

Fresh Thoughts on Confirmation

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This essay explores the theological, liturgical, and pastoral principles underlying the rite of confirmation in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer and considers contemporary pastoral concerns, including the role of the bishop and the ritualization of a person's affiliation with the Episcopal Church. It argues that the rites introduced in 1979 should be understood in the context of the baptismal ecclesiology of the 1979 book, in which baptism is the basis for Christian mission and ministry. In this context, confirmation and the related rites of reception and reaffirmation of faith should be offered as pastoral responses to significant turning points in Christian life but should not be a requirement for lay or ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church.

Among the myriad changes in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (BCP), none are more profound, more far reaching, than those made in the rites and practices of what is frequently called "Christian initiation": baptism, confirmation, and admission to communion. Moreover, in the three decades since the book was introduced, none of the changes has resulted in more confusion and disagreement than the new rite of "Confirmation, with forms for Reception and for the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows."

Changes to the national canons during the last twenty years have attempted to define and clarify understandings and practices of confirmation and related rites. Most recently, the Standing Commission on Ministry Development proposed to the 2003 General Convention a series of revisions to the canons that would eliminate the requirement of confirmation for those holding elected or appointed office or seeking ordination in the Episcopal Church. The motions were defeated in the House of Bishops. Instead, the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops gave new attention to the theology of confirmation, leading to a series of papers forming the basis of a discussion at

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the House of Bishops meeting in March 2005. Among those papers, an article by Kathryn Tanner, published in the Winter 2006 issue of the *ATR*, proposes a new theology of confirmation. While I welcome her contribution to the debate, I believe that the 1979 BCP and the developments leading up to it offer a quite different approach to confirmation.

Full Initiation by Water and the Spirit

The 1979 Prayer Book makes what at the time was a startling claim: “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church.”¹ For most of the twentieth century, Anglicans had debated the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism and confirmation. Some adopted the position that A. J. Mason first articulated in the late nineteenth century and Gregory Dix then developed in the mid-twentieth century: baptism, the first stage in the sequence of Christian initiation, effects cleansing from sin but is wholly incomplete without the seal of the Spirit bestowed in confirmation.² Geoffrey Lampe, drawing upon many of the same sources from Scripture and the patristic church, countered that the Spirit is fully at work in the waters of baptism. For those baptized as infants, the effect of the Spirit is more potential than actual, and confirmation enables these Christians to realize and actualize what has already been bestowed in baptism.³

To underscore the work of the Spirit in baptism, the revisers included in the 1979 baptismal rite the classic prayer for the sevenfold gift of the Spirit, a prayer that had been part of confirmation in every Anglican prayer book since 1549.⁴ The formula that follows—“you are

¹ The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Publishing, 1979), 298.

² See, for example, Arthur James Mason, *The Relation of Confirmation to Baptism as Taught in Holy Scripture and the Fathers* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1891); Gregory Dix, *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism: A Public Lecture in the University of Oxford Delivered on January 22nd, 1946* (Westminster [London]: Dacre Press, 1946).

³ Geoffrey W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism and Confirmation in the New Testament and the Fathers* (London: Longmans, Green, 1951; 2nd ed., London: SPCK, 1967).

⁴ The text of this prayer in the 1549 BCP was: “Almighty and everliving God, who hast vouchsafed to regenerate these thy servants by water and the Holy Ghost, and hast given unto them forgiveness of all their sins: send down from heaven we beseech thee, O Lord, upon them thy Holy Ghost the Comforter, with thy manifold gifts of grace: the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and ghostly

sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever"—further emphasizes the Spirit's action in baptism.⁵ Some locate the bestowal of the Spirit in the waters of baptism, while others insist that the prayer and the handlaying with signing and chrismation constitute a distinct sacramental action associated with the gift of the Spirit.⁶ Yet regardless of the nuances of interpretation, it is one rite, effecting *full* initiation by water *and* the Spirit.

