



Growing in Christ

Active ways to move forward in
your relationship with God

by Pastor Scott Boerckel

Living things grow. Here in the spring, we see all kinds of life and growth. Why is it that many Christians grow stagnant in their relationship with Christ?

Too often, that leads to spiritual deadness that Jesus points out to the church in Sardis. Jesus says, *"You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead."* (Revelation 3:1) We do not want merely the reputation of being an alive church or of being an alive Christian. We want to grow in Christ! In this edition of the OakLeaf, you will discover some ways to enliven your relationship with Christ.

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One of the East White Oak Vital Signs of discipleship is Growing in Christ. Much as a medical professional would measure your blood pressure and pulse rate to assess your physical health, a discipleship Vital Sign is an indicator of spiritual health. In this edition of the OakLeaf we will explore ways that believers are deepening in their relationship with Jesus, becoming spiritually mature, and transforming in character to be more like Jesus. That's what it looks like to be Growing in Christ.



As I have pondered this topic of Growing in Christ, it occurred to me that too many Christians grow old rather than grow up. Without intentional attention, we can easily fall into a spiritual malaise that leads to dryness that leads to what Jesus calls deadness. How can we focus intentionally on our growing in Christ? While that is a huge topic that involves both our individual relationship with Christ and our engaging in our pathways of discipleship with others, I want to point out just a couple of exercises that you can do individually that can jump start your growing in Christ.

First, spend time in God's Word. This is where you will experience God communicating with you. If you have not done so, join our Read Through the Bible program this year, reading the "One Year Chronological Bible." Don't worry that you did not start on January 1. Just pick up today and start reading. That reading plan is available on the YouVersion app.

Second, memorize God's Word. As a church, we are committed to scripture memory and have set out several verses that your elders believe that everyone should memorize. Those verses are: Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:8-9; John 1:12; John 3:16; 1 John 1:9; 1 John 5:14-15; Psalm 119:9,11; John 14:21; Joshua 1:8; Acts 1:8; Matthew 4:19

Third, put on the full armor of God. Paul reminds us that in this life, we do not wrestle against flesh

and blood, but that there are spiritual forces arrayed against the believer. As such, we need to have our spiritual armor on. Ephesians 6:10-20 provides clear guidance in that spiritual armor. It would be a good discipline to read that paragraph once a week, praying that the Lord might bless you as you put on your spiritual armor.

Finally, take time to pray. Prayer is the means by which we communicate with God. The "ACTS" acronym is helpful as a guide to our prayers:

Adoration—taking time to praise our triune God

Confession—expressing our sorrow over our sins and agreeing with God about them

Thanksgiving—telling the Lord specific ways that we are thankful to Him

Supplication—praying for others around us who have need of God's tender care

Again, in this edition of the OakLeaf, you will discover many more ways to grow in Christ. Let's not become idle or grow weary. Let's not grow dry or even dead. Rather, let's follow our Lord Jesus' counsel to that church at Sardis: *"Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die... Remember what you have received and heard. Keep it, and repent...He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."* Revelation 3:2,3,6.



"Too many Christians grow old rather than grow up. Without intentional attention, we can easily fall into a spiritual malaise that leads to dryness that leads to what Jesus calls deadness."



Follow the Example of Jesus

by Pastor Traig Whittaker

Jesus was the perfect human. He is much more than that, but at a minimum He is our example of unbroken relationship with God absent any obstacle of self-interest. His was a life lived in the undisturbed love of God.

Jude's exhortation in verse 21 was to keep yourself in the love of God. What were some of the means by which Jesus accomplished this perfectly? It was neither accidental nor circumstantial; it was regular and routine. There was a rhythm to the way Jesus lived.

Jesus prioritized prayer. He kept himself in the love of God when He withdrew from the crowds, noise, and busyness to be alone with the Father.

Jesus was uncompromising in His obedience to the Father. He understood that to keep God's commandments was to remain in the love of God.

In times of testing, Jesus relied on God's word rather than human wisdom or ingenuity to keep himself in the love of God.

Jesus kept himself in the love of God by endeavoring to live His life for the glory of God.

Are there ways that we can more fully be transformed into the image of Christ and reflect the character of Christ in how we keep ourselves in the love of God? Pursue quiet times and quiet spaces to be alone with God. Let abiding in Scripture remind you that you are God's beloved son or daughter. Do not delay your

"Remember that your life has a greater purpose and is not about your own glory."

obedience; practice it immediately so that you may more quickly and easily feel the love of God. Remember that your life has a greater purpose and is not about your own glory.

When our primary motivation is God's plan and purpose rather than our own, we move out from under the weight of self-importance—where anxiety, pride, and insecurity find fertile ground in which to grow. Do you feel distant from God? It may be that your glory-seeking has created an obstacle, a barrier to keeping yourself in the love of God.

By seeking His glory we are constantly reminded of His greatness and goodness, which will stoke our affection for Him. Jesus perfectly put this on display. Let's learn from Him and grow to be more like Him.



Pastor Traig Whittaker serves at East White Oak as our Senior Associate Pastor. His ministry responsibilities include oversight of the church's Christian Education programs and administrative duties. Traig is married to Laura and they have four adult children.



