

Westerhoff's Styles of Faith

John Westerhoff, a religious educator and theorist

As a tree trunk develops new rings through the years, so too does faith develop a variety of stages over time as a person matures. Each stage passes and builds upon the previous stage. *Adapted from "Will Our Children Have Faith?" by John Westerhoff III.* Christian faith, like the human body, has an expected pattern of growth and development. The different stages are usually addressed at certain ages, and can (like physical growth) be delayed, with faith development ended before the final stage is reached.

EXPERIENCED FAITH (preschool & early childhood) – imitating actions, e.g., a child praying the Lord's prayer without understanding the meaning of all the words – "This is what *we* do. This is how *we* act. It is based on experience rather than a cognitive understanding of faith. The manger scene at Christmas, the Advent wreath...*Experienced faith* grows by participating in the customs and rituals of our faith tradition with other Christians. It is the lifelong foundation of our faith. Experienced faith is also the faith of our senses. The liturgical rituals of the Catholic Church, with its recurring sights, sounds, and smells, are quite conducive to developing experienced faith, especially in young children. Young children do not fully understand the meaning behind the rituals. Nevertheless, just by participating in them they come to believe they are meaningful and important. The rituals point to the experience and love of God.

When children experience warm and loving feelings in church, they are more likely to value church and, most importantly, associate God and church with love and warmth. That's why, when our children were young, we deliberately spent lots of time holding and hugging them in church.

"AFFILIATIVE FAITH (childhood & early adolescent years) – belonging to a group, which still centers around imitating what the group does – "This is what *we* believe and do. This is *our* group/church. Focuses on the community experience. The child comes to experience a sense of community. Corporate worship helps engender a sense of belonging. First Communion and Confirmation...The second stage of faith, *affiliative faith*, develops by belonging to (being affiliated with) an accepting Christian community. Provided the needs of experienced faith are met during childhood, we may expand into affiliative faith during adolescence. Therefore, it is critical for churches to provide an active youth ministry program. These social, spiritual, and service activities, which provide opportunities for teenagers to deepen their relationships with other Christians, are absolutely crucial for this stage of faith development. Although much progress has been made, most Protestant churches are still better than most Catholic churches at providing these affiliative faith experiences.

However, weekend retreats (like "Search for Christian Maturity", "Christian Awakening" and "Encounter with Christ") are shining exceptions in the Catholic Church. These retreats are profoundly meaningful experiences for most high school and college students who attend

"SEARCHING FAITH (late adolescence & young adulthood) – asking the question, "Is this what *I* believe?" Thomas is our example of this. He will not blindly accept what others have said, but needs to find certainty for himself. This stage of faith is adding the "head" to the "heart" of the earlier stages. This questioning stage can lead in the two directions. Will the questioner become an unbeliever or move onto the next stage of faith? This is the level when most cult groups recruit their members and when many "drop-out" of church. Others will "regress" and live as adults with an immature faith. It is a period of questioning traditional values and searching for understanding of the meaning of religious experience. It is a movement from the community's understanding of faith to a personal understanding. A necessary step in developing mature faith it is often a difficult phase and may be misunderstood as losing faith. A person may withdraw from active participation in the life of the Church. This withdrawal may be for a short time or longer or permanent. The third stage of faith development, ***searching faith***, is the faith of questioning and internalizing what we have long been taught. Searching faith usually begins during late adolescence and often continues in earnest during young adulthood. For example, every year "Does God Exist?" was the most popular discussion topic selected by the students in our 11th grade religious education class. This stage can be troubling for parents, teachers, etc. if not properly understood. And, of course, it's risky. However, only by questioning and testing what we have long been taught can we truly come to accept and internalize these teachings. Searching faith is a necessary prerequisite to owned faith.

OWNED FAITH (early adulthood) – this stage comes only through the searching stage. After exploring, "Is this what *I* believe?" one can, hopefully, discover an answer: "*This is what I believe!*" Owned faith is the strong, personal faith that one lives by, witnesses to and may even be willing to die for. Mature faith. It is like the largest ring of the tree. Faith becomes central to one's being/life at this stage. It becomes a means of reaching one's potential. It may result from a dramatic conversion experience or from steady growth in awareness. A person with this style of faith can appreciate the faith experiences of others and can learn from other traditions..... This final stage of faith development, ***owned faith***, rarely occurs before young adulthood. Because of the serious struggle with doubt that precedes it, owned faith may appear as a great illumination or enlightenment. It's now our own faith and no longer merely the faith of our parents, family, etc. Even though doubts and questions remain, those who own their faith want to witness it by personal and social action, and are willing and able to stand up for what they believe in as mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

Owned faith is God's intention for everyone, even though (according to Westerhoff) most adults have had their faith arrested at the affiliative stage. Therefore, it is important for churches to provide opportunities that address the needs in each and every stage of faith development, and thereby help as many as possible to reach their full faith potential.