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Integrative Paper
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In writing this paper, I will be looking at the curriculum SPICE RACK - and evaluating it using the developmental theory of James Fowler. As a representation of the curriculum, I will specifically be using the four part Christmas series which we used with our 5th-8th Grade Sunday School Class at Christiansburg Presbyterian Church, Christiansburg, VA, last year during the Advent season. This curriculum is sent out on a weekly basis by e-mail and is written by the Reverend Mark DeVries who has been the Associate Pastor for Youth and their Families at First Presbyterian Church, Nashville for the past twenty years. Mark is also the founder of Youth Ministry Architects. Our church has subscribed to Spice Rack for over five years and we have used it with both our 5th-8th grade youth and our Senior High Youth at different times.

The set up of Spice Rack is different than many curricula which only give one or two options per section of the lesson because it is written for a range of ages of adolescents with various parts suitable for youth from early junior high through senior high. Since developmentally youth of these ages are different in the way they behave and are able to think, it is important to have choices in what will be used. In addition, there is the assumption that certain materials will work well with some people but not with others. I have found from talking with our teachers that this is a very strong point for the curriculum – if one activity is not going to work with our youth there is another that can be used and the teacher is not left with the difficulty of having to fill time when there is only one activity suggested and it has failed to work with the group. Because our main teacher has been with this age group since 2001, he has a good grasp of what will and

will not work with our youth and enjoys taking the curriculum and choosing which portions will work with our youth.

When we were assigned this project, I contacted Mark and asked him if he used specific Developmental Theories in developing the curriculum. He told me that he does not use any one in particular but instead has the theories of Erickson, Kohlberg, Elkind and Piaget playing in the background of his mind as he works. He does, however, have certain assumptions which guide the writing of this curriculum. Here are a few assumptions Mark has made in writing Spice Rack and which he shared with me:

- 1) Kids learn best when they are engaged.
- 2) Lecture (unless by an extraordinary teacher) is one of the least effective ways to engage students.
- 3) Students remember more when they participate, particularly when there is some emotion connected to what they are learning.
- 4) Emotions bring a stickiness factor to learning.
- 5) The rule of thumb of "one minute of attention span for every year of life" seems to work (12 year olds need to change activities or methods every 12 minutes).
- 6) Some insights are only gained while laughing.
- 7) The activity that works beautifully for one group or one teacher will fall flat with another group or another teacher.
- 8) Teachers need to speak to a variety of different learning styles in each session.
- 9) If students get engaged in a text, the text can do its work on the students.
- 10) The text's work (the lesson's message) will be different for different student

These assumptions are useful in looking at the practice of the methodology of educational theory in how to deal with teaching adolescents. James Fowler's theory of Human Development comes out of a synthesis of the work of Piaget, Erikson and Kohlberg along with the results of over 400 interviews with children, youth and adults and so is a good choice to evaluate Spice Rack. The youth we are working with here are just moving into

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Integrative Paper
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the Stage 3 Synthetic-Conventional Faith. They range in age from 11-14 and so are in the younger range of adolescence. There are around fifteen youth who attend each week.

There are four lessons in this series which was used during Advent and Christmas 2006. Two of the lessons come from the Gospel of Luke and two from the Gospel of Matthew. The lessons are introduced by Scripture but not by topic and the first activity is something which will give a hint of what will be done during the day. After they do the first activity they guess what the lesson will be about and enjoy the mystery. The first lesson, "The Godbearing Life," works with the story from Luke 1:25-38 of the revelation of the angel to Mary of her part in the birth of the son of God and how we discern God's word to us. The second lesson "Shepherd's Surprise Party," is from Luke 2:6-20 and looks at the shepherd's visit to Jesus and the gospel's emphasis on God's love for the least in society. The third lesson, "The Strange Ancestry of Jesus," is from Matthew 1:1-17 and looks at Jesus' family and how we fit into the family of God. The final lesson, "What Gift Will I Bring?" looks at the visit of the Wise Men to Jesus and how we can choose to not be the pawns of others but to instead follow God and let our lives be gifts. These four lessons all hit upon questions which are vital to youth and they attempt to draw the youth into the story of the people of God in a way which will help them see their relationships to God and one another.

