and initiatives in light of relevant faith development theory.

Definition of Faith

“What is faith?” This question is especially fundamental for colleges and universities that claim to promote and develop faith. To begin the defining process, the Oxford English Dictionary (1989) states that faith is “belief, trust, confidence.” The definition continues, “In early use, only with reference to religious objects: this is still the prevalent application, and often colours the wider use.” This definition highlights the general “trust” aspect of faith.

A more representative definition for Christian colleges and universities is found in Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words (1985) which defines faith as follows: “pri-
marily, ‘firm persuasion,’ a conviction based upon hearing; is used in the New Testament always of ‘faith in God or Christ, or things spiritual’” (pg. 222). This definition aligns faith in relationship with an evangelical Christian world-view.

These two definitions are seen more as a positional definition. This positional definition is appropriate for static applications, but for the purposes of this article there needs to be a dynamic definition- a definition of faith that can be developed or matured. Therefore, Fowler’s definition of faith within his books, *Stages of Faith* (1976) and *Becoming Adult Becoming Christian* (1984), is even more appropriate. Fowler states in *Stages of Faith* (1976) that

“faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person’s way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose” (p. 4).

Here faith is defined as a person’s understanding of his/her own meaning. This definition transcends religious terminology along with being developmental in nature. One problem with the use of this definition for Christian colleges and universities is that it is not religiously distinctive.

*Benson and Eklin (1990) define faith maturation as “Maturity of faith - the degree to which persons exhibit a vibrant, life-transforming faith marked by both a deep, personal relationship to a loving God and a consistent devotion to serving others” (p. 9). Of all the definitions presented thus far, this definition is more useful within the Christian college communities because the basic underlying assumptions are more in line with those accepted within that specific Christian community.*

**Faith Development Theories**

The major theorists concerning faith development vary in their approaches to describing the developmental process. Some focus on defining a stage format, others focus on the process, and still others focus on defining the core dimensions and evidences of change.

Leading the major stage theorists are James Fowler, Sharon Parks, and John Westerhoff. Both Fowler and Parks believe that the development of faith is linear and that a fully developed faith is “universalizing faith.” Fowler’s stages are as follows: 1) primal faith; 2) mythical-literal faith; 3) synthetic-conventional faith; 4) individuative-reflective faith; 5) conjunctive faith; and 6) universalizing faith (Fowler, 1976). Parks accepts much of what Fowler postulates, but goes deeper into theorizing about the individual’s faith development during the traditional college years. She adds a stage between Fowler’s stages three and four. She refers to this as a time of “young adult.” This stage is defined as a time of “probing commitment” and a “fragile self-dependence” (Parks, 1986; Parks, 1982). She also outlines how ten significant aspects of the maturation process develop during the transition from adolescents to mature adulthood.
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A third stage theory is Westerhoff’s faith development theory. Westerhoff proposes four stages: experienced, affiliated, searching, and owned (Litchfield, 1995). Though the stages are relatively simple, Westerhoff describes both a macro idea of faith development over a lifetime and a micro view of development that describes the changes within each stage.

Taking a different approach to the research of faith development is James Loder. He presents faith development as a series of “transforming moments.” Loder (1982) believes that individuals develop faith as they confront situations. Those situations can then be translated into transforming moments. The process of transformation comes about in five steps. First, the individual experiences conflict or “contradiction.” The individual then moves through an “interlude for scanning,” basically a time of reflection. Next, the person begins a resolution or a “constructive act of imagination.” The fourth step is for the person to have an “opening.” During the “opening” time, the individual begins to accept the reality that their faith is changing. After the opening there is a “reinterpretation.” This reinterpretation then solidifies the developmental experience (Loder & Fowler, 1982).

Fowler reiterates the importance of the “contradiction” or “crisis” aspect of faith development. He states, “We do not make the transition from one stage to another without disruption, pain, confusion, and a sense of loss. All growth involves pain” (Fowler as cited in Dykstra and Parks, 1986, p. 40).

The last faith development theory paradigm included here comes from Benson and Eklin (1990). Funded by a Lilly Endowment grant, they surveyed several hundred adults from six major protestant denominations. They came up with eight core dimensions of faith. Further development of the Index by Peter Benson, Michael Donahue, and Joseph Erickson resulted in an additional research article titled Faith Maturity Scale: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Empirical Validation (1993).

