

# GROWING PERSONS

## PURPOSE

To communicate the gospel more effectively, leaders need to be aware of the ways they and other people grow and develop throughout all of life. Participants in this workshop will be helped to reflect on their own faith experiences at various ages, understand the role of struggles in the development of faith, consider different styles of faith, and suggest appropriate ways for the church to nurture faith development at various age levels. They will be given information on styles of faith, drawn from the work of John H. Westerhoff III, author of *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Participants will write generalizations concerning needs and faith experiences of persons at various age levels and will suggest implications for churches that wish to nurture healthy faith development.

## POSSIBLE SETTING

While the workshop is designed for groups of 10–15 persons, it can be readily adapted for use with smaller or larger numbers as well. However, if the group is large, more than two hours will be required.

This workshop could be offered by a congregation, a group of congregations, or at a regional event. It could be used in a retreat setting, or done in two parts. If you have the opportunity to have 2 two-hour sessions, you may want to take the full two hours for Parts I–II and to devote a second session to Parts III–IV.

If participants come from several areas of the life of the church (for example, teachers and others engaged in education, deacons, trustees, pastors, and musicians) the effectiveness of the workshop will be enhanced. The presence of persons of various ages (youth through senior adults) will also be helpful. The workshop may be used in parent education as well.

## PREPARATION AND MATERIALS

- Be in prayer for God’s guidance and for the participants as you prepare for the workshop.
- Review the workshop so you are familiar with the process and the contents of the handouts.
- here options are given, select A or B; do not plan to do both unless you have scheduled more than two hours for the workshop.
- In order to reflect on your own faith development, complete Handout A and identify a faith struggle that you will share with the group.
- If you are not familiar with John H. Westerhoff III’s discussion of styles of faith read at

least chapter 4 of his book, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* revised and expanded edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000).

- Prepare or secure volunteers to prepare drinks and snacks for the break.
- Gather or prepare the following materials:
  - Newsprint (An overhead projector and transparencies may be substituted.)
  - Marking pens
  - Masking tape
  - Copies of Handouts A, B, and C for each participant
  - Small group directions printed on newsprint, overhead transparency, or PowerPoint slide.
  - The basic workshop outline) on newsprint, overhead transparency, or PowerPoint slide. (optional)

**TIME FRAME: 2 hours for the workshop plus 15 minutes for break and transitions.**

## **BASIC WORKSHOP OUTLINE**

- I. Introduction (*5 minutes*)
- II. Reflecting on One's Own Faith Development (*25 minutes*)
- III. Faith Struggles (*45 minutes*)
- Break (*10 minutes*)
- IV. Styles of Faith (*40 minutes*)
- V. Evaluation and Closing (*5 minutes*)

## CONDUCTING THE WORKSHOP

### I. Introduction (5 minutes)

As participants arrive, invite one of them to be prepared to lead the closing prayer circle. Welcome the participants and take time for *brief* introductions if the participants do not all know each other, including information on what responsibilities they have in the church. If the group is small, invite participants to share their reasons for participating in this workshop.

Share (or paraphrase) the following:

Faith has been defined as the way an individual understands the meaning of life. It is the way a person finds coherence in the midst of the many forces, relations, and ideas impinging on his or her existence. In this sense there is no such thing as a person who does not have faith. The question is: What kind of faith does an individual have? In what or whom does he or she put faith? Everyone perceives the world through some set of “glasses”; the question then becomes, What are the glasses through which one views life? Through what or whom does the person find coherence and meaning?

There is no more fundamental category for understanding an individual than faith, because the way a person perceives reality determines what that individual does, believes, and feels.

The purpose of this workshop is to help each of us reflect on our own faith experiences at various levels, understand the development of faith and the role of struggles in that development, and consider appropriate ways for the church to nurture faith development.

If you posted the workshop outline, review it so participants know where you are heading.

