

Faith Formation for Adults with Disability

By Jeff and Kathi McNair

Scripture defines faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Heb. 11:1). Belief and trust are arguably the most critical aspects of faith. For the Christian, it is belief in Jesus, and trusting in the things he has said about who he is. As Jean Vanier, international advocate for individuals with severe disabilities, has stated, “Trust is continually called to grow and to deepen or it is wounded and diminishes.”¹ Vanier’s perspective is not unique and serves as one of many that could be quoted about the importance of growing in faith.

Because people with disabilities are first and foremost *people*, the types of differences impacting faith and spiritual development are the same as for anyone else. Personality, life experiences, being a son, daughter, sibling, parent, professional, employee, employer, high school or college graduate all impact faith development and understanding. The differences for those with disabilities that impact faith development typically relate to: 1) the effects of a person’s disability on themselves in terms of functional limitations, 2) how others perceive their disability, and 3) how society and particularly the church perceive them. In order to understand these particulars, let us first define faith development.

What Is Faith Development?

What changes take place when someone attempts to develop a person’s faith? Faith development theory discusses assessing growth in logic, moral reasoning, social perspectives, evaluating sources of authority, understanding the perspectives of others, developing a coherent understanding of the “world” and responding to symbols, narratives and rituals related to the sacred. James Fowler, one of the leaders in the assessment of faith development, lists these as the “structures” of faith.² It has been stated that Fowler has “secularized” faith development through his focus on structures.³ The key question is, “Are the structures of faith different from the content of faith?”

Obviously, the answer is yes because people hold faith in a variety of divergent and conflicting areas. The structures of faith, although somewhat similar among those who believe, have a variety of foci as to the “content” of their doctrines (such as Christianity, Judaism, and secular humanism). These belief systems can vary widely. It is arguable, however, that faith development should address *both* the structures and the content of faith.

If structures of faith can be generically applied across faith content areas, then we must consider whether actual faith development should focus only on these generic structures, or focus on the content of faith for the Christian, or both. For example, if a person has significant knowledge about Christianity, does that imply he or she also has great faith? We personally know individuals with seminary degrees who have totally rejected or perhaps never embraced faith in Jesus Christ. However, strictly on a knowledge

basis, they would have more knowledge about theology and aspects of faith than many people. Although knowledge can contribute significantly to faith, knowledge by itself does not imply faith.

At the same time, a person may actually grow in faith while increasing knowledge about the object of their faith. So, some factors, although important to faith development, would not necessarily indicate what the content motivating them would be. Once again, Fowler calls these the structures of faith.

The Bible itself addresses the notion of structures of faith in the well-known faith and works section of the Book of James (James 2:14–25). Works are a structure that may or may not be motivated by faith. However, faith is evidenced in a structure—works—that must be present. After all, “faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17, NIV). Content-based faith without structures is dead. As James later states, that is the faith of the demons (James 2:19). In this case and in many others, structures are the evidence of faith. Good works could cause observers to wonder whether works were faith motivated.

For the Christian, the content of faith is extremely critical. Jesus’ comment, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6) is exclusive in identifying what the content of faith must include. Structures by themselves may contribute to a moral or compassionate person. However, without the correct content—Jesus Christ—faith is misdirected.

Faith requires both content and structures. These facets are interconnected. Structures are the fruit on the tree (Matt. 7:15–20) that may tell us about the tree. What we are looking for is an integrated faith with both content *and* structures.

From a Christian perspective, another way of looking at the structures and content of faith might be to consider the following issues. Each includes examples of critical elements of the Christian faith. However, some can exist simply as structures (the works aspect).

- Trust in God and acknowledgement of God in everything (Prov. 3:5)
- Love for God (Mark 12:30)
- Belief in God (John 3:16)
- Passion for God’s desires (Mic. 6:8)
- Love for others (Mark 12:31)
- Selflessness and being a servant (Phil. 2:4–8)
- Knowledge about who God is (Heb. 6:1)
- Self-understanding/sinfulness (1 Tim. 1:15)
- Purity (Ps. 19)
- Courage (Dan. 3:16–18)

Faith develops as we increase our trust in God while decreasing in self-reliance. This is a critical component of the content and structure of faith. Evidences of growth in trust in God are evidences of growth in faith. This growth in trust can be evidenced by our personal acknowledgement of God in everything. Our decisions are guided by prayer—before decisions are made, while we are in the process of acting on those decisions and in giving thanks for the outcome. In this way, faith recognizes God’s sovereignty over all aspects of life. This acknowledgement also provides evidence of the reality of God as being present, as we are never alone.

