

FAITH DEVELOPMENT
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Introduction

The goal of Christian education is to help Church members live and think within the experience of God's presence. Many people, however, do not achieve this goal during their lifetime. It is possible for one to go through every stage of development without having any significant experience of God's presence. When one lacks an understanding of God appropriate to his or her age and mental ability, there is a danger of distorted or incomplete approaches to religion. Such a distortion is an obstacle to faith and can even lead to idolatry.

When we share with the child in his own terms our experience of life with God, we can nurture and strength the child's potential for religion. Such a sharing of faith which appeals both to the intellect and the feelings of the child lies at the heart of the life of the Church. By cultivating faith in God in the hearts of our children, we help them not only to find direction and meaning in their lives, but also to attain their salvation. This is why faith development should be the main concern of Sunday School teaching.

In this address we shall consider how children's and young people's growing religious needs and interests can guide us in what we should give them as Christian nurture to develop their faith in God. The point here is learning to connect the growing capacities and needs of the student with an awareness of religion that suitable Church school materials can provide. Sensitivity to the growing needs of youngsters means having an appreciation of the children as persons in their own right. It also means timing the children's Orthodox Christian education according to their readiness for religion.

The Lord in His saving ministry was never too tired or too busy to welcome children into His presence. His loving concern to serve the particular needs of all persons makes it mandatory for us to minister to children according to their own pattern and rate of growth.

Our purpose here is to set forth some of the basic needs of pupils at certain stages of development, and how the Christian faith, taught and expressed in a Church School community, can help to satisfy these needs. The sketch of religious development which follows is a selection of the findings of some of the major research dealing with the growth of religious understanding in early childhood (ages five through seven), middle childhood (ages eight through ten), older childhood and pre-adolescence (ages eleven and twelve), and adolescence (ages thirteen through sixteen). These age groups are taken up in relationship to God as a vital area of life experience and knowledge. This area of development is discussed in reference to concepts that can be taught, contents of curriculum, and teaching methods.