### II. Reflecting on One’s Own Faith Development (25 minutes)

**Note:** Participants will be remembering and sharing some deep and significant experiences. Do not push them to reveal more than they wish and do not judge their experiences or struggles.. If you can help the participants catch a sense of the pilgrimage of faith and a desire to continue growing, the workshop will have a special significance. If someone shares a current struggle, make it a point to speak to that person after the session, offering support and encouragement. Likewise, if someone is cut off due to time limit, give him or her an opportunity to complete the personal story in private conversation after the session.

Distribute Handout A, “My Faith Experience,” and review the instructions. Give eight to nine minutes to complete the grid. When all have completed the handout, invite discussion using one of the options below:

**OPTION A:** Divide into groups of 3–6 persons and assign each group a different age category. If your gathering is small, you may want to combine or use broad categories, such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. If your gathering is large, assign single categories to more than one group. If you are working with church school teachers or others who work directly with participants of age-graded programs, you can divide into groups according to the age they work with. If the participants are primarily parents, divide according to the ages of their children. Generally, persons should not be assigned to a group discussing an age level they have not yet attained, with the exception of those who work mostly with individuals older than themselves.

Provide newsprint and markers and review these directions with the participants:

1. Share what you wrote or drew on your handout for the age level you are discussing.
2. Identify and record generalizations drawn from your sharing about the needs and the nature of faith at that age level.

Keep the newsprint for use in IV “Styles of Faith.”

**OPTION B:** Engage in whole group discussion of each age level. Invite participants to look at the words and symbols they put in the first box of Handout A and suggest any generalizations about the needs and nature of faith of children in that age range. Record these generalizations on newsprint, then move on to the next age level. Keep the newsprint for use in IV “Styles of Faith.”

### **III. Faith Struggles (45 minutes)**

Share or paraphrase the following:

We have already defined faith as the way an individual perceives reality and understands the meaning of life. Faith is not stagnant; it is something that changes and grows, especially if a person is nurtured. Change, however, often involves struggle.

Everyone faces struggles in a life of faith. The result of a struggle may be the deepening of faith. On the other hand, struggle may result in stagnation or even a step backward. Faith struggles may be extensions of struggles in other areas of life, such as the family or workplace. They may involve reinterpreting or making sense of earlier experiences and questioning where God was during a trying time in one’s life. Such struggles may be relational. Other struggles are more intellectual, as a person struggles with the content of their faith, with issues such as good and evil. Sometimes we struggle to discern God’s will for our lives, or even resist doing what we believe we are called to do. Many Christians go through periods in which prayer is a struggle.

Take a moment to briefly share one of your own faith struggles. This will encourage participants to be more open in discussing theirs.

Ask those who did not do so earlier to think of one or two significant struggles in their faith journey and add them to Handout A. Those who already included struggles on the Handout may spend these few moments reflecting on what they wrote. Assure the participants that they will not be pressured to share anything they prefer to keep private.

Invite reflection on faith struggles using one of the following options:

**OPTION A:** Divide into small groups, provide newsprint, and give each group the following instructions:

1. Think about the following questions and then let persons who wish to do so share their responses:
  - What were the circumstances under which the struggle you identified took place?
  - What was the essence of your struggle?
  - In what ways did individuals, a congregation, or other group help or hinder as you went through this struggle?
2. Select a reporter. Then identify what your discussion has revealed about faith struggles, their relationship to growth in faith, and how congregations and individuals can help those who have similar struggles. Record these observations on newsprint to share with the total group.

Reconvene and invite groups to make report of their findings. Invite comments after all have reported.

**OPTION B:** Post the questions listed in OPTION A. Invite volunteers to share their experiences with faith struggles, responding to the questions. After several persons have shared, ask the participants for general observations or conclusions. Record these on newsprint, focusing especially on factors that were helpful and those that were hindrances in the struggles.

**BREAK: 10 minutes**

Direct participants to the facilities. Provide clear direction about snacks and when to reconvene.

**IV. Styles of Faith (40 minutes)**

Post newsprint from II “Reflecting on One’s Own Faith Development .” Distribute Handout B, “Styles of Faith.” Ask for a volunteer to read the introductory section of the handout aloud (or have a different volunteer read each paragraph). Ask for comments or questions for clarification.

