

Spiritual styles

Exploring the variety of ways in which people experience God and make sense of the world around them

Getting to know you...

The Roots resources take account of people's different spiritual preferences. These preferences were described as 'spiritual styles' by Canadian scholar Joyce Bellous in her books *Educating Faith* and *Conversations that Change Us*, among other publications. David Csinos, a former student of Bellous, used these styles as a framework in his research into the spiritual lives of children. Csinos wrote six articles for Roots on the different ways in which people express their spirituality and experience God.

The four styles: Word, Emotion, Symbol and Action, describe the way we behave and interact differently with each other, why we prefer different styles of worship and what helps us to perceive and connect with God. We have learned that taking account of people's different spiritual preferences when planning worship and learning can enable everyone to connect with God more readily and develop as disciples. The Roots resources offer support across the styles to help leaders who want to prepare truly inclusive worship. This year, we will be providing more specific guidance to help you to plan and prepare for different types of worship service and children's and youth groups.

An insight into who we all are

Let's meet some people and find out how their spiritual preferences affect their experiences in church. First, imagine a children's group. Here are four of its members, Willow, Evie, Sam and Aaron.

Willow

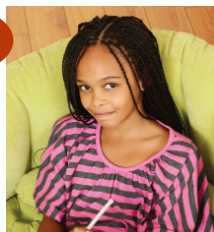
Willow really likes

- going to a formal church service
- singing hymns with beautiful words
- writing her own poems and hymns
- hearing someone read well in church
- finding out about the people, places and events in the Bible
- being on the reading rota and practising the reading at home first

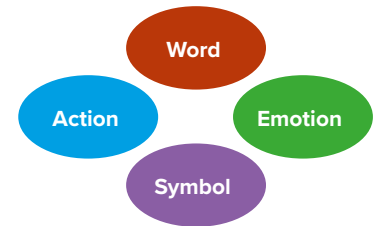
Willow is really uncomfortable

- with craft activities and games in the children's group
- when worship varies from the familiar structure
- when Bible readings and prayers are badly read out

Word



Willow knows God when she knows about God.



Evie

Evie really likes

- being part of church clubs and groups
- singing together with everyone
- baking things to share during fellowship time
- being involved in drama and dance at church
- looking at religious art
- to know how people are feeling

Evie is really uncomfortable

- when she can't actively participate in worship
- if she's asked to organise a charity campaign in youth club
- during the reflection times on a youth retreat

Emotion



Evie knows God when she can feel God, especially when she's with others.

Sam

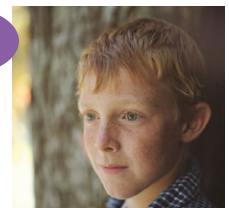
Sam really likes

- being alone to wonder about God
- going outside to find God in nature
- making or drawing things connected with his faith
- looking at pictures and objects which represent something about God

Sam is really uncomfortable

- when there are lots of hymns, prayers and a talk
- if he's asked to write or read out something about God

Symbol



Sam knows God when he sees the work of God's hands.

Aaron

Aaron really likes

- volunteering to help with charity campaigns
- welcoming people as they come into church
- helping with refreshments after worship

Aaron is really uncomfortable

- when no one shows enthusiasm for a fundraising event
- if they just have the Bible story and craft activities in his group

Action



Aaron knows God because he does the work of God.

Dominant and mixed preferences

We have started with children and young people because younger people tend to have a dominant spiritual preference. In our examples, Willow has an overwhelmingly Word preference, Evie relates through Emotion, Sam works predominantly through Symbol and Aaron is all Action. Through experience and the need to accommodate to the places in which we find ourselves, adults tend to have a more mixed spiritual profile, but will still have preferences for certain types of worship and interaction over others. Let's meet three of them.

Celia

Celia really likes

- being on the reading list
- listening to sermons
- arranging the flowers
- telling stories to children
- using daily Bible notes
- choosing hymns
- sending letters and text for Amnesty
- managing the food bank volunteers
- selecting pictures for the service sheet

Celia is really uncomfortable

- with going to prayer groups
- when singing worship songs
- when asked to share personal stories
- with people hugging each other
- with spontaneous or extempore prayer



Celia's preferences are Word and Action, with a bit of Symbol.

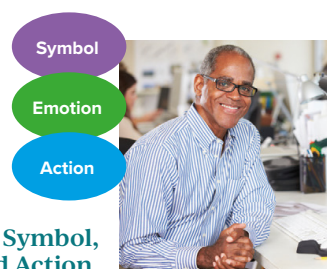
Mike

Mike really likes

- collecting for Christian Aid and other charities
- singing in the choir
- setting up the church ready for a service
- songs and music of all kinds in worship
- decorating the church for special occasions
- being a street pastor
- welcoming people
- running the church football team
- being a server

Mike is really uncomfortable

- listening to long sermons
- being asked to join a Bible study group
- with pew Bibles
- with preachers who always talk about books they've read
- if asked to write letters for good causes and campaigns



Mike has a mix of Symbol, Emotion and Action.

Rachel

Rachel really likes

- worship songs being in the drama group
- praying from her heart
- talks that explain the Bible and ask for responses
- group activities during worship
- using daily Bible notes
- going to the prayer group

Rachel is really uncomfortable

- with writing letters for good causes and campaigns
- if asked to arrange flowers
- singing 'Old fashioned' hymns
- being asked for cakes
- with candles and pictures



Rachel is quite strongly Word and Emotion-centred.

Recognise anyone?

Can you recognise yourself – or bits of yourself – here? Or do some of these remind you of people you work with or bits of people you work with? Celia's preferences are Word and Action, with a bit of Symbol. She is not at all Emotion-centred in the way she relates to God. Mike has a mix of Symbol, Emotion and Action. Aspects of worship and church life in a Word style don't engage him. Rachel is quite strongly Word and Emotion centred. She doesn't understand the mystical nature of a Symbol preference and puts no priority on Action-driven activities.

Togetherness and tensions

All these people could be part of the same church community! Although some adults will choose to attend a church that very particularly suits their own preferences, most churches have pretty diverse congregations. Children rarely have the opportunity to choose where they go to worship and learn about the Christian faith. So the situations that we serve embrace different people with many expectations and needs. This makes for celebrations and irritations in our everyday lives as part of a church community. It's fairly clear what people enjoy and value – they return again and again to experience those things, demonstrate joy and satisfaction while they're taking part, and may even offer feedback about what they appreciate most. But what if they're not engaged? Children may manifest their disaffection through their behaviour; adults are more likely either to stay away or to complain.

It may seem virtually impossible to meet the needs of all these diverse and potentially conflicting needs and expectations, but with some understanding and reflection, it is possible to offer a balanced diet, and create what Dave Csinos refers to a 'harmoniously dissonant communities'.

Dave Csinos is Assistant Professor at Atlantic School of Theology, where he teaches in the areas of practical theology and ministry studies. He is the founder and president of Faith Forward, an ecumenical organization for innovation in ministry with children and youth. His book, *Children's Ministry that Fits*, was published by Wipf and Stock in 2011.