

Study 2: Growth in Depth

The beginning of a Christian journey is often marked with great celebration. But what happens next? In this session we are looking at our spiritual journey – and asking what it means to grow in faith, both individually and collectively.

Getting started

Sit for a few minutes in silence to compare how your understanding and experience of Christianity today differs from when you were new in the faith. Share any insights with the group.

View from the world church

As well as growth in numbers, churches in Mozambique and Zimbabwe have witnessed a deepening of faith and commitment.

MOZAMBIQUE: The Anglican Church in Mozambique has been growing at an astonishing rate, with more than 50 new churches and 300 bible study groups established in the Diocese of Niassa in one year – something many churches in Britain can only admire.

Imagine then the surprise of USPG Mission Companion Mark van Koevering, the Bishop of Niassa, when an anxious priest asked him: 'Shall we slow down church growth?' It transpired that the young priest simply didn't have the experience to support his burgeoning congregation. Bishop Mark commented: 'Christianity is coming to many communities – you can see absolute delight in the people's faces. But the need for discipleship training is enormous: there is a saying that Christianity in Africa is a mile wide but an inch deep.'

Bishop Mark recalled visiting a new Christian community where he was surprised at being introduced to the congregation as 'the chief witch doctor'. He said: 'It shocked me at first, but then I realised they were just trying to explain my role in the words of their cultural language.'

Mark added: 'There is a real challenge to help the church enculturate itself so that it is expressing a Mozambican spirituality and worship. We're starting to see this happen through forms of song and dance and a more spontaneous style of worship.'

Progress is being made: priests and lay leaders are being trained, and bible study groups are also teaching literacy and women's empowerment.

ZIMBABWE: In Zimbabwe, Anglicans in Harare have been expressing a deeper commitment to their faith in response to persecution. Last year, congregations were tear-gassed, manhandled and threatened by police and thugs who were allegedly hired to help an ex-communicated bishop take possession of church property.

Expelled from their churches, Anglicans gathered in the streets to sing praises to God in defiance of the hostility they faced.

The Rt Revd Chad Gandiya, the Bishop of Harare and a former USPG Africa desk officer, said: 'There are all kinds of pressures on us, but God always provides a way out. God is worshipped every day in spite of the afflictions we face and, as a result of our faith, commitment and resilience, God is adding to our numbers every day.'

For discussion

1. What are your reactions to the different experiences of the Anglicans in Mozambique and Zimbabwe?

2. What does it mean for a church – and an individual – to go 'deeper' into their faith and spirituality? Share your different perspectives, and consider the factors that prevent us from going deeper.

Looking at the Bible: Acts 2:42-47

Following the explosive excitement of the first part of Acts 2, the emerging church starts to focus on organisational matters. Now the church is growing in depth and understanding as the first believers build community in a very practical way, with members sharing their goods and experiencing mutual hospitality as well as participating in a regular spiritual discipline of worship and learning.

1. These verses present us with something like a point-by-point list for how to 'do church'. Itemise this list and consider why each element is important. How relevant is this list for the church today? Is anything missing?
2. Look at the impacts the activities of the church in Jerusalem had upon believers and non-believers. What is happening here – what is 'growing'? Explore how our experiences differ today – both as a church and as individuals.
3. Consider the tools and techniques available to us as Christians – for head and heart. What steps can we take as a church – locally and globally – to develop and deepen our spirituality, and support one another as we do so?

Prayer

Spirit of holiness,
You dig deep within us,
Mending us and making us whole.
Mould us gently to become people
of your praise,
Not only with our lips but in our lives.

Action: Bring and buy sale

This session has been looking at the theme of sharing. Try some decluttering and hold a bring and buy sale. Share the proceeds with your brothers and sisters around the world by donating the proceeds to USPG.