Emphasize that the styles of faith are like tree rings, which are added on, not out-grown, and that it is not appropriate to judge another person on the basis of faith style.

Invite participants to review together each described faith style and compare each to the information generated in II “Reflecting on One’s Own Faith Development” for that same age

level. Ask the group what, if anything, they would now add to the newsprint on the basis of their review of Westerhoff's styles.

Invite participants to respond to the question "What suggestions do you have for nurturing persons . . .?" found after each style description. Be sure to consider Owned of Integrative Faith for all stages of adult life as growth continues throughout life. Watch for statements that reflect styles of faith already discussed since the styles are added to, not replaced, as the years pass.

Review together the section of Handout B titled "Growth."

## **V. Evaluation and Closing (5 minutes)**

Distribute Handout C and ask participants to complete and submit the evaluation before they leave. Be sure to provide a box or other receptacle so that evaluations remain anonymous.

Express appreciation for each person's participation. Ask the group to form a circle for a closing prayer led by a group member you have previously asked to do so. As an alternative, invite participants to join in a group prayer, offering up individual sentence prayers, following by a group response, such as, "Lord, help us grow in faith" or "Guide us, Lord, as we help others to grow."

**HANDOUT A**

**MY FAITH EXPERIENCE**

In each box, draw symbols or write words or short phrases to represent a few key events, persons, attitudes, feelings, visions, struggles, or ideas representing something you remember about your faith life or something that may have influenced your ability to become a person of faith during the age specified. Omit any age categories you have not yet reached.	0-5	5-12	
	12-18	18-25	25-40
	40-55	55-70	70+

## HANDOUT B

### Westerhoff's Styles of Faith

Faith has been defined as the way an individual views reality and understands life. It is the way a person finds meaning in the midst of the many forces, relationships, and ideas which impinge on his or her experiences. In this sense everyone has faith. It involves thinking, feeling, and willing. There is no more fundamental category for understanding an individual than faith, because the way a person perceives reality determines what that individual does, believes, and feels.

If a person's faith is to be Christian faith, that person must be nurtured in a Christian context or converted from another faith. To "repent" is to "change the way you see and things." *Christian* faith, then, means that the individual has repented. The new way of seeing and the new path on which one walks are based on the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christian faith is acquired, enhanced, and enlivened within a community of faith in which there are common memories, vision, rituals, authority, and life together—life of an intimate, caring nature. Where there is no sense of community, faith seldom grows to a very mature level.

Christian life, as expressed by Ephesians 4, is the attainment of mature adulthood "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). This maturity is closely tied to unity within the Body of Christ, expressed locally as the congregation. The life of the Christian is a pilgrimage in which he or she grows and matures, but it is not a pilgrimage undertaken alone. Persons grow in faith largely as a result of interaction with other persons of faith.

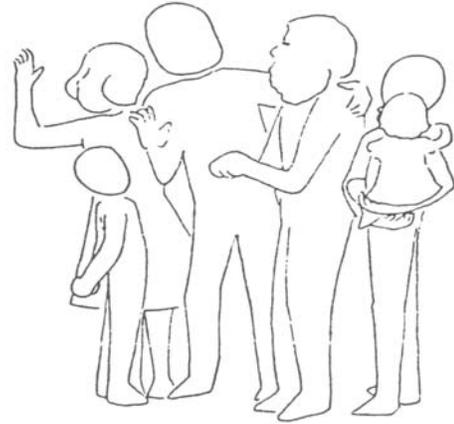
Christian faith is a pilgrimage involving the growth of the individual. One may grow into a more mature style of faith. Styles of faith are like tree rings: Just as the tree does not cast off old rings as it adds new ones, so too the individual does not cast off old styles of faith when adding new ones. The new ones are added to the old, giving faith a greater richness and depth. It is normal for an adult who is in a period of crisis, such as experiencing grief over the loss of a parent or spouse, trauma when a child takes drugs, or the loss of a job, to move back temporarily from searching or even owned faith and to live primarily out of experienced and affiliative faith for a time. It is also normal for persons to go through several searching stages, perhaps centered in different issues.

