

WHAT I BELIEVE

Will Penner

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“Every year I keynote a confirmation retreat for a large nearby church. We invite the young people to participate in the exercise outlined in this session, and every year I am absolutely amazed at what they produce. I always hear what a powerful witness their statements of faith are for the adult leaders, parents, and staff members; and years later, when I run into youth who participated in this exercise, they often say that this experience was a pivotal moment in their faith journey. I hope you and your young people will be blessed by this exercise as well.” —Will

MEET THE WRITER

Will Penner has been in ministry with young people for two decades in Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian churches and at public and private schools. He is a popular speaker at youth retreats, camps, and conferences. He has served as the editor of both leading professional journals of youth ministry and has authored or edited numerous books and youth ministry curricula. Most important, he is the husband of Christine Penner, Children’s Minister at First United Methodist Church in Dickson, Tennessee, and the father of five children ranging in age from two to twenty.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED

- paper and pens
- Bibles
- a large sheet of newsprint for each group of 6–10 students
- markers
- sheets of newsprint, each labeled at the top with one of the following concepts: “God,” “Jesus,” “Holy Spirit,” “Bible,” and “Church.” (Depending on the size of the group, you could also add include the concepts “You,” “Sin,” “Salvation,” “Grace,” “Worship,” “Service,” and other theological terms.)
- Ideally, have an adult small-group leader for each group of 6–10 students. (Before the session, think through how you will group the participants. For instance, try to mix introverts and extroverts.)
- quiet instrumental background music
- additional activities for people who finish quickly

PLUGGED IN

- + One great way to open or close the session would be to play the music video “Creed” by Rich Mullins. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LR2hFP1yb4>)
- + If your group sings before the lesson, consider teaching the group “I Believe in Jesus,” a simple song by Vineyard. (<http://www.tabsforworship.com/tab/853.htm>) Or you may sing along with the song on YouTube. (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_d5HbddjrTU)

CHECKING IN

Before the session, post around the room the labeled sheets of newsprint. Provide markers. As people arrive, invite them to walk around the room and to jot down on the newsprint some ideas related to the concept listed on each one. For example, if they believe God is forgiving, they should write the word *forgiving* on the newsprint labeled “God.”

When everyone has arrived, bring the group together for the next activity. Don’t worry if some people have not written on the newsprint or if some sheets have not been used.

EXPLORING THE WORD

For this exercise, no preselected scripture is required, but do provide Bibles for each person.

Step One—Writing Individual Creeds

Invite people to reflect on what they believe and why they believe it. Then ask them to write a statement of faith. Explain that a statement of faith can be one well-written paragraph (8–10 sentences) or up to several pages in length. People should simply tell what they believe and what they have learned about being a Christian. They may want to think about their favorite Bible verses and add scripture verses for support. Encourage people, if they wish, to make their statements personal by incorporating stories or examples from their lives.

You may choose to post on newsprint or on a chalkboard or white board questions to help people complete this assignment. Or you may choose to pose questions from time to time as people write. Some people will need guiding questions and others will be irritated if you talk too much, so use your discretion. Questions such as these may help to guide reflection:

What do you believe about God? Does God ever abandon us? How do you know?

What do you believe about Jesus? What does being his disciple mean?

What do you believe about the Bible? How has it helped you?

What is involved in being a Christian? Is it more than simply going to church?

Think about one or two people who have modeled a life of faith for you or who have encouraged you in your faith. What are/were they like? What can you learn from them? from their Christian witness?

What does saying “yes” to Jesus mean? What does saying “no” mean?

Have you ever had an “aha!” moment with God?

What gifts and talents has God given you? What are you supposed to do with them?

Try to allow people as much time as they need to do their best. As people finish, give them another activity to do so that they don't bother those who are still working on their statement of faith. (For instance, when I lead this exercise in a retreat setting with 55–80 students, the process typically takes about 90–120 minutes, so we set up interactive prayer stations for people who have finish early.) If you have adult volunteers helping with this session, consider having one or more of them work with people as they finish to read and affirm their statement of faith or, if necessary, to encourage people to take additional time to think more deeply about what they believe.

Step Two—Developing Small Group Creeds

Invite people to form small groups; and, if possible, assign an adult leader to each group. Give each group a sheet of newsprint and a marker.

Say: *“From time to time, church leaders have come together to discuss what they believe and to agree on a set of principles that they will hold in common. Following that tradition, we are going to create a communal statement of faith.”*

Ask group members to take turns stating one belief they have recorded, and ask a volunteer from each group to write these statements on the newsprint. Encourage each group to go through several rounds of this process, so that each person provides several beliefs for group members to discuss and to decide how to incorporate into to their combined statement of faith. Encourage each adult facilitator to help the group see how they might combine similar ideas and incorporate language from as many different people as possible.

Step Three—Establishing a Common Creed

Bring the small groups together, and post their statements of faith where everyone can see them. Continue to discuss and to refine these statements into one common list for the entire group. (NOTE: If you have a very large group, you may need to add one or more steps in which you create larger groups from smaller ones and allow these groups to combine their belief statements. Continue the process until all of the groups' agreed-upon ideas are folded into one list.)

Once the common creed is created, invite the group to read aloud their combined statement of beliefs. Then ask people to discuss these questions:

How would our lives be different if we lived by this creed every day?

How might the world be different?

SHARING IN PRAYER

Close the session by inviting people to sing “I Believe in Jesus” (see “Plugged In”), to watch “Creed” by Rich Mullins (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LR2hFP1yb4>), and/or to recite together The Apostles' Creed (<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/apcreed.html>) or The Nicene Creed (<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/ncreed.html>)

TAKING IT FURTHER

- Take some time with the group to re-arrange the final lists of beliefs into an order that flows logically, but without changing the words. This will be a terrific affirmation of faith to print in the bulletin and to use at your next youth-led worship service, confirmation commissioning, or mission trip send-off.
- Consider typing up each person's statement of faith. Fix spelling mistakes, but let the words speak for themselves. At your next meeting, return the statements. Encourage people to make corrections if they wish or to be sure that the words still echo their beliefs. Then consider publishing the statements in a booklet to give to parents at Christmas or at some other appropriate time.