Fowler is concerned with how people develop a system of faith in which to function. This faith does not necessarily mean a system of beliefs but instead "faith is understood as a trust in another and as loyalty to a transcendent center of value and power" (*Stages of Faith*, 14). In addition "faith is always relational" (17). Following

Cheryl R. Peeples
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

Erikson, Fowler sees an important part of adolescence as moving beyond immediate family into culture and the resulting development of identity. As the culture the youth lives in becomes larger, he or she is continually trying to determine how he or she fits into the various cultures and who he or she is becoming and will be. He or she begins to think beyond the concrete to abstract possibilities and is able to articulate how these possibilities may play out. The youth form deep friendships and spend a lot of time discussing their lives and how they compare to others. This younger adolescent time can be vicious as youth form cliques which bond some together while excluding others. Our lessons attempt to help the youth to look beyond their own experiences to see possibilities of other scenarios and viewpoints. By trying these alternatives on in non-threatening ways we have discovered that the youth become, over time, better able to relate to others and themselves. Division into teams is done in completely non-judgmental ways (i.e. person who has the most trees in their yard goes first) so that self-consciousness is less of a problem (p. 153).

The lesson “The Godbearing Life” is the most difficult of the four lessons to use with young adolescents due to their emerging sense of their own physical maturing and embarrassment at their changing or seemingly unchanging bodies. In this lesson, there are various ways to get the youth to think about what the news of Mary’s pregnancy would mean to her. One option has the youth imagine Mary telling her parents about the pregnancy. Another has the youth watch a scene from the movie *Riding in Cars with Boys* and a question of whether Mary would have had the same concerns as Drew Barrymore’s character. A third possibility is a case study of a virtuous college student

Cheryl R. Peeples
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

who goes to give blood and has an HIV test which does not show that she does not have HIV and so requires additional testing which will require a lengthy wait. Our teachers chose to use none of these options but to instead use the very first option which was to ask what kind of news might you get that would be very unsettling for your family. This lesson is very different from one used in the 3rd-4th grade class in which the angel tells Mary she will have a baby and she says “So be it.” This is the first time these youth have thought about what the reality of the birth of Jesus would have meant to Mary. This lesson then asks if the youth have seen the movie “The Nativity” which our youth had seen the week before they did this lesson. They were able to talk about the scenes from the movie in which Mary learns of the coming birth and Joseph is told that all will be well. They were able to enter into the story through their experience of the movie and the lesson then has them act as directors making the movie. The youth loved this option. The next option which was used was dividing the class into boys and girls and having each give gender specific reactions to the news. The boys and girls acted together to come up with “acceptable to them” reactions and then presented them to the class. The reactions were very different and the groups of boys and girls each thought their reactions were “correct” and the other reactions were “dumb.” As Fowler has noted, they saw “differences of outlook with others as differences in ‘kind’ of person” (173). They were very much in tune with what the expectations of others would be in this situation since there have been several pregnancies in our Middle School in the past few years and they said they had never realized how awful this must have been for Mary to be in this position and to not have a way to prove that she was telling the truth. They are not far

Cheryl R. Peebles
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

from being children but are being forced by our culture and their own physical maturing to look at life differently than the way that worked for them just a year or two before. The final portion of this section was coming up with rules to decide “Rules for Discerning the Voice of God.” Because these youth are younger, they had difficulty doing this. They tended to say “If Mom and Dad or the Bible tell me it is God’s will, then I should do it.” They are not sufficiently developed to come up with a list of rules on their own at this point beyond this external authority. Relying on an external authority is very much in keeping with the Synthetic-Conventional Faith of Stage 3.

“The Shepherd’s Surprise Party” was a fun lesson and less embarrassing for the youth. It began with a game of Pictionary of words having to do with the story and then guessing what they had in common. This group of youth loves games and Pictionary is one of their favorites. They like the competition between each other very much and want to prove they are good at the games. The next option done was to divide the group into teams responsible for specific parts (shepherd left behind, Angel, Shepherd before angel comes, People who are told of shepherd’s experience, Joseph) and then each has the opportunity to tell the story from their character’s perspective. The stories are of course different and they get a feel for different perspective in telling the same story. This lets them try on the viewpoints of others and lets them see beyond themselves. Next they looked at the job of shepherd and how those on the margins of society were given the news of the birth. God’s love of those on the bottom of society was discussed after this and the youth processed who might that be in our society. Finally they were given candy canes and were told the story of the candy cane being a reminder of the shepherd’s crook

Cheryl R. Peeples
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

and asked to decide the most important idea of the day that they had found in the lesson.