Faith will also develop as I grow in love for God, in belief in God, and in passion for God’s desires. Each of these is a critical component for both the content and structure of faith. Evidences of growth in these areas are evidences of growth in faith.

In contrast, faith may develop as a person grows in love toward others. However, this can be just a structure of a non-specific faith, a different religious faith, or it can be motivated by the content of Christian faith. There are people who are very loving toward others, yet are not motivated by Christian faith. To show love toward others may or may not be a direct evidence of growth in Christian faith. At the same time, if a

person is thought to be growing in Christian faith but is not growing in love for others, the claimed growth in faith could be called into question.

Similarly, faith will develop as a person grows in selflessness and as a servant of others. Faith will also develop as one grows in knowledge of who God is, in self-understanding (particularly in the understanding of one's self as a sinner), in the desire to be pure and holy as God is and in courage. These are all structures of faith.

These examples are provided so that those who endeavor to facilitate faith development can distinguish between general faith development and Christian faith development. It is the latter that we are interested in developing. This also helps to distinguish structure-oriented, content-oriented, and integrated faith development. As the church, we often confuse these areas, equating content knowledge with integrated faith development.

Facilitating Faith Development Among People with Disabilities

Disability includes a variety of effects on an individual's faith development. People with an intellectual disability, for example, are often limited in their ability to understand, evaluate, and synthesize information. These individuals will therefore be dependent upon those who can explain concepts to them in an understandable manner. One of our friends with an intellectual disability voraciously consumes any video he perceives has to do with the Christian faith. This is a positive method to assist with his reading disability. However, he lacks the ability to distinguish fact from fiction. The impact of disability on the content of his faith is that he is sometimes confused, believing the last thing he saw in a video. Movies based upon novels become confused with videos with biblical teachings.

Those with more severe intellectual disabilities process little if any knowledge-based information. Their disability removes most content as a means of faith development. In the field of Special Education, discussion is made of what are called functional skills. Functional skills are those that have a high probability of being required of someone. This is an important idea to also apply to the notion of faith development. Depending on what a person's disability might be, skills that are functional for faith development will typically be structures. Things like loving others and considering their perspective, such as, "Don't hit others because it makes them sad."

We must speak only in generalities here when determining which skills are functional for which person. However, some teachers attempt to force the conveying of knowledge as the primary form of faith development for people with severe intellectual disabilities. This is unrealistic and unhelpful. We have visited ministries where individuals who are nonverbal with severe intellectual disabilities are placed in a room while the teacher conducts a standard Bible study. This makes little sense from a Special Education perspective as well as for the development of this person's faith.

Instead, the focus of faith development in this case needs to become assisting those with severe intellectual disabilities to be the recipients of love and acceptance. To help each one to understand that he or she is an important part of a group of caring people who love Jesus, learn about the Bible, eat together, and meet regularly. To know they are with people who are happy to see them and give them the most freedom they may experience during the week. To spend time with people who pray and believe prayer is important. To encounter people who do not exclude them but rather offer them opportunities to do lots of things they would not have the opportunity to do if they weren't involved in a church (like go to the beach, or have movie nights, or barbeques and swim parties, or sing songs with a big group of people).

The development of this trust and connection with the Body of Christ should be the primary focus of their structures-based faith development, impacting the way faith is both perceived and developed. Faith is evidenced in their desire to have a Bible to carry, or requests for prayer for their bus driver or teacher, or having total access to anyone in the group, independent of what they are doing. In Luke 5:17–26, we, the

Body of Christ, are given the privilege of filling in the gap and bringing people to God. We are given the opportunity to engage them in the way we express our faith so that it benefits the person with disabilities in a myriad of ways. We believe the words of Luke 5:20 that state, “When Jesus saw their faith, he said, ‘Friend, your sins are forgiven’” (emphasis added). The faith of friends may therefore have a tremendous impact on the lives of persons with severe disabilities in their own structures-based faith. Those with physical disabilities might struggle with knowledge areas of faith in an entirely different way. How does someone with a severe physical disability accept the sovereignty of God? An inclusive church can do much to assist such individuals to accept God’s sovereignty through the acceptance they show and the support they provide. Depending upon the severity of the physical disability, they might struggle with access to usable materials they can use to grow their faith. Those with sensory impairments may also struggle with access to content knowledge because of a lack of sign language interpreters or materials for those who are blind.