No longer is confirmation required for admission to communion. The confirmation rubric, "And there shall be none admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or be ready and desirous to be confirmed,"⁷ has disappeared from the Prayer Book, replaced by a canon suggesting that baptism is the sacramental prerequisite to communion.⁸

Confirmation, then, is *not* a rite of Christian initiation, the sacrament that incorporates one into the body of Christ. Rather, it is a rite of renewal or reaffirmation, a part of Christian life rather than the sacramental completion of initiation into that life.

strength, the spirit of knowledge and true godliness; and fulfill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear." In Church of England prayer books since 1552, and in the American books of 1789, 1892, and 1928, the prayer was revised to ask God to "strengthen them, we beseech thee, O Lord, with the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, and daily increase in them thy manifold gifts of grace." The remainder of the prayer was unchanged. (Texts of the historic Anglican prayer books, along with some contemporary Anglican books, are available on line at <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp.htm>; subsequent citations of Anglican prayer books are taken from this source). The 1979 BCP rephrased the prayer in contemporary English: "Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works" (p. 308).

⁵ BCP 1979, 308. For a critique of this formula, see Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 356-360.

⁶ Leonel L. Mitchell, *Worship: Initiation and the Churches* (Washington, D.C.: Pastoral Press, 1991), 143-144; Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments, Baptismal Meanings* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 162-164.

⁷ The rubric originated in a decree of the Council of Lambeth in 1281 (J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, Alcuin Club Collections 47 [London: SPCK, 1965; reprint edition, Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2004], 138-139). In the 1549 BCP the rubric read, "And there shall be none admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed." The 1662 BCP added the proviso "or ready and desirous to be confirmed."

⁸ "No unbaptized person shall be eligible to receive Holy Communion in this Church" (Canon I.17.7).

The Episcopal Church is not alone in this new approach to Christian initiation and reaffirmation of faith. In 1991 the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation asserted that baptism is full sacramental initiation, leading to participation in the Eucharist, while confirmation is a pastoral rite whose primary purpose is renewal of faith.⁹ A few provinces of the Anglican Communion had already revised their liturgical books along these lines, and since the 1991 consultation, several other provinces have done so. Increasingly across the Anglican Communion, baptism is full Christian initiation and culminates in admission to communion. However, as in the Episcopal Church, understandings and practices of confirmation continue to manifest theological confusion.¹⁰

*Confirmation: Commissioning for Ministry?*⁹

One way to interpret confirmation is to view it as a rite of commitment to ministry. Since 1662, the Anglican confirmation rite had included a question asking candidates to renew the “solemn promise and vow” made at their baptism and thereby acknowledge themselves bound to “do all those things” that they had undertaken at that time.¹¹ Yet only in the early twentieth century did Anglican theologians begin to interpret this ratification of baptismal promises as a commissioning for ministry, describing confirmation as a kind of ordination of the laity.¹² In this view, confirmation is not so much a sealing with the Holy

⁹ “Walk in Newness of Life: The Findings of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto 1991,” in David R. Holeton, ed., *Growing in Newness of Life: Christian Initiation in Anglicanism Today: Papers from the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto, 1991* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1993), 229.

¹⁰ For a survey of contemporary Anglican initiatory rites, see Ruth A. Meyers, “Rites of Initiation,” in Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, eds., *The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 484-499.

¹¹ “Do ye here, in the presence of God, and of this congregation, renew the solemn promise and vow that ye made, or that was made in your name, at your Baptism; ratifying and confirming the same; and acknowledging yourselves bound to believe and to do all those things which ye then undertook, or your Sponsors then undertook for you?”

¹² See, for example, Edward Lambe Parsons and Bayard Hale Jones, *The American Prayer Book: Its Origins and Principles* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1937); Convocations of Canterbury and York, *Confirmation To-day, Being the Schedule attached to the Interim Reports of the Joint Committees on Confirmation* (London: Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1944), 32.

Spirit as it is a particular enabling gift of the Spirit, strengthening the confirmands for their ministry in the world.

This interpretation of confirmation as ordination of the laity did not hold sway for long. By the late 1950s, some Anglicans were suggesting instead that baptism should be understood as ordination of the laity because it is incorporation into the priesthood of believers.¹³ These two perspectives have existed side by side for some time, continuing to this day.

In the revision process leading to the 1979 Prayer Book, the first proposal for Christian initiation, presented in 1968, eliminated confirmation entirely. Renewal of the commitments made at baptism would occur when the congregation joined in the baptismal promises at each celebration of baptism.¹⁴ This proposed rite was published two years before the General Convention that would act on it, and response was swift. There were so many calls for a separate rite of reaffirmation of faith that the Standing Liturgical Commission introduced "A Form of Commitment to Christian Service" in a collection of pastoral offices published shortly before the 1970 General Convention.¹⁵ This rite was approved for trial use and eventually included in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, although it does not seem to have been widely used, then or now.