<table>
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<th>Table 1.</th>
<th>BENSON AND EKLIN’S EIGHT CORE DIMENSIONS OF FAITH</th>
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<td>1. Trusts in God’s saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus.</td>
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<td>2. Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace.</td>
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<td>3. Integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships, and political choices as part of one’s religious life.</td>
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<td>4. Seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer, and discussion with others.</td>
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<td>5. Seeks to be a part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another.</td>
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<td>6. Holds life-affirming values including commitment to racial and gender equality, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity, and a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.</td>
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<td>7. Advocates social and global change to bring about greater social justice.</td>
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This paradigm focuses on the measurable aspects of a developing Christian faith. This model provides a framework for the Christian Student Development Professional to develop and evaluate the programs and initiatives he or she is implementing.
A MODEL FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Every aspect of a student’s life can be used for the development of faith. The working model or operational definition of the spiritual formation process was created in order to facilitate better communication and understanding on this topic for the Christian educator. This work centered on defining the spiritual formation process in such a way as to capture the essence of a college student’s faith development. This work also enhances the educator’s understanding of the process of integrating the student’s faith (spiritual formation) and learning across all areas of the university. It is included here because the author believes that Christian spiritual formation is congruent with Christian faith development and that this initial work on a working model will be of assistance in understanding faith in a developmental model context.

A Concentric Circle Model of Spiritual Formation

1. Inner circle - “Altering Self-recognition”
2. Second circle - “Recognition of a Creator”
3. Third circle - “Redemption of His Image in me”
4. Outer circle - “Redemption of His Image in others”
5. Arrow - “Change and/or Growth”
6. Perforated circle walls - “Ability for constant change”

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Operational assumptions

The operational model of spiritual formation is made up of four concentric circles. These four circles represent four definable aspects or movements that an individual engages in as they are being transformed into the Image of Christ. There are two aspects of the model that are important to understand:

1. All four circles are needed and necessary for the full spiritual development of each person. The smaller circles are not negative in themselves. Instead, the smaller circles lack the fuller, more complete development of the person’s spiritual formation.
2. For a person to move into a fuller development of spiritual formation (to a larger circle), there must be a life situation that creates dissidence within the individual. This experience of dissonance can be negative or positive.

The first or inner circle

The first or inner circle of the model is “Altering Self-Recognition.” It represents seeing the world only as it relates to the self. This initial aspect of faith development encompasses the “created but fallen” essence of our being. Here the individual is engaged in aspects of the spiritual formation process, but the involvement is limited to a shallow understanding of how truth relates to the self. This initial aspect or circle is important for each person to grasp or understand, but if our spiritual formation is limited to this circle, we remain severely limited in understanding who we are and what God intends for us.

An example of this circle is how a student may initially have a great “ah-ha” experience (e.g., community worship in a chapel service, viewing the Grand Canyon, or learning a mathematical truth). There is an initial “a-ha” experience where the individual is overwhelmed at what she sees or experiences. In this circle there is recognition of the world outside of the self and a sense of how the self interfaces with this world, but there is not a full understanding of how that experience or truth fits with the self (or the collective humanity).

The second circle

The second and more encompassing concentric circle is “Recognition of a Creator.” It represents grasping the world beyond the self. The individual recognizes that there is a higher power - a Creator God. In this circle, truth takes on divine order. There is recognition that the individual is separate from God and that God is greater than the individual.

This circle is exemplified by a person who attributes a new understanding of order in the universe to a Creator God or the individual who experiences the “wow” of the Grand Canyon or a moving chapel and then attributes the awesome experience to an experience with God.

The shortfall of the person’s experience in this circle is that there is no internalization or change to the person. The focus here is on recognizing God, but it is limited to wonderment. The fuller understanding must include engagement in the developmental
process. In this circle God is acknowledged, but this acknowledgment is limited solely to recognition.

**The third circle**

The third concentric circle is the “Redemption of His Image in Me.” This circle represents the beginning of an integrational aspect of spiritual formation. The individual works on understanding and integrating the difference Christ as Savior makes in her daily life. The individual attempts to take every thought captive. The individual begins to be transformed by the renewing of her mind. She works with the Holy Spirit to redeem every aspect of her experience.