Growing in Faith Through Cancer

by Jill Matheis

On July 31, 2025, I had surgery to remove a small tumor from my bladder which was diagnosed as cancer. After hearing the word cancer, my mind went a lot of different directions.

I needed to research and find out more about this disease that I have. What are the common treatments, best treatment facilities, and new medications? I had to decide what my next step would be. There were a lot of decisions to make. I had never realized how many decisions a newly diagnosed cancer patient faces. I was overwhelmed and my thoughts were consumed by cancer.

After the initial shock wore off, I realized that I needed to bring all of these concerns and anxious thoughts to God. I have a deep faith in God and believe He hears all of our prayers, but sometimes I forget that going to Him should be the first step when we are faced with something challenging. I reminded myself that my cancer diagnosis was not a surprise to God, so I needed to trust that He would care for me and my family during this journey.

Philippians 4:6 “Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Philippians 4:6 became very personal to me as I started my cancer journey. God has answered so many prayers since July, and I can rely on His loving sovereignty. I was fighting a physical illness, but there were other family members, friends, and people at church going through difficult things too. As I focused on praying for specific needs of others, Jesus gave me

“I reminded myself that my cancer diagnosis was not a surprise to God, so I needed to trust that He would care for me and my family during this journey.”

peace with my own situation. When I saw prayers being answered, I became more in awe of His greatness, grace, and love. In February, God answered a prayer in a big way when my latest biopsy results came back benign. Praise God for answered prayers!

As I've become more intentional in my prayer life, my faith has also grown. I still have a long way to go, but when I earnestly pray over a person or situation, I'm finding it easier to release that concern to a loving Savior. I can trust that He hears my prayers and is in complete control. Do I still sometimes get anxious, impatient, and fearful? Of course I do, but I trust that as I continue to grow in faith, I will become more Christ-like, and God will be glorified.



Jill is married to Tom and they have 3 adult children. Erica (married to Michael), Nathan, and Grace. Jill works part-time as an office manager for a construction company and enjoys doing yard work, going on long walks, playing board games, and spending time with family.



Growing Through Obstacles

by Dr. Jeff VanGoethem

“I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord... I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.”
1Sam. 1:15-16

Poor Hannah was in a very bad way. She was barren. Her husband loved her, but in the practical and unfortunate context of the day had taken a second wife, in order to secure offspring. Predictably, the second wife and her children only served to increase Hannah’s torment.

In the culture of that time, her life as a woman could not have been much worse. On the family’s annual trip to the Tabernacle in Shiloh she determined that she would meet with God. As she prayed before the tabernacle, her emotions were so overpowering that Eli, the supervising priest, thought she was intoxicated.

She explained herself by saying that she was “pouring out” her soul before the Lord. Try visualizing something being poured out. All the contents right from the bottom to the top spilled out to the last drop. This is the image the Bible uses more than once to depict intense and honest praying.

Hannah shows us an important aspect of prayer and its role in growing through painful obstacles. We also find it elsewhere in scripture: Nehemiah, when he heard the news of Jerusalem, David after his season of sin, Samuel, when he heard the news of Saul’s failure, and even Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Pouring out the trouble, anxiety, difficulty, and pain that we find deep in our souls.

I have learned when I am anxious, troubled, agitated, discouraged, and pained that I must meet with God. And I must find a way to tell him everything I have in my soul, everything I know about myself and my situation, lest these

troubled feelings linger and prevail and I find myself stuck spiritually.

It is hard not to get stuck spiritually when we are overwhelmed by our troubles. We have to grow through those problems, which can be obstacles to spiritual growth. We have to find God. We have to obtain His help (Heb. 4:14-16). One of the keys is to “pour out our souls” to Him in honest, transparent praying.

Have you ever been stuck spiritually? Not growing? Not joyful? Not hopeful? Troubled in mind and overwhelmed with problems? How do we get growing again? How do we get through such seasons?

Have you tried a prolonged season of prayer alone with God in which you tell God everything you know about yourself and your troubles?

Some seasons of honest praying start where you really are and go from there, digging deep down into the shadows and dark crevices of our souls.

Try telling God everything you know about yourself and everything you know about Him. Lavish time on Him. Often we get a sense that God has graciously heard our prayers. Hope comes. God’s peace comes. And we begin again to wait on Him and we are able to start growing again.



Pastor Jeff VanGoethem serves as the Associate Pastor of Spiritual Development and Missions at East White Oak. He is married to Karen. He loves the Packers, his four daughters and his five grandchildren. (Not in that order.)



Serving with a Heart Centered on Christ

by Maura Crittendon

Growing in Christ through service was my goal when I volunteered to serve in Germany.

And to be honest, I assumed I would return with a strong sense that my service was a blessing to others. Yet as I replay the events of our week, I know that it proved to be more of a personal blessing instead.