Calls for a separate rite of reaffirmation of faith, presided over by a bishop, continued as the next round of prayer book revision got underway after the 1970 General Convention. The Theological Committee of the House of Bishops pressed the Standing Liturgical Commission to retain confirmation as a distinctive rite of personal discipleship, sending individuals into the world. The Standing Liturgical Commission continued to insist on its view of baptism as the foundation of Christian life, including commissioning for mission. Theological statements and proposals went back and forth, culminating in December 1972 with a meeting of the Standing Liturgical Commission, the Theological

¹³ Convocations of Canterbury and York, *Baptism and Confirmation Today: Being the Schedule attached to the Final Reports of the Joint Committees on Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Communion* (London: SPCK, 1955), 44; Massey H. Shepherd, *Liturgy and Education* (New York: Seabury, 1965), 106. For further discussion, see Ruth A. Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), 61-63, 70-73.

¹⁴ *Holy Baptism with the Laying-on-of-Hands*, Prayer Book Studies 18 (New York: Church Pension Fund, 1970).

¹⁵ *Pastoral Offices*, Prayer Book Studies 24 (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1970), vii-viii, 9-11, 40-41.

Committee of the House of Bishops, and the Prayer Book and Liturgy Committee of the House of Bishops. By the end of the meeting, the bishops reached agreement on a series of theological principles concerning baptism and a postbaptismal affirmation of vows. With regard to baptism, the statement affirmed the sufficiency of baptism as full Christian initiation. While the essential element is baptism by water in the triune name, the rite of Christian initiation also normatively includes commissioning for Christian mission.¹⁶

The 1979 baptismal rite clearly expresses these theological principles. Not only does the Baptismal Covenant conclude with questions inviting commitment to active Christian discipleship in the world—proclaiming the gospel by word and example, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, striving for justice and peace. Further, the Prayers for the Candidates ask God to “teach *them* to love others in the power of the Spirit” and “send *them* into the world in witness to your love.”¹⁷ Christian discipleship requires God’s enabling power as well as our active commitment.

Although the Baptismal Covenant is by now well known, a core text that shapes our understanding of Christian mission, the Episcopal Church has not yet fully embraced a baptismal ecclesiology, that is, a theology of baptism as the foundation for mission and ministry. In her “new theology of confirmation,” Kathryn Tanner acknowledges that baptism is full Christian initiation, including the commitment to a transformed life as articulated in the Baptismal Covenant. Yet she proposes that confirmation be understood as an unrepeatably sacramental rite associated with commissioning for Christian service:

¹⁶ The “agreed positions” were included in the preface to the rites proposed to the 1973 General Convention: *Holy Baptism, together with A Form for the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows with the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop, also called Confirmation*, Prayer Book Studies 26 (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1973), 3-4. The convention approved the rite with the revised title of *Holy Baptism, together with A Form for Confirmation or the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop with the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows*. Recognizing the controverted nature of the issue, the Standing Liturgical Commission authorized publication of a background study issued under the name of its principal author: Daniel B. Stevick, *Holy Baptism, together with A Form for the Affirmation of Baptismal Vows with the Laying-On of Hands by the Bishop, also called Confirmation*, Supplement to Prayer Book Studies 26 (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1973). Stevick subsequently published a revised and greatly expanded edition: *Baptismal Moments, Baptismal Meanings*. For further discussion of the revision process, see Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 132-191.

¹⁷ BCP 1979, 305-306.

Simply stated, in confirmation one shows oneself ready to do what one has promised to do in baptism. Confirmation becomes a kind of public rite of accountability, in which one assumes responsibility for now carrying out, in a particular direction appropriate to one's specific character and gifts, what one has committed oneself to doing at baptism—to serve God with one's whole heart, mind, and soul. . . . Confirmation on this way of looking at it might be associated with commissioning rites for Christian service.¹⁸

Tanner goes on to emphasize the empowering work of the Spirit at confirmation as well as baptism, insisting that “we require rites that strengthen and confirm us on the path to which Christ effectively calls us in baptism, because of our weakness and frailty” (p. 89). Here, I find her work very helpful. The Baptismal Covenant asks us to commit ourselves to a particular way of life, one of worship and service, justice-making and reconciliation. We respond to each question, “I will, with God's help,” but we can all too easily focus on *our* commitment, *our* action, rather than God's empowering Spirit. As we seek to be faithful Christians, it is important to see ourselves caught up in the movement of God's mercy and grace, offering ourselves in loving service because God first loved us. Ritual expressions of the Spirit's strengthening grace can remind us of our dependence on God even as we renew our resolve to lead a Christian life.