An example might be the way an individual understands the concept of “created order” and the attempts to integrate this concept into her life. Chapel in the third circle no longer produces just a good feeling of people singing in harmony or an experience of knowing that God is being collectively worshiped. Rather, chapel is both of these plus a place where one gains the supernatural power and a fuller understanding of how to structure one’s life in order to be more fully transformed into the Image of Christ.

**The fourth or outer circle**

The fourth and largest circle is “Redemption of His Image in the World.” This circle represents the place where the redeemed person’s actions and intentions join the work of God in redeeming His creation. Here the individual sees herself as a co-laborer with Christ. This circle represents the outgrowth or the result of a transformed life. The transformative integration process in the fourth circle allows the individual to cooperate with Christ in His kingdom work.

As an example, the student in chapel who is being redeemed and used by the Holy Spirit helps those around her to move into a larger circle. This individual may also be used in the classroom to challenge and support another individual who is moving from one circle to another. Another concrete way students move into this outer circle is through the living out of a purposed life. Here they see all of their life experiences as opportunities to help others redeem their lives.

**Arrows**

The arrows within the model represent the change and growth that take place as the student moves from one aspect of their development to another. These changes are a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in concert with life experiences to create growth. Many times these experiences are considered crisis experiences.

**Perforated walls**

The perforations within the walls of the circles represent the ease and fluidity of movement from one circle to the next.
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The Christian University

There is a uniqueness to the educational community that claims to be Christian and is serious about developing faith. Gangel and Wilhoit (1994) suggest in *The Christian Educator’s Handbook on Spiritual Formation* that faith development is an “intentional, multi-faceted process that promotes transformation.”

This transformation correlates with the “self-realization” that George Coe wrote about in his book *Education in Religion and Morals* eighty years earlier.

Coe (1911) wrote, “If we believe that complete self-realization requires not only human society, but also fellowship with God, then it follows that for us education is the effort to assist immature human beings toward complete self-realization in and through fellowship with both their fellows and God” (p. 22).

It then becomes clear that the Christian educator, and specifically the CSDP, is aspiring to develop a Christian faith in students. It is also clear that this faith development is on at least two planes one plane with God and the other with man (Ortberg, 1995). Therefore, it is clear that as the CSDP develops programs and initiatives she must provide opportunities that address both of these areas.

A commitment to the developmental process of faith maturation is evident within the publications from most Christian colleges. The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), whose association is compiled of “Christ-centered colleges and universities of the liberal arts and sciences,” state that their membership is comprised of colleges and universities who “are committed to maintaining the highest academic standards in an environment that fosters spiritual growth” (Coalition for Christian Colleges and Universities, 1998, p. 2).

As stated within the literature, a primary goal of a Christian college is to foster spiritual growth (Peterson & Moore, 1994; Ringenberg, 1973; Sloan, 1994). One such CCCU institution promotes faith development in their education goals. The university’s catalogue states that all university programs hold to a Christian worldview and are characterized by the integration of faith and learning (1996-1998 Taylor Catalog). A second CCCU institution’s catalogue states “spiritual formation has been a part of the mission of SPU since the university’s beginning.” This, they say, is accomplished by “promoting the spiritual disciplines...fostering spiritual mentoring...modeling a community of love...encouraging an informed and thoughtful faith...and through service” (Seattle Pacific University, 1996 Status Report). What is especially interesting and poignant is that the leadership role for most of these initiatives historically comes from the student development area.

CHRISTIAN STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

The Christian Student Development Professional (CSDP) has a central role in integrating faith development at the Christian university mainly because of the type of educational interaction that the student development office facilitates. Unlike other faculty and staff, the CSDP is able to utilize formal, non-formal, informal and serendipitous learning environments. Specifically, the CSDP has a large and powerful arsenal
of educational tools with which to engage students in transformational learning. The utilization of residential hall programming, spiritual disciplines, club involvement, mission trips, chapel services, service learning, servant leadership training, freshmen year experiences, vocational calling development, mentoring, small group involvement, wellness sensitivity and sports, experiences all provide the CSDP exceptional educational experiences rich with faith developmental opportunities. In many cases these educational opportunities may be a university’s primary facilitation of the faith development aspect. In addition, no other campus wide division has the cross sectional campus interaction with students like the CSDP. Last, a hallmark of the CSDP has been strong relationships with individual students. These relationships are critical tools in the faith developmental tool chest. This is especially true as the transformation of values is realized through teachable moments and critical faith developmental experiences that take place through incarnational relationships. This relational ministry focus is even more critical in a post-modern world.

