

Going Deeper: Patterns of Discipleship Growth

A second helpful starting point in thinking about growth in discipleship is: what sort of pattern do we expect Christian growth to take? Recognising some common patterns of growth won't - in itself - tell us about what helps growth in discipleship to take place. But reflecting on some common growth patterns can help us understand our own growth - and help us acknowledge that not everyone grows in the same way.

Think/Discuss:

- If you had to draw a shape to describe your own journey of growth as a Christian, what shape would you choose? Would it be a line? If so, would that line be straight, wiggly, or move in a spiral? Or something else?
- Accepting that everyone's spiritual growth looks slightly different, do you see any common patterns in the way that people grow in discipleship in your church or group?
- How might recognising some common patterns of growth help you anticipate some of the experiences and challenges which you and others might face in the future?

Sarah Brush, who is an Anglican priest teaching at Ripon College Cuddesdon, has recently written a helpful book which describes some of the main patterns of growth - I've changed some of the language slightly.¹ Which one sounds most like your own experience?



Straight Line Growth

Some people see growth taking place through a series of stages which pretty much everyone experiences, in basically the same order. (Although only the most mature or most committed experience all the stages).

- Some of these 'straight line growth' models draw on developmental psychology. These see our spiritual growth as closely mirroring our wider human growth, which happens in stages as we seek to make meaning out of our experience of life and the world. Perhaps the best known example is James Fowler's Faith Development Theory² but see also the work of Sharon Daloz Parks.³
- Some evangelists and missionaries also think they see a different kind of 'straight line' model, in which people journey through a set of common stages of exploration of faith until - perhaps - they finally make a faith commitment. One of the best-known examples is the Engel Scale.⁴

¹ Sarah Brush, *Way through the Trees: An Introduction to Faith Development* (2025).

² <https://churchandtheology.org/fowlers-stages-of-faith-explained-in-plain-language/>

³ As summarised in this presentation by Ryan Manning: https://prezi.com/hxosehxx2qy_/the-faith-development-theory-of-sharon-daloz-parks/

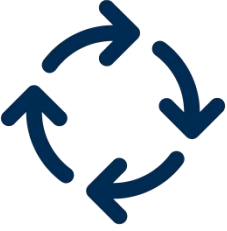
⁴ Article and critique by Paul Hazelden: https://www.hazelden.org.uk/pt02/art_pt068_modified_engel_full.htm

	Stop-Start Growth Some people think spiritual growth happens in a series of common stages, but not in a neat, straight line: there can be road blocks, steps backward or a feeling of losing one's way, before moving forwards again. ● This is a very common pattern of growth found in the classics of Christian spirituality. John of the Cross, for example, says that in the early stages of Christian life, growth often seems simple. Then we hit a 'dark night of the soul' in which we feel stuck, lost or far from God. We cannot go <i>around</i> this, but have to go <i>through</i>, totally depending on God to get out the other side. The particular faith development experiences of women have been explored by Nicola Slee.⁵ ● Some more recent research on church growth also points to a 'stop-start' approach. For example a big survey of Willow Creek churches in the USA noticed that we need different sorts of support and growth opportunities at different stages in our Christian journey.⁶ What helped us when we first came to faith may not sustain us beyond a certain point: we can become stuck, and we need something different kinds of support, challenge and opportunity to enable us to mature in our Christian commitment.
	Tree Ring Growth Some understandings of Christian growth don't involve a straight line at all. Instead, they see growth in discipleship more like the growth of tree rings. We don't leave our early experiences behind - they stay with us. Thinking of growth in this way also reminds us that though we continue to develop throughout our lifetimes, the rate of our growth can change due to our circumstances (just as tree rings can be thicker or thinner depending on the climate, soil conditions and other factors). ● John Westerhoff's four stages of faith is a good example. He says that first we <i>experience</i> faith, then we <i>choose</i> faith, then we experience a period of <i>searching</i>, in which we test out our assumptions, before finally we <i>choose</i> to own our faith (with all its doubts and tensions as well as its hopeful aspects). In later versions Westerhoff adapts the stages and says they can be experienced in any order.⁷

⁵ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (2004)

⁶ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1000 Churches Reveal about Spiritual Growth* (2011)

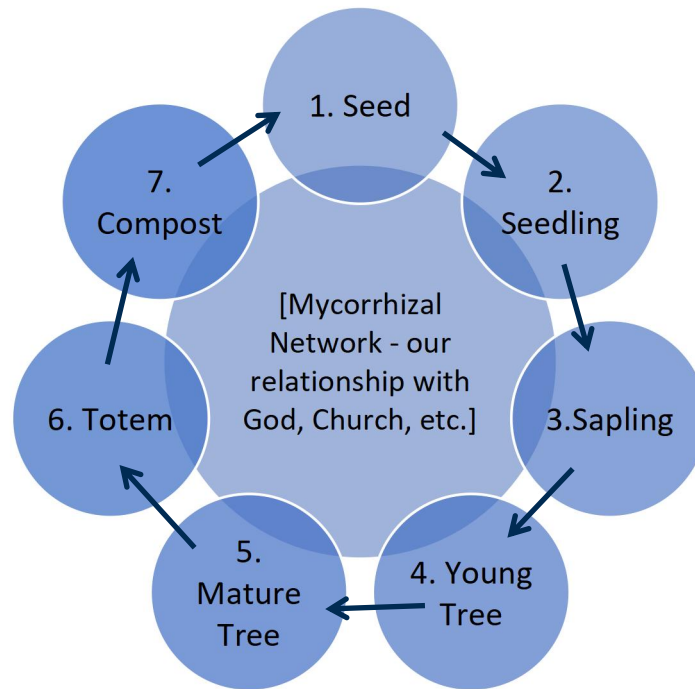
⁷ A short article on John Westerhoff: <https://buildfaith.org/john-h-westerhoff/>

