



WHAT IF...

Imagining Possibilities

A Vision for Maturing in Faith

John Roberto

What's your vision for maturing in faith? What does a vital Christian faith look like at each stage of the life span? What are the characteristics of a committed, maturing Christian who is growing in faith and discipleship? How does your vision guide the development of faith formation at each stage of life? These are questions that are rarely asked, but our response to each one is central to the vitality and effectiveness of faith formation across the life span.

In this article I am proposing ten goals for maturing in faith that can guide the development of faith formation at each stage of life so that we can (re)direct our attention to people growing in faith and discipleship. Guided by the ten goals we can ask what we need to be doing to help faith and discipleship flourish in the lives of our people from childhood through older adulthood.

This is a huge shift in emphasis from our current church-centric focus on providing curriculum, courses, classes, programs, and activities—often with little reference to how we see faith flourishing at each stage of life. This change of focus reflects a significant shift from a provider-centered, program- and content-driven approach to a *person-centered* approach to faith formation. Becoming goal-centered opens up multiple ways (activities, methods, programs) to promote faith and discipleship through developmentally-appropriate faith forming experiences at each stage of life.

Researchers have been studying the characteristics of committed, maturing Christians for decades. The Search Institute's Effective Christian Education study of the late 1980s and the Exemplary Youth Ministry study of the early 2000s were developed around widely accepted, tested, and easily understood beliefs and practices of committed Christians. The Effective Christian Education study proposed eight marks of faith maturing: trusting and believing in God, experiencing the fruits of faith, integrating faith and life, seeking spiritual growth, nurturing faith in community, holding life-affirming values, advocating social change, and

acting and serving. (For the description for the eight marks of faith maturing and the seven characteristics of vital faith from the Exemplary Youth Ministry study go to the Appendix.)

Drawn from the Christian faith tradition and from research studies on what makes a difference in forming faith in people's lives across the life span, I am proposing the following ten characteristics of faith maturing. They incorporate knowing and believing, relating and belonging, practicing and living. When taken together, these characteristics describe a person maturing in faith. They form the basis of helping people discern their faith journey and needs, and accompanying them through relationships, programs, activities, and resources.

Goals for Maturing in Faith

1. Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ
2. Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life
3. Reading and studying the Bible, and its message, meaning, and application to life today
4. Learning the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular Christian faith tradition and integrating its meaning into one's life
5. Praying—together and alone—and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines
6. Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values
7. Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally
8. Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship and ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year
9. Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community
10. Practicing faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world

These ten characteristics are a starting point. They need to be contextualized within a specific Christian tradition, the identity and mission of a church, and the unique social, cultural, and ethnic make-up of the community.

With a lifelong vision of maturing faith a congregation can address each characteristic in developmentally-appropriate ways at each stage of life. The characteristics provide a way to direct energy and attention to specific goals or outcomes in faith maturing. They provide a way to develop a seamless process of fostering faith growth from birth through older adulthood. Everything is in service to people growing in faith and discipleship.

In this approach, congregations build faith forming experiences around the ten goals and ask how can they can guide people in. . . .

- Knowing and understanding more fully the Christian faith (informing)
- Developing and deepening their relationship with Jesus Christ and the Christian community (forming)
- Living the Christian faith in every aspect of their lives (transforming)

Becoming goal-centered means that there are multiple approaches, programs, activities, and media to help people grow in faith—one goal, multiple ways to grow. No longer will faith formation be limited by the one-program, one-textbook/resource, one fixed-time and place approach. The focus will be on the person growing in faith and discipleship guided by the ten goals and a multiplicity of ways to form faith.



In upcoming articles I will present ideas for personalizing faith formation by developing *pathways* for faith growth designed around the ten goals and by creating *playlists* of faith forming content and experiences designed for the pathways.

Reflection

- ◆ *What is your vision of maturing in faith?*
- ◆ *Toward what ends (goals) are your church's faith formation efforts directed?*
- ◆ *What is your church try to accomplish in the lives of people at each stage of life from childhood to older adulthood?*

Use the worksheet on the next page to reflect on your church's goals, and how your church practices the ten goals proposed in this article. Invite others to join you in the reflection: your faith formation leaders, the church staff, ministry leaders in the church, and more.

Your Church's Goals for Maturing in Faith

◆ What are your church's goals for maturing in faith and discipleship?

◆ Explore how the Ten Goals for Maturing in Faith are being practiced in your church. Use this simple chart to organize your profile.

	Children	Youth	Young Adults	Midlife Adults	Mature Adults	Older Adults
Developing and sustaining a personal relationship and commitment to Jesus Christ						
Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and making the Christian faith a way of life						
Reading and studying the Bible, and its message, meaning, and application to life today						
Learning the Christian story and the foundational teachings of one's particular Christian faith tradition and integrating its meaning into one's life						
Praying—together and alone—and seeking spiritual growth through spiritual practices and disciplines						
Living with moral integrity guided by Christian ethics and values						
Living the Christian mission in the world—serving those in need, caring for God's creation, and acting and advocating for justice and peace—locally and globally						
Worshipping God with the community at Sunday worship and ritual celebrations, and through the seasons of the church year						
Being actively engaged in the life, ministries, and activities of the faith community						
Practicing faith in Jesus Christ by using one's gifts and talents within the Christian community and in the world						

Appendix

Eight Marks of Faith Maturing

(*Effective Christian Education Study*, Search Institute, 1988)

1. *Trusting and Believing*: People of mature faith trust in God's saving grace and believe firmly in Jesus' humanity and divinity.
2. *Experiencing the Fruits of Faith*: People of mature faith experience a sense of personal well-being, security, and peace that grows out of their faith. It is the "life in all its fullness" that Jesus offers (John 10:10).
3. *Integrating Faith and Life*: Mature Christian's faith is a filter through which they evaluate everything they see, hear or think. Faith is integrated into vocational, relational, financial, political, moral, and ethnical decisions. In short, faith shapes all aspects of life.
4. *Seeking Spiritual Growth*: People of mature faith know that faith is a journey. They seek to grow spiritually through study reflection, prayer, and discussion.
5. *Nurturing Faith in Community*: In community people witness to their faith and nourish one another. In this context they support others' faith and share their own faith story. And they experience God through these interpersonal encounters.
6. *Holding Life-Affirming Values*: People of mature faith believe life is good and should be affirmed. They are committed to life-affirming values and feel a personal sense of responsibility for others' welfare.
7. *Advocating Social Change*: People of mature faith understand that the Christian faith involves advocating social and global change to bring about greater social justice.
8. *Acting and Serving*: People of mature faith not only advocate social change, but become personally involved in serving, consistently and passionately, through acts of love and justice.

Seven Essential Characteristics of Vital Christian Faith

(*Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. Roland Martinson, Wes Black, and John Roberto. EYM, 2006)

1. *Seeking Spiritual Growth*: engaging in conversation, study, reading the Bible, prayer, small groups, retreats
2. *Possessing a Vital Faith*: being aware of God present and active in one's life, the lives of others, and the life of the world
3. *Practicing Faith in Community*: practicing faith in Jesus Christ, privately and publicly, through participation in the congregation's worship, ministries, and leadership
4. *Making the Christian Faith a Way of Life*: recognizing God's "call" and integrating one's beliefs into the conversation, decisions, and actions of daily life
5. *Living a Life of Service*: being involved in activities caring for others, reaching out to others in need, and addressing injustice
6. *Exercising Moral Responsibility*: living with integrity utilizing their Christian faith in making moral decisions
7. *Possessing a Positive Spirit*: reflecting loving and hopeful attitudes toward others and life