The CSDP must have a working knowledge of how to integrate Christian faith development theory and practice with relevant student development theory. A developmental configuration that does not provide room for Christian theological concepts like sin and redemption will not appropriately lead the professional in providing transformational experiences for the student. The core aspect that differentiates the Christian college program from the non-Christian programs is that the Christian college developmental programs are attempting to partner with God to transform students into the image of Christ. In essence, the CSDP is working to assist the student in moving into the more mature developmental stages of the Concentric Circle model or to fully internalize the eight dimensions of a mature faith.

To illustrate the difference between the Christian and non-Christian’s understanding of the student development professional’s role, one can look at how Arthur W. Chickering’s developmental theory outlined in “Education and Identity” (1969) is utilized differently at each type of campus. Chickering provides a profound and fundamental framework for student development practice. What Chickering neglects to include is a construct of how Christian truth significantly affects where a Christian gains his or her self-image. The first chapter of the New Testament book Ephesians clarifies who Christians are (chosen, predestined, adopted etc.) and where they gain their self-worth (imparted from God). As a CSDP, it is critical to infuse Christian truth into all programming. Without an infusion of truth from scripture and our church fathers, Chickering’s framework is inadequate and ultimately leads us in an errant direction.

Benson and Eklin’s research along with the Concentric Circles Model provide a faith developmental construct that incorporates evangelical theology and is one that can be adopted by the Christian university. This construct will be utilized as an outline to review the integral role the CSDP plays in student faith development. Below is a list of critical programs and roles that the student development department and CSDP play in facilitating growth in faith dimensions on a Christian campus.
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1. **Trusts in God’s saving grace and believes firmly in the humanity and divinity of Jesus.**

The CSDP has a central role in the communication of the gospel of Christ to students who attend their university. Formal programming, for example chapel, plays a central role in communicating the gospel. In addition to the formal programs, the CSDP has significant opportunities to utilize his or her relationships with students to clarify and communicate the gospel. Appropriately communicating the truth about the redemption process is most times done in the teachable moments outside of the formal classroom.

Here the student may need to be challenged to engage in more than the excitement of the community (first circle). There needs to be experiences that lead the student into a transformational, personal relationship with Christ (third circle).

2. **Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace.**

Providing transformational opportunities for fostering a sense of personal well-being, security and peace is a central premise and focus of programming initiated from the counseling center or the wellness coordinator. These programs along with interpersonal interaction with CSDP create opportunities for this aspect of the faith maturation process. Initiating interventions and being available in times when individual students are struggling with these issues provide some of the richest opportunities for growth.

In this dimension the CSDP needs to assist the student in integrating Biblical truths into their personal lives moving them beyond the second circle and into the third (Redemption of His Image in me).

3. **Integrates faith and life, seeing work, family, social relationships, and political choices as part of one’s religious life.**

The integration of faith and life is most evident in the residence halls of Christian college campuses. The outworking of the transformational life is best developed in real life experiences. The residential setting is full of opportunities for challenge and growth. Additional opportunities come with the student’s involvement in ministry outreaches, service learning experiences and being a part of an athletic team. These non-formal educational settings are excellent opportunities for integrating faith and life. Related to this faith developmental dimension is the process of assisting the student in finding a calling. The student development department is in a leadership position to assist students in vocational counseling.

Here the CSDP must challenge the student who has begun the transformational process to allow the new self to partner with God in assisting others. The challenge here is to be careful not to assume the excitement of the ministry experience as a circle three experience when in reality the student is still in the first or second circle.
4. **Seeks spiritual growth through study, reflection, prayer, and discussion with others.**

Formal mentoring and discipleship are significant programming initiatives CSDPs have initiated for the development of this dimension. Additional student development educational opportunities for this dimension exist in the organization and facilitation of the spiritual disciplines and small group Bible study. For example, working with the religion department on seamless curricular programs that initiate discussion and reflection are powerful tools for this dimension.

In the fourth dimension, the CSDP encourages the student to fully engage in the disciplines, allowing them to transform their minds. This transformational experience is where the student moves from circle one or two to the outer circles of real transformation and ministry.

5. **Seeks to be a part of a community of believers in which people give witness to their faith and support and nourish one another.**

The campus as a whole, and specifically the residential facilities, are intentional communities programmed to be supportive and nourishing. The CSDP plays a valuable role in facilitating the community aspect of the residential community. Small groups, chapel mission trips, freshmen year experiences, along with outreach ministries may all provide opportunities for a community of believers to give witness of their faith.