Those with emotional problems might struggle with loving others either because of the treatment they have received, their lack of trust, or simply their desire to be alone. Such is often the case for individuals with some forms of autism. Those with more severe forms will struggle with human interactions while those with milder forms will struggle with rejection.

At the same time, faith can grow through the strengths people with disabilities have related to their disabilities. For example, a person with intellectual disabilities can be very loving and very forgiving. We do not apologize for this generalization. These strengths can be built upon to assist in faith development. Also, those with some forms of autism have an incredible ability for memory. This could be built upon relative to knowledge-based faith structures. Those with high functioning autism or Asperger’s syndrome are sometimes described as “guileless” and unable to lie. Could their black and white orientation to what is right or wrong be the foundation for faith development?

Individuals with physical disabilities may have developed a fuller understanding of dependence upon God as a result of their dependence on friends and care providers to assist with basic life necessities. In this case, they serve as an example of right relationships. People with emotional disabilities might be more open to accepting others because they are less judgmental about the social skills of others. This can be a tremendous example to those around them, and should be praised and developed as a characteristic of God’s relations with human beings. We have come to see disability not as a negative, but as having the potential to add value to the lives of the individuals around them. Those engaged in faith development must attempt to understand disability in this way in order to assist people to overcome functional impairments, and to also develop the strengths brought to the process of faith development. In Special Education there is an idea referred to as universal design. Universal design observes that accommodations designed to assist individuals with disabilities may actually benefit all people in the environment. A classic example includes the curb cuts (sidewalk ramps) we see in most cities. These changes were originally designed to benefit wheelchair users. However, bike riders and senior citizens have also come to benefit from this environmental alteration. As universal design is applied to faith development for those with various disabilities, it will likely be observed that others who are not disabled will benefit from the changes made to assist those with disabilities.

Disability Perception and Its Impact on Faith Development

Helping individuals understand their disabilities from a Christian perspective becomes an effort to understand God’s sovereignty and the social consequences of their disabilities. Independent of what one’s disability is, the juxtaposition of their understanding of it with the way they are often treated by others due to disability can cause cognitive dissonance. Often, feelings of rejection are not linked to the disability they are experiencing. For example, a person may not really recognize that they have a disability (in the case of those with intellectual disabilities), or may have come to accept and learn to live with the differences (in the case of persons with physical or sensory disabilities). They may therefore deal more deeply with

how others treat them: “Why don’t people just treat me like I am normal?” Or, “Why do people tease me and treat me unkindly?” These are comments we have heard from those with a wide range of physical, intellectual, and other types of disabilities.

One friend repeatedly asks, “Do you think I am strange?” Why does he ask that? Because that is how he feels based on the way he is treated. The question is not, “Do you think I am strange because of my disability?” but rather whether or not he is strange as a *person*. Of course this type of experience has an impact on faith development, especially if people have allowed society to convince them that their disability is the defining characteristic of their lives, or that disability in some way devalues them. It is critical to communicate that in God’s eyes, people with disabilities have absolute equality with and the same value as any other person. This must be reinforced clearly and often. If a person with a disability is treated unkindly, it is due to the person providing the unkindness, not the person with the disability. Our non-judgmental welcoming, overlooking of minor social deficits, and giving of time in personal interactions communicates volumes concerning how God values all people as members of his family.

It is also important to mention from a faith development perspective that the presence of individuals with disabilities, including those with severe disabilities, has the potential for significant impact on the faith of those around them. Henri Nouwen makes this point in his book *Adam: God’s Beloved*.⁴ He relates the story of a friend who did not understand why Nouwen lived and worked with a man with very severe disabilities. Nouwen’s perspective was, “Don’t you see that Adam is my friend, my teacher, my spiritual director, my counselor, my minister?” This man, Adam, a person who would be dismissed by most in the church and in society, was characterized in this way by one of the most influential Christian writers of the 20th Century. The impact of individuals with disabilities on those who do not have the same life experience can be missed from a faith development perspective, unless we devote time and pay attention as Nouwen did.

How People’s Perceptions Impact Faith Development

In developing faith among those experiencing various disabilities, we must discuss aspects of corporate faith versus individual faith. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that a person can speak in the tongues of men and angels, be a prophet, move mountains, give everything to the poor, even sacrifice his or her own life, but without love nothing is gained. For those with disabilities who look at the Christian church, and for those within the church who have the awareness to self-evaluate, we must ask what we have to offer those with disabilities in terms of faith development. In too many cases, our examples have shown too little love toward those in the disability community. We focus on things described as “less important” in comparison to love. We show favoritism to nondisabled people in the face of warnings against such favoritism (James 2:1–13) and then expect to grow their faith.

