

How We Know What We Know (Epistemology)

epistemology – the study or theory of the origin, nature, methods, and limits of knowledge

Faith formation is a wonderful, mysterious process. The same inputs of information and experience can produce very different results. Some of the differences can be traced to six distinctive styles of spiritual grounding and processing. The Rev. Hugh Magers first identified these in the early 1990s and there are hundreds of people who have enjoyed his playfully witty exposition of this bit of wisdom. Though the following summary lacks his particular style and the Texas accent, the hope is that the information will help you understand why others in your congregation just don't see it like you do.

According to Hugh, there are six different styles of discovering how we know what we know when it comes to God, faith, liturgy, and other matters of spiritual life and growth. These are:

Angle-Catholic
Charismatic
Evangelical
Rationalist
Social Activist
Traditionalist

Below is a summary of the starting points for how we know what we know. Almost all of us will be a mixture of these but there will be one category underlying and supporting all of the others.

Anglo-Catholic Faith is grounded in mystery, the sacraments, the experience of worship and church aesthetics. One comes to know God and feel God's presence through these things. There is a high value on the authority of the church and often good stewardship has been mandated by the clergy. Bringing the offering plates forward and placing them on the altar ties it to the Eucharist and allows our financial giving to enter into the mysteries that surround the altar. It is difficult to move Anglo-Catholics away from the external, focused on aesthetics, and into the internal movement of transformation. This can, however, be accomplished by focusing on the sacramental aspects of stewardship. Focus is on worship

Charismatic Faith is grounded in the repeatable, ecstatic experience of the gifts of the spirit (example: glossolalia – speaking in tongues). There is also a quest for personal affirmation in whom they are in Christ. Focus is on worship and Christian community. Charismatics take scripture seriously and tend to be good stewards, accepting the tithe as the standard.

Evangelical Faith is grounded in the conversion experience. An Evangelical can tell you the moment their life changed. The Bible is of primary importance. They take scripture seriously and are obedient to God. They tithe because God, through the Bible, says we should. Focus is on evangelism.

Rationalist Faith is discovered in paradox. The faith journal and scholarship are of primary importance. Focus is on education. Rationalists often talk about the paradox of stewardship, namely the liberation that comes when they surrender control of money to God through tithing or other financial disciplines. The concept “whose service is perfect freedom” is an example of a paradox in which they can find meaning and enlightenment...

Social Activist The quest for justice is primary. Either they were injured as children and know that offends God or they read the Bible and take it seriously. Focus is on service and outreach. With regard to stewardship, social activists are often wildly generous to specific causes to the point of self sacrifice. Justice is far more important than comfort.

Traditionalist Faith was formed in a happy childhood. Often this faith development is precognitive, before the age of five. People who are traditionalists will often say that they have always “known God” and cannot identify a specific time when God became real for them. They have an unerring instinct for comfort and sentimentality and are highly change resistant. They can most easily understand stewardship as it relates to providing a happy childhood experience for their own children or those of the congregation. Let the children take up the offering or collect the pledge cards. Acknowledge that talking about stewardship will be uncomfortable. Focus is on pastoral care.