Here again the CSDP encourages the student to fully engage in the disciplines and allowing them to transform their minds. This transformational experience is where the student moves from circle one or two to the outer circles of real transformation and ministry. A continued caution is to make sure the CSDP or the student does not confuse the excitement of being part of the community with a transformational experience.

6. **Holds life-affirming values including commitment to racial and gender equality, affirmation of cultural and religious diversity, and a personal sense of responsibility for the welfare of others.**

Leadership for racial and gender equality is highlighted by student development programming from the minority and international student network and departments. Informal interaction on campus along with residence hall programming provides opportunities for inclusion and understanding among racially and religiously diverse students.

In the sixth dimension, the CSDP provides opportunities for the transformed student to be used of God in transforming the world around them. This is where the student is seen as experiencing the outer circle or the “Redemption of His Image in others.”
7. Advocates social and global change to bring about greater social justice.

Here again the CSDP provides leadership in outreach programs, service learning, and mission trips rich with experiences in working towards social justice. Servant leadership and ethical training are hallmark programs for many CCCU campuses that specifically address the development of a deeper understanding of social justice.

Like the sixth dimension, the CSDP provides opportunities for the transformed student to be used of God in transforming the world around them. This is where the student is seen as experiencing the outer circle or the “Redemption of His Image in others.” A continued caution is to make sure the CSDP or the student does not confuse the excitement of being part of the ministry with a transformational experience.

8. Serves humanity, consistently and passionately, through acts of love and justice.

The opportunities for CSDP leadership, both interpersonally and in campus wide program development, is at the core of what is provided at the Christian university. Outreach programs, service learning and mission trips provide definable experiences that shape the students. Residence hall living, student government and athletics all provide constant real life experiences of opportunities for students to put their faith into practice.

In the eighth dimension, much like the sixth and the seventh, the CSDP provides opportunities for the transformed student to be used of God in transforming the world around them or “Redemption of His Image in others.” As stated earlier in the article, every experience can and does get used in the faith development process. So even if a student is engaged in the process of serving humanity and is acting out of the first or second circle and not from a transformed life, God can and does utilize these experiences to shift the individual. In fact, some of these experiences are the crisis experiences that push the individual into the next circle.

In closing, as demonstrated above the CSDPs provide the leadership in programming initiatives that foster the most significant faith developmental opportunities on campus. This transformational learning outside of the classroom is underscored in current literature. Richard Light in his recent book *Making the Most of College* states, “learning outside of classes, especially in residential settings and extracurricular activities such as the arts, is vital. When we asked students to think of a specific, critical incident or moment that had changed them profoundly, four-fifths of them chose a situation or event outside of the classroom” (page 8). The CSDP must take his or her role seriously as a leader for faith development within program development and be intentional in relationship issues. The CSDP must also see themselves as campus leaders looking for partnerships among campus divisions to maximize the college experience.

**CONCLUSION**

Faith development is a crucial aspect of the Christian college and university. It is a Christian college distinctive, but more than that it is central to the Christian college mission.
and university’s mission. Understanding what a maturing faith consists of and how to develop it remains a critical issue for the Christian Student Development Professional who wants to take a significant role in the developmental process and in the development and execution of programs and relationships that foster a student’s faith development. The Christian Student Development Professional must take a leadership role in facilitating and fostering the historical student development programs. The Christian student development professional must take a leadership role in directing all campus resources to maximize the faith development experiences because the Christian student development professional cannot do this alone. His or her responsibility will include taking a leadership role in helping the faculty and the staff to develop their personal faith. This leadership role includes working with each interaction point where a student connects with the university, such as: workstudy programs, assisting in faculty development, and providing seamless curriculum opportunities for integrating faith development. The task is both formidable and rewarding.

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Faith Development on the Christian College Campus


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**ENDNOTE**

The Concentric Circle of Spiritual Formation was developed in cooperation with John Brown University’s Spiritual Formation Task Force (SFTF). The members of the SFTF are: Ms. Tracy Balzer, Dr. Stephen Beers, Dr. David Brisben, Dr. Ron Habermas, Ms. Patty Kirk, Rev. Stan McKinnon and Dr. Jim Worthington.