	Cyclical Growth Some have seen Christian growth less in terms of a series of stages and more as a cycle of seasons, or a circular pattern of renewal. ● Some versions of this focus on growing through the seasons of our lives, emphasising the opportunities that are opened up and closed off at different times of life. ● In other versions, the 'cycle' doesn't relate to particular stages of life or maturity, but are about a repeating pattern of life through which we are renewed. Brian McLaren, for example, (in his 2011 book <i>Naked Spirituality</i>) sees us moving from 'Simplicity' to 'Faith after Doubt', to 'Complexity' and 'Perplexity' - and the cycle starts again with 'simplicity'.
	Growth Styles Some people insist that there is not one single path to growth, but instead that different people appear to grow best through different 'styles' or types of path. We tend to prefer one or two of the styles, but all can be helpful to us. In this perspective, discovering our spiritual type or style (and also learning from other types/styles) is an important key to growing spiritually. ● For example, in work on children's spirituality, David Csinos⁸ has suggested four different styles or spiritual types: 1) Word-Centred (intellect/knowledge; 2) Emotion-Centred (feelings/relationships); 3) Symbol-Centred (mystery/reflection), 4) Action-Centred (justice/service). (see: https://www.davecsinos.com/)

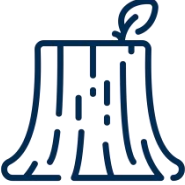
Think/Discuss:

- Which one or two of these patterns of growth you can relate to in your own life?
- Which of them you see in the people in your local church or group?
- How could you use some of these patterns to help people explore their own growth in discipleship?

Looking at all of these different growth patterns, Sarah Brush offers her own model (which I have slightly adapted), which brings several of these together in one image: the lifecycle of a tree.



	Seed Developing moral and spiritual awareness - perhaps from early childhood. 'We experience the faith of those around us' but 'signs of it are less visible to the world' (Brush, p.211).
	Seedling Positive examples of faith (e.g., home, school, church influences) provide positive models for the seed of faith to germinate. (If no such models are present, the seed can fail to sprout). (p.212)
	Sapling As faith grows, the branches need to be 'staked' for support - for example, by engaging for ourselves in the 'roots' of our faith, and by meeting with others who can help support the growth of discipleship. It's important that the 'stake' doesn't replace the root, but simply helps the plant to take hold (p.213). This often takes place in adolescence but can happen at any time of life. First fruits appear.
	Young Tree We learn to move with the different seasons of life and discipleship, bearing 'good fruit' in season. We gradually become more mature as we learn from the seasons of life we have weathered. Some people struggle to move into this season, continuing to rely entirely on others for their growth. (pp.213-15)

	Mature Tree Our discipleship is established and solid. There will be times of fruitfulness and the ups and downs of the seasons are received as something expected. However, there is also the risk of inflexibility, and we do not escape the effects of adverse weather conditions (difficult experiences or challenges to our faith).
	Totem A 'totem' is a tree that is still standing but produces very little new growth. It may become an important source of nourishment and shelter for other wildlife - or just a withering tree. In discipleship terms, this equates to the phase of our life and faith journey in which we may not be able to be as active as previously, but in which we can still share wisdom, experience, hospitality, etc. (pp.217-218)
	Compost Many medieval spiritual writers talked about a stage of Christian maturity beyond death. The Christian hope is in the resurrection of the dead in a new heaven and new earth, in which wrongs are righted and we see God face to face. Meanwhile, the legacy of our own discipleship continues to nourish others who come after us. We are part of the 'great cloud of witnesses' spoken of in Hebrews. (pp.218-219)
Two Further Elements in the Growth of the Tree... (and our growth in discipleship?)	
Roots Here I have added an extra element to Sarah's 'tree' image (albeit one which is implied in her book where she talks about our 'roots' in faith). We used to think trees were solitary, individual plants. More recently scientists have discovered the importance of small root-like networks which connect plants (even very big trees) together, allowing them to share nutrients and communicate with each other through chemical signals. Called mycorrhizal networks, some have nicknamed this connectivity the 'wood-wide web'! In discipleship terms, this reminds us that our growth is never wholly isolated from other relationships: our relationship with God, the support of fellow Christians, and 2000 years of Christian wisdom which we all draw upon. We are being built into something bigger than ourselves.	Seasons At every stage of the tree's life, the seasons come and go, shaping its development. The right combination of sun, rain and frost may see a year of strong growth or a bumper crop of fruit. Shifts in the patterns of the seasons or unusually long periods of one weather condition may stunt the tree's growth. In discipleship terms, we too are affected by the 'seasons of life' at every stage of our life journey as Christians. Times of growth don't just happen at one stage of life and not at other times. We will experience leaner times when we are new Christians and when we are mature Christians. This is a helpful reminder that growth is possible at every stage; just as the hard times may come at any stage. The hard parts (the winter seasons) in our Christian life can be just as important as favourable times (spring and summer) - provided they don't get out of balance.

Think/Discuss:

- Where do you find yourself in this story at present?
- What will help support you to bear fruit and be a blessing to others?
- What are the needs of other people in your church/group at a different stage in the story?