A friend of ours with severe physical disabilities once commented concerning the church, “Why would I go to them for help when they communicate they have no interest in me?” This attitude of many churches toward the disability community must change if we are to have an impact upon their faith development. People with disabilities (and their families) will not be drawn to a Christian church that does not want them as a member or is comfortable with their exclusion. Why would people with disabilities want to learn and grow in the Christian faith if followers of that faith do not see them as a priority?

However, on the positive side, the church holds great potential as an agent of integrated faith in the lives of persons with disabilities. There is so much that might be accomplished in the lives of people if the church takes an interest in them. We have referred to these life changes as “social healing”⁵ because some of the most difficult challenges of living with a disability are the social consequences. An accepting church might begin faith development by acting out the structures of faith in the lives of those with disabilities, such as by being loving and accepting of others. Those with disabilities would be intrigued by this treatment and perhaps be open to the content that informed the structures.

Pressing on Toward the Goal

We have worked to develop the faith of adults with intellectual disabilities for nearly 35 years. During the past 17 years at our current church, Trinity Evangelical Free Church in Redlands, California, we have hosted a ministry that includes people with a very wide range of intellectual and other disabilities. Called “The Light and Power Company,” the program is structured to encourage faith at the point where each individual is currently functioning. So although there is content knowledge delivered, it is not necessarily the major or only faith development focus for any of the participants. We do study the Bible and memorize Scripture for those who are able to do so. However, there are no limits on participation based on the ability to comprehend content.

There are also significant times of interaction and relationship building where people can fully participate independent of personal characteristics. We include complete access at all points of the program, and there is freedom to move around as needed. Our programs also include participation in the activities of the larger church, including worship, prayer, and men’s and women’s ministry events. Because people with disabilities are full and equal members of the Body of Christ, they are not segregated. It is critical to their faith development and the development of nondisabled members that we all have normal access to each other.

In addition, we include opportunities to express how each person is growing in faith and how they practice faith on a weekly basis. Based on Psalm 1, class members share whether they “sat” (spent time in faith development through prayer, Bible reading, listening to Christian music, or watching Christian TV, movies, or video), “stood” (stood up for what is right, resisted temptation, spoke about Jesus to someone) or “walked” (worked hard at their job, acted as a good citizen, attended church or Christian programs, or helped a person in need). Each person receives a card with three pictures on it that they raise to indicate what they have done the preceding week. Activities across the three areas are quite varied, often reflecting a person’s current point of faith development. Opportunities are provided for every person who desires to pray for one another so that people can be prayed for, but also to represent the equality all have before God. There is also much good-natured fun and humor customized to each person’s ability to understand. All members, independent of any personal characteristics, are treated with full respect.

Final Thoughts

To the degree we are able, our efforts in the lives of anyone in whom we are developing faith must combine structure and content in an integrated fashion. The caution of James that faith without works is dead is a great teaching to reinforce the notion of integrated faith. Disability may present challenges to faith development, yet it also brings life perspectives useful in faith development for both the disabled church members and the larger church family. The church must begin by including people with disabilities into the Body of Christ and then grow to understand the indispensable nature of these individuals to our corporate faith.

Notes

1. Jean Vanier, *Becoming Human*, (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), p 48.
2. James Fowler, "Faith development at 30: Naming the challenges of faith in a new millennium," *Religious Education*, 99, (2004), p 413.
3. Richard R. Osmer & Friedrich L. Secheitzer, eds., *Developing a Public Faith*, (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2003).
4. Henri Nouwen, *Adam: God's Beloved*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis books, 1998), p 52.
5. For more information on the concept of "social healing," see Jeff McNair, *Disabled Christianity*, cial+healing

About the Authors

Jeff and Kathi McNair are career special educators. They have been involved in ministry to adults with intellectual disabilities since 1974 the last 30 years of which have been at their current local church. Jeff is a Professor of Special Education and the director of the credential program in moderate to severe disabilities at California Baptist University. He is widely published in the area of church and disability and has conducted trainings in more than 25 countries and across the United States. Kathi recently retired from K-12 teaching and is supervising special education credential candidates and doing some university teaching.