But Tanner does more than call attention to the empowering work of the Spirit in confirmation. She proposes that confirmation be understood as a distinctive, unrepeatable rite that sends us into the world in mission. But does not baptism serve this function? The Baptismal Covenant certainly suggests that it does, as do the prayers. Moreover, the materials for the catechumenate included in *The Book of Occasional Services* call for reflection on “the catechumen's gifts for ministry and work for justice and peace.” The assumption is that adults preparing for baptism already have gifts for ministry and that, even before they are baptized, they will begin a “practice of life in accordance with the Gospel (including service to the poor and those in need).”¹⁹ Tanner argues, however, that those baptized as adults still

¹⁸ Kathryn Tanner, “Towards a New Theology of Confirmation,” *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 88.

¹⁹ *The Book of Occasional Services 2003* (New York: Church Publishing, 2004), 114-115.

need to mature as Christians and so must be confirmed once they grow into a more adult Christian faith.

In her insistence on the necessity of a single unrepeatable act of mature Christian commitment to ministry, Tanner takes inadequate account of the lifelong process of faith development. Certainly all of us, at whatever age we are baptized, must grow into the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). For some, there may be a distinctive moment of new maturity in faith, when the eyes of one's heart (Eph. 1:18) become open to the Spirit in a new way, resulting in a new depth of commitment to God's mission in the world. For these Christians, a ritual expression of their renewed commitment and of God's enabling Spirit, whether through confirmation, or reaffirmation of faith, or a Form of Commitment to Christian Service, may be very appropriate. But such a ritual should not be considered essential to Christian faith and life. Some Christians may never experience a unique moment of renewed or deepened grace and commitment, but instead find themselves steadily growing as Christians, more and more able to receive the gifts of the Spirit and manifest those gifts in their patterns of life. At what point, then, should they be confirmed? More importantly, whether a Christian experiences a dramatic reawakening or a more gradual pattern of growth, this is a lifelong process. Tanner's arguments for an unrepeatable sacramental rite of confirmation do not adequately recognize the Spirit's ongoing work in bringing Christians into "the full stature of Christ" (Eph. 4:13) and the reality that such maturity is an eschatological gift never fully realized on this side of the grave.

It is easiest to make the case against the necessity of confirmation for those baptized as adults, who make a conscious profession of faith and commitment to participate in ministries of justice and service. But what of those baptized as infants or young children? Certainly as they grow into adulthood, they are able to become more intentional in their Christian commitment. A ritual such as confirmation provides opportunity for them to own the commitments made on their behalf by parents and godparents and to experience consciously the empowering gift of the Spirit in their lives. Yet an emphasis on confirmation as *the* distinctive rite that now sends them into the world in mission diminishes and distorts the Spirit's work in children and teenagers throughout the course of their development. True, the cognitive developments that occur during adolescence—abstract thinking, self-reflection, identity formation—allow the development of a system of beliefs and values,²⁰

²⁰ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 172-173.

resulting in a more intentional Christian commitment. But living out the commitments to ministry made at one's baptism does not begin in adolescence.

Elementary-school-age children begin developmentally to use their physical and intellectual capacities to contribute productively to their world. This newly emerging sense of industry gives children at this stage particular interest in and energy for service to others. One group of children, a Sunday school class, began to correspond with children in Argentina, a connection made through a missionary. As their relationship developed, they organized a collection to meet the needs of their new friends in a faraway place. Such activity clearly embodies the baptismal commitment to mission. I am not proposing that these children should therefore be encouraged to participate in a ritual expression of this commitment, such as confirmation, but rather that we should recognize their activity as an expression of the Baptismal Covenant and perhaps also the work of the Spirit empowering these children for their service.