The youth in this lesson looked beyond their own viewpoints and interests to see that God loves all people and has a special love for the least in society. They tried out ideas of how they can show that love to others. They had to look beyond concrete experience to possibilities and to work out how those possibilities might play out from the story.

Our third lesson was “The Strange Ancestry of Jesus.” In this lesson the youth looked at Jesus’ genealogy as shown in Matthew and wondered about why seemingly unsavory characters were included. They then each did their own family tree and were given the opportunity to talk about interesting characters in their family tree. This lesson has to do with identity – a vital question for youth in Fowler’s theory. Youth are trying to determine what “emerging personal myth” they will have. They are looking for a way to make sense of who they are from their pasts and from the hope of who they will become. When the youth did this lesson, each of them was surprised that everyone else also had strange characters or stories in their history. Each thought he or she was unique in having weird family connections and the level of talk was quite loud for the lesson. The lesson gave them the chance to reflect on their own stories and to see how they fit together in what they thought of themselves but also in how their different stories fit into the bigger story of God’s story. After doing this, the youth were told the story of Jonathan Edwards and his descendants. They were told to turn over their family trees and to write what they would like their families to be like in 100 years. They were then asked what was the most important thing they could do now in order to help their great-great grandchildren to be the kind of people they would want their great-great grandchildren to be. This was hard

Cheryl R. Peeples
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

for them because they tend to not see beyond the next hour much less years down the road. Their answers tended to be along the line of, "I should be nice and obey my parents." Lastly, they were asked to pray for their own descendants. At first they thought this was strange but as they prayed they seemed to get into the prayer and into the idea of passing something along to others.

The last lesson of this series was "What Gift Will I Bring?" The first game was to in teams look through magazines to find specific gifts such as "something green." Again this game was a success. Next, the group is divided into two teams who are told that the book of Matthew needs to be edited for length and they must debate whether to leave in or take out the story of the Wise Men. The debate was lively about whether it made any difference of whether it was there or not. After the debate, there is a guided meditation with the Wise Men. This meditation leads them through the experience of being one of the group traveling with the Wise Men on their journey. The hope is that the youth will be able to put themselves into the story and look beyond their own experience to that of the Wise Men. They are asked if this experience lead them to make any changes in how they are celebrating Christmas this year. Next one sheet of paper for each youth is handed out with the youth's name at the top. The sheets are passed around and each youth is asked to write a "sky's the limit" gift they'd give to this person. Then the youth looked at the gifts of the Wise Men and compared them to the kinds of gifts we give today. Finally the youth looked at Herod's role in this story and how sometimes people will try to use us as pawns.

Cheryl R. Peeples
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

Our class is led by three teachers with years of experience. One has been a Boy Scout leader for 20 years. Another is a Middle School Guidance Counselor. The Third is a Nurse. Because of their backgrounds they work well with this curriculum and are able to explain when the youth do not “get” what is being asked of them. They will rephrase and rework the activities to get the best results. The year began with each youth and teacher being asked to bring a baby picture and current picture of him/herself and these were made into a bulletin board with the title “Branded by God” playing on the idea of items which are branded and how we all carry the image of God in ourselves. Each week the teachers put up the Scripture and a hint about the lesson that will occur the next week. This has gotten the youth used to looking up and reading the Scripture ahead of time. A lot of effort goes into making the youth feel like a cohesive group in which everyone belongs. Pictures of all activities from Sunday School, Youth Led Worship, Youth Group Activities and all church activities are posted around the room the week after they happen and remain up all year. The youth room is ringed with couches and the classroom is on the third floor of the church. Until 5th grade, all Sunday School classes are held in the basement and the classrooms have tables with chairs around them. Moving up to the fifth grade is a big event in the life of our youth. At this point they move upstairs, sit on couches, are asked much more what they think and given the chance to role-play, debate, discuss and play together. There is almost no lecture involved in the lessons but instead the youth move from activity to activity with each one adding on to the one before in order to create a multi-level experience. Our youth have mentors as they go through confirmation in seventh grade and with multiple teachers who are in their Sunday School

Cheryl R. Peebles
Integrative Paper
8/26/2010

class each week they have the opportunity to get to know more adults in greater depth in the church. All these things work together to help support them in their journey of faith and as they develop from being children to adolescents on the road to adulthood.