For me, serving is a great way to be more like Jesus. Yet it can be very easy to get caught up in task mode. That happened to me. I then wondered how the “service” I was providing (I mean I washed a lot of dishes in a kitchen separate from the students) honored Christ. Should I have not been more engaged, witnessing about Christ, instead of anchoring to the work in the kitchen? But then one of the members of the Cru Team likened our overall service to Christ washing the feet of His disciples. That reminded me that serving with a heart centered on Christ, even if it’s by washing dirty dishes, does equate to Christlikeness.

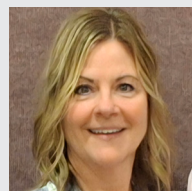
“Serving with a heart centered on Christ, even if it’s by washing dirty dishes, does equate to Christlikeness.”

Then one of my former Cubbies asked me, as part of his Sparks homework, what my favorite part of the trip was. Forcing me to quickly reflect (because honestly, I failed to do that before he asked), God made that answer very apparent. How humbling! Toward the end of the event, the East White Oak serving staff was asked to join a worship service to be recognized and thanked



Maura serving with the 2026 Germany Team

for our willingness to prepare and serve meals to the students. Upon joining, the students were on their feet as the worship leader, who spoke German, encouraged the group. Then music and singing began and I could feel the presence of our Lord and Savior in Germany! It was overwhelming. It did not matter whether I could understand the message being shared or the words being sung. The group was praising the One true God. While our spoken language was different, our praise was in fact unified. What a blessing to be a part of!



Maura and her husband, Donnie, have three children: Tori, Emma & Dane, and four grandchildren: Jovie, Graham, Jude, and Joss. Maura has served in the Wednesday night AWANA program for 12 years (9 as the Cubbie director). She works as

an Engineering Manager at State Farm Insurance and enjoys cooking, organizing, relaxing at home, and spending time with her children and grandchildren.



Growing in Forgiveness

by Pastor Justin Waples

A definition of forgiveness is “clearing the record of those who have wronged me without holding a grudge.”

Consider with me the work of God’s forgiveness in the believer’s life from Colossians 1:13-14, which says, *“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”*

As we reflect on these truths, **Growing in Christ** means considering the Biblical method for handling confrontation, as illustrated in Matthew 18:15-35. This passage deals with a believer who sins against you. Sometimes, we’re tempted to think, “I can forgive, but I can’t forget!” That may be true; even God does not forget, but He does choose to forget. When God says He will not remember our sins, He means He will never remember them or use them against us. See Psalm 103:8-13. We should follow His example in this.

Growing in Christ maintains an attitude of forgiveness, even if the offender does not repent or admit to their wrongdoing. Without this attitude, we risk falling into bitterness and rejection. See Luke 17:3-4. We must be ready to forgive.



“Ask God to **examine your heart** to see if there is anyone you need to forgive.”

Growing in Christ involves living according to the biblical concept of forgiveness. Ask God to examine your heart to see if there is anyone you need to forgive. Go to God (and to the person involved) to confront this wrongdoing. Ask a trusted friend to hold you accountable. If God does not reveal a specific area of sin to you, think about a situation in your life where a lack of forgiveness, either by you or someone else, hurt someone else.

Consider 1 Peter 3:8-9, which says, *“Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”*



Pastor Justin Waples is East White Oak’s Outreach and Discipleship Pastor. He is married to Abigail and they are blessed with five children. Justin is passionate about equipping the saints for ministry and helping each member reach out to their neighbors and community.

Growing Through Serving Others

by Pastor Walt Baertsch



One of the joys of *Growing in Christ* is to know that God has given us the incredible opportunity to serve others without any expectation of anything in return.

Serving others is one of the signs that we are believers. The apostle Paul exhorts us *“Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.”* (Philippians 2:3–4, NLT)

Spring is a season of transitions within the youth ministries. As we welcome new Junior Highers into the fold, one of the first trips we go on is Mission to Michigan. On this trip we sleep in tents in a field, deal with bugs, use pit toilets, work hard, get dirty, and we learn community, service, hard work, and we have lots of fun.

This trip is far from what most people would call “comfortable,” but it is one of the most memorable trips ever, and graduates look back fondly on those trips as pivotal to their growth as believers. It is when they solidified in their mind and heart that the Christian life isn’t about “me,” but it is all about Christ.

When we think of “church” we should think of the body of believers who serve others before serving themselves. Over the centuries, that has been the hallmark of the church. Christians were the ones who cared for and served others even at great cost to themselves, even to the point of death.

Fortunately, at least for now, we have the opportunity to *“Work willingly at whatever [we] do, as though [we] were working for the Lord rather than for people.”*



Mission to Michigan 2025

(Colossians 3:23, NLT) without fear of prison or death. But sometimes, maybe it’s too easy to sit back and think about our own comfort instead of getting involved in serving others.

Talk to one of the staff members to find out where you can get involved in serving in the church, the community, and the world. Maybe consider getting outside of your comfort zone where you can learn to trust God even more.

“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.” (1 Peter 4:10, NLT)



Pastor Walt serves in Youth and Young Adult Ministry at East White Oak. Prior to coming to Illinois, Walt served as the Senior Pastor at Northwest Baptist Church in Denver. He holds a Masters Degree in Global Leadership from Fuller Seminary. Walt is married to Penny, and they have two adult children.