Moreover, I suggest that even younger children might have something to offer the Christian community. One young Christian I knew was a particularly enthusiastic worshiper. From infancy, her parents brought her regularly to the Eucharist, and by the time she was three, her "Amen" to the eucharistic prayer rang out loudly in the assembly. I became accustomed to hearing her behind me during communion, asking whether it was her turn yet, eagerly awaiting the gift of Christ's body and blood. Her presence in that worshiping community was a witness to all of a joyous and unrestrained response to the incredible gift of God's love made tangible in the eucharistic gifts.

In sum, rather than viewing confirmation as a distinctive, unrepeatable rite of empowerment by the Spirit for commitment to Christian service, we need a fuller appreciation of the commissioning for mission that is integral to the grace bestowed at baptism. This is not just a matter of rhetoric, but of concrete expressions of the place of confirmation in the life of the Episcopal Church.

Twenty years ago, the General Convention enacted a number of changes to the constitution and canons in light of the changes introduced in the 1979 Prayer Book. Prior to 1985, the canons had required an Episcopalian to be a "communicant in good standing" in order to hold office or be ordained. The 1985 convention altered this language to "confirmed adult communicant." Before the 1979 Prayer Book, of course, a communicant was by definition confirmed, since the effect of the "confirmation rubric" was to require confirmation for

admission to communion. By continuing to require confirmation for various forms of ministry in the church, the 1985 convention rejected the theological principles underlying the 1979 Prayer Book, in particular the understanding that baptism commissions one for ministry. Canonical revisions after 1985 likewise required confirmation for various forms of service and ministry, including membership in commissions, lay liturgical ministries, and ordination. The Standing Commission on Ministry Development proposed to the 2003 General Convention a series of revisions to the canons that would eliminate the expectation of confirmation. The motions were defeated.

Those who support the requirement of confirmation generally cite the value of the conscious commitment made at confirmation, whether that is specifically a commitment to ministry, as Tanner proposes, or a broader affirmation of one's baptismal faith. Certainly it is appropriate to expect that those holding leadership positions in the church be committed Christians, actively engaged in living out their baptismal commitments. Yet such commitment, I suggest, is better assessed as an ongoing pattern of life rather than on the basis of the onetime commitment made at confirmation. The canons already define a communicant in good standing as one who is "faithful in corporate worship" and "faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God,"²¹ and I propose that this is a sufficient standard by which to determine eligibility for leadership, whether lay or ordained.

Confirmation: Affiliation with the Episcopal Church?

Another argument sometimes advanced in favor of confirmation, including the requirement of confirmation for leadership positions, is the use of confirmation as a rite of affiliation with the Episcopal Church. Prior to the 1979 Prayer Book, it was customary in the Episcopal Church to confirm those coming from Protestant churches while receiving those who came from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The distinction was not made on the basis of whether one's former church had a rite of confirmation: Lutheran

²¹ "All members of this Church who have received Holy Communion in this Church at least three times during the preceding year are to be considered communicants of this Church" (Canon I.17.2[a]); "All communicants of this Church who for the previous year have been faithful in corporate worship, unless for good cause prevented, and have been faithful in working, praying, and giving for the spread of the Kingdom of God, are to be considered communicants in good standing" (Canon I.17.3).

churches practiced confirmation, yet the Episcopal Church confirmed Lutherans. In contrast, although Orthodox churches do not have a separate rite of confirmation, the Episcopal Church received rather than confirmed members of those churches. In each case, the deciding factor was whether an individual came from a church with the historic episcopate. If so, that person could be received, sometimes in a formal ceremony presided over by a bishop or priest, sometimes simply by being added to the congregation's roster of baptized and confirmed members.²²

The 1979 Prayer Book introduced the possibility of a rite of reception parallel to confirmation, the only difference from confirmation being the bishop's words at the central ritual moment and the absence of a specific requirement for a ritual gesture to accompany the formula. But who is to be confirmed, and who received? What ritual gesture is appropriate? Since 1979, no consistent understanding or practice has emerged. Should the Episcopal Church continue to confirm Protestants and receive Catholics and Orthodox? Should the church receive Protestants who have been confirmed in their previous tradition but confirm those who have not, including those from churches, such as the Baptist Church, that have no rite of confirmation? Should the church receive everyone, regardless of their prior church affiliation, as long as they have been baptized? What are the implications of the Episcopal Church's full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)? Is any rite, whether reception or confirmation, to be expected when a person is from a body already in full communion with the Episcopal Church?