No person should use faith styles as a way of judging another person's faith or level of maturity. They should only be used as a tool for understanding how best to nurture persons.

## Experienced Faith—infancy and up

John H. Westerhoff III has suggested that a person first learns faith through experience of trust, love, and acceptance. Experienced faith results from interactions “with other faithing selves,” that is, with others who have acted, and act, in accordance with their faith. In this style of faith, the individual observes and copies, acts and reacts, and thereby tests his or her experience.

Experienced faith is the only style of faith available to the very young, but it remains foundational for all persons, regardless of age. To the extent that persons function out of experienced faith, what a parent, teacher, or pastor *tells* him or her is much less significant than the love and acceptance those persons *offer*.



What suggestions do you have for nurturing persons for whom experienced faith is predominant?

## Affiliative Faith—approximately age 5 and up



A person who has developed a healthy sense of trust, love, and acceptance can add to that an affiliative faith style. This style is characterized by intuitive thinking and by the use of stories to express meaning. The person has a need to belong, reflected in a desire for active participation. Healthy relationships within an accepting community are thus important. Religious feelings are also of crucial significance. Music, art, and drama provide means for expressing meaning and feelings. They are therefore important elements in nurturing faith. Authority rests in the community and is represented by the community's tradition.

What suggestions do you have for nurturing persons for whom affiliative faith predominant?

## Searching Faith—adolescence and up



What suggestions do you have for the nurturing of persons for whom searching faith is the predominant?

If the needs of affiliative faith have been met, the person can gradually add to it a searching style of faith. By degrees, the person's reliance on the authority of the community decreases as he or she takes more responsibility for beliefs. Doubt or critical judgment may lead to a desire to reshape the tradition. Abstract thinking may be applied to questions of faith. Experimentation and exploration of alternatives are typical. In addition, there is a need to commit one's life to persons or causes, sometimes one after the other. An individual who is not given the freedom to search, question, doubt, and explore within the community of faith may remain within the limits of the affiliative style or may cease to feel any sense of affiliation with the community. In the latter case, the traditions of the community may be rejected altogether and the individual may withdraw from it.

A person who has been allowed the freedom to express a searching style of faith, while still being accepted by the community, can gradually add to his or her faith a style of owned and integrative faith. Faith is "owned" in that the individual now has a personal faith. This does not alleviate the need for the experienced, affiliative, and searching styles, as these are still a part of the person's faith experience. However, now authority rests primarily in principles and norms which guide both the self and community. One appropriates for oneself the traditions of the community.

This style of faith is also integrative in that the individual seeks to harmonize both the intuitive and the intellectual, both dependence on the community and independence from it, both continuity and change, and both the active and the contemplative. The person feels a need for personal integrity, a need to live out his or her faith. This gives the individual with an owned or integrative faith a vision of the future.

## Owned or Integrative Faith—late 20's and up



What suggestions do you have for nurturing persons for whom owned or integrative faith is the predominant?

## Growth

Faith development is not something reserved for children and youth. Adults also develop and change. The fact that a person has attained an owned or integrative style of faith does not mean that his or her faith should now remain stagnant. There may be periods of growth and periods of stagnation. The person may move back and forth between the four styles in terms of which style is dominant at a particular time.

Growth in faith may take a variety of forms. It may include:

- a greater reliance on the Holy Spirit, and thus a greater level of trust;
- more consistency in resisting certain temptations;
- greater service to God and others in the community or world;
- a release from bondage to conscious or subconscious guilt, giving the person a greater freedom to express his or her personality as a child of God
- thinking at deeper levels, thus integrating more of life's experiences into one's faith understanding; theologizing about experience
- a stronger commitment to Christ and the church, resulting in an increased participation in the community of faith
- conflict with the community of faith and/or the structures of society due to a prophetic understanding of their shortcomings
- a deepening of the personal life of faith as expressed through prayer, meditation, and worship
- a growing ability to express in words and share with others what one believes.

The major source of information for this handout is *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, by John H. Westerhoff III (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000), especially Chapter 4.

Illustrations are by Cynthia Siems.

