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**Faith formation and growth**

Faith is an understanding that God is the source of all life, the One who gives us identity and purpose. As a gift of the Holy Spirit, faith breaks into our individual and communal lives, inviting us to follow Jesus Christ in our daily living. Within the community of believers, faith grows through worship, response, and sharing God’s good news with the world.

 Faith formation is a lifelong process that happens through relationship with God. Faith is active, always in process, constantly transforming us to be more like Christ. Faith is also relational. We grow in faith within the

context of a loving, accepting community. If conditions are nurtured, children will grow in their understanding of God and Jesus, as revealed by the Spirit through scripture and Christian community. In all aspects of growth, people tend to follow a standard developmental path.

 The faith experienced by young children is the foundation upon which all other growth takes place and deserves to be a priority in the church. Images of God’s caring presence and loving protection will help children grow in a trusting relationship with our loving, generous God.

**Early Childhood faith experience**

A young child best experiences God’s love through interaction with adults, who serve as God’s hands, face, and heart. If caregivers are found to be trustworthy and loving, and children are provided with language for spiritual thought and expression, that trust and love is transferred to feelings and expressions for God. Expressions of faith begin with nonverbal communication and evolve along with physical, mental, and social development.

 Creative play based on key faith stories and rituals is important for exploring and owning the ideas and symbols of the spiritual community. Because young children make no clear distinctions between reality and fantasy, we can expect them to weave together a variety of symbols: Bible stories, secular storybooks or television characters, and real experiences.

 Children feel powerless and vulnerable at this age; they identify with giants and heroes who do what they cannot. They are responsive to stories that evoke both fear and trust. It is dangerous to play on their fertile imaginations by giving images of terror and destruction. Avoid attributing wrath or acts of violence to God. Teach children instead to trust our loving and gentle God.

**Primary faith experience**

This experience is characterized by a sense of fairness and belonging as children think more concretely and develop relationships outside their immediate families. They enjoy playing with, and not just alongside, others. Belonging to the gathered faith community is important for children in this stage. They enjoy participating in worship, singing, and being part of the gathered community.

 Primary children respond deeply to religious stories and view Bible characters as great and good faith heroes. They enjoy Bible stories of good winning over evil but are sometimes confused by stories Jesus tells because they seem unfair. Creative, imaginative play remains an important way to express and internalize the faith community’s symbols and ideas.

 Children at this age begin to apply their growing social understanding to religious ideas. Some will have the ability to ask questions about our world, the causes and purposes of things. At this age children need the freedom to discover and create their own ways of expressing a deepening relationship with God. If children experience love and trust in their early years, they will develop the ability to expand that faith into a deeper relationship during later elementary-school years. Children who haven’t experienced love and trust before these years will require patient love, understanding, and consistency as they learn to love and share.

**Middler faith experience**

Eight- to eleven-year-old children respond to God in deeply personal ways. They express their feelings through art, prayer, silence, and faith conversations. With guidance, they are able to personalize scripture and pray with it. Their growing writing skills provide a way to articulate their understandings about God. With adult assistance, they are able to develop a thoughtful inquisitiveness about spiritual experiences and to articulate this to others. Yet this is also the age at which they become hesitant to express spiritual experience for fear of being dismissed or laughed at.

 Stories of the early church, family, and faith community make them feel part of the church, God’s household of faith. They want to participate in worship through drama, music, litanies, receiving the offering, and special programs. By affirming their gifts and accepting them as valued people, adults convey a powerful message of unconditional acceptance and love.

 Middlers perceive God as both creator and friend. They want to know how God is at work in their lives and the larger world. These are puzzles to be investigated. As they become increasingly aware of the larger issues of the world in which they live, they enjoy facts about the world and service projects. They appreciate the beauty of creation, our dependence upon it, and our responsibility to care for it.

 Middler children know the rules and want life to be fair. They are beginning to understand wrongdoing and forgiveness. They have a strong need for assurance of unconditional acceptance, especially when they have failed and need to accept negative consequences for their actions. They are idealistic, expecting adults to live up to values and commitments.

**Junior Youth faith experience**

Junior youth are filled with critical questions and insecurity as they undergo puberty and establish new levels of independence from their caregivers. They rely heavily on peer relationships yet also value relationships with adults outside their immediate family. As they develop skills for critiquing what they have been taught, they become increasingly aware of inconsistencies between the words and actions of adults. As they develop skills to critique society, they also begin to develop personal values.

 Junior youth most often have faith experiences that are influenced by the expectations and judgments of others (both peers and significant adults), and tend to believe what the church—and their friends—believe. Faith must be seen as relevant in the midst of more complex relationships and issues that move beyond home and church. Junior youth need to ask important faith questions to help move them toward making a thoughtful and personal commitment to follow Christ. The church should continue to tell and show them that they are gifted by God and that their gifts can be shared with the larger community.

 Their image of God may expand to include a personal, affirming friend; a guide; and a counselor who understands and loves them unconditionally. As junior youth begin to form an identity apart from family and friends, they need to feel that they belong and are loved and accepted in the church. Spiritual practices help them understand God’s intentions for the world, process questions, and develop a personal relationship with God.