The canons have not helped clarify the matter. Once it was decided to require confirmation for leadership positions, it became necessary to determine what constitutes confirmation for individuals who have previously been members of another church. The canons approved in 1985 included various definitions.²³ The 1997 General

²² For further discussion of the historical background and contemporary practices of reception into the Episcopal Church, see Daniel B. Stevick, "To Confirm or to Receive?" in Ruth A. Meyers, ed., *Baptism and Ministry*, Liturgical Studies 1 (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 55-85.

²³ "Any person who is baptized in this Church as an adult and receives the laying on of hands by the Bishop at Baptism is to be considered, for the purpose of this and all other Canons, as both baptized and confirmed; also, Any person who is baptized in this Church as an adult and at some time after the Baptism receives the laying on of hands by the Bishop in Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows is to be considered, for the purpose of this and all other Canons, as both baptized and confirmed; also, Any

Convention attempted to clarify the matter by stipulating that anyone who had previously made a mature public commitment in another church could be received with the laying on of hands by a bishop of the Episcopal Church.²⁴ Presumably this would include, for example, a Lutheran baptized as an infant and confirmed in early adolescence, a Baptist baptized as a teenager, or a Roman Catholic initiated as an adult in a rite that included confirmation by a parish priest.

The 2003 General Convention adopted a resolution to clarify processes for incorporating members in light of the relationship of full communion begun with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on January 1, 2001: “*Resolved*, that the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer and the Constitution and Canons of The Episcopal Church allow reception of members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.” Subsequently, the Office of Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations issued guidelines stating that members of the ELCA may be transferred into Episcopal congregations as stipulated in the canon that details the process for communicants of the Episcopal Church to be transferred into another congregation.²⁵

Such attempts to determine the equivalent of confirmation could be set aside were the Episcopal Church to relinquish its insistence on confirmation as a requirement for leadership positions within it. The church might then be free to respond pastorally to those who come to the Episcopal Church after baptized membership in another branch of Christ’s church.

Consider, for example, Jane, a mature Christian woman who was baptized as an infant and raised in an Eastern Orthodox Church. As an

baptized person who received the laying on of hands at Confirmation (by any Bishop in apostolic succession) and is received into the Episcopal Church by a Bishop of this Church is to be considered, for the purpose of this and all other Canons, as both baptized and confirmed; and also, Any baptized person who received the laying on of hands by a Bishop of this Church at Confirmation or Reception is to be considered, for the purpose of this and all other Canons, as both baptized and confirmed” (Canon I.17.1[d]).

²⁴ “Those who have previously made a mature public commitment in another Church may be received by the laying on of hands by a Bishop of this Church, rather than confirmed” (Canon I.17.1[c]).

²⁵ “Guidelines for Reception and Confirmation for Persons Joining the Episcopal Church,” at <http://www.dfms.org/documents/confirmation.pdf>. These guidelines cite Canon I.17.4(d): “Any communicant of any Church in communion with this Church shall be entitled to the benefit of this section”; the preceding paragraphs of this section spell out the process for a member of the Episcopal Church to transfer from one congregation to another.

adult, she found her way to the Episcopal Church, the worship resonating with her liturgical formation in Eastern Orthodoxy, the support for women's ministries affirming her experience as a woman. Jane is an active member of her congregation, worshiping every Sunday, singing in the choir, participating in a women's Bible study, providing leadership for outreach projects. She considers herself fully a member of the Episcopal Church, though she has never been formally received or confirmed. The catholicity of the Episcopal Church is particularly appealing to Jane. That is, the Episcopal Church recognizes her as a member because she has been baptized with water in the triune name and has included her on the parish membership rolls.²⁶ Jane, I would suggest, is well suited to serve on a vestry or as a lay eucharistic minister or a member of a national commission. To insist on a ritual equivalent of confirmation would diminish the significance of Jane's baptism: the Episcopal Church does, after all, proclaim one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.²⁷ Requiring confirmation in some form would also minimize Jane's formation in the Episcopal Church through regular participation in our worship and ministry.

I am not suggesting that we ignore the unique contours of our Anglican heritage as we welcome Christians from other parts of the body of Christ. We ought to provide regular opportunities for study and reflection on the gifts (and challenges) that come with our particular Anglican way of following Christ, and we ought to offer such opportunity not only to those newly affiliating with the Episcopal Church but also to longtime, even lifelong members of the Episcopal Church.

Nor am I proposing that we abandon altogether the option for a ritual form of reception into the Episcopal Church. Susan's story, for example, is rather different from that of Jane. Susan was raised in the Roman Catholic Church, was baptized as an infant, made her first communion at age 7, and was confirmed at age 10. She discovered particular gifts for music and found that the church welcomed those gifts. Eventually Susan joined the staff of a local Roman Catholic parish, her sense of call to ministry growing through her service as minister of music. She went to seminary, earning first a master's degree and then entering an ecumenical doctor of ministry program. Continuing to

²⁶ See Canon I.17.1(a): "All persons who have received the Sacrament of Holy Baptism with water in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, whether in this Church or in another Christian Church, and whose Baptisms have been duly recorded in this Church, are members thereof."

²⁷ Eph. 4:5-6; see BCP 1979, 299.

ponder her vocation, she began to perceive a call to ordination. A mentor nudged Susan toward the Episcopal Church and, after considerable prayer, she and her family began worshiping in a nearby Episcopal congregation. This spring, Susan and her family were presented to the bishop and received into the Episcopal Church. For Susan, this ritual expression of her welcome into the Episcopal Church was a powerful experience, a sense of coming home, an acceptance for which she had been hungering for years. If she continues in the ordination process, some ritual equivalent of confirmation will be required, but this was not Susan's primary motive for being received by the bishop.

For Susan and for others, a ritual expression of their decision to join the Episcopal Church is a profound statement of belonging, marking a significant transition in their journey of faith. Offering a rite of reception into the Episcopal Church is an important pastoral gesture that ought to be provided, even if it is not required for membership or for service or leadership in the church.

Confirmation: The Role of the Bishop?

Susan's experience highlights one significant feature of the 1979 prayer book liturgy for confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation: the role of the bishop. As the Prayer Book was being revised, Episcopalians were particularly insistent on retaining this feature. For many, this ritual laying on of hands by a bishop is key to Anglican identity.

Certainly Anglicans understand episcopacy to be necessary. The Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral adopted at the end of the nineteenth century includes the historic episcopate as one of four elements that provide the basis for unity with other churches.²⁸ These principles continue to guide our ecumenical dialogues. For example, resolving our differences on episcopacy was essential to achieving full communion with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Nonetheless, it is possible to maintain the historic episcopate without focusing that ministry in the liturgical rite of confirmation and without requiring confirmation by a bishop. Our sisters and brothers in the Eastern Orthodox churches have never had a separate rite of confirmation presided over by a bishop. Orthodox baptismal rites include anointing with chrism, using oil previously blessed by the patriarch; and Anglicans have considered this to be the equivalent of

²⁸ BCP 1979, 876-878.

confirmation when deciding to receive rather than confirm members of those churches. In the Roman Catholic Church, the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults approved in 1972 expects that in the absence of a bishop, the priest who administers baptism will immediately confirm the newly baptized. Since these rites envision adult initiation's occurring at the Easter Vigil, the most common practice is for the parish priest to baptize and confirm adults.²⁹

The practices of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches suggest that Anglicans might reconsider the bishop's role in confirmation. The 1979 Prayer Book introduced a shift by identifying the bishop as principal celebrant of baptism, and the 1991 International Anglican Liturgical Consultation encouraged a broader understanding of the bishop's ministry consistent with Anglican tradition. A bishop is chief priest and pastor, called to "encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries."³⁰ As teacher of the faith, a bishop proclaims the gospel, preaching the word and interpreting Scripture. As guardian of the faith and unity of the church, a bishop is a visible sign of the congregation's connections with the diocese and with the national and international church.³¹ It is within the wider context of the bishop's ministry that we should consider the bishop's liturgical roles. The 1991 consultation concluded that, whenever possible, the bishop should preside at baptism and at the Eucharist, and further that confirmation might be delegated by the bishop to a presbyter.³²

The 1979 Prayer Book places baptism as the foundation of the church's life. Focusing the bishop's liturgical ministry on confirmation obscures the more fundamental sacrament of baptism. While a bishop cannot be present at every celebration of baptism, it is possible and even desirable that congregations schedule baptisms for the bishop's visit, whether or not there are also persons being presented for confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation. When there is neither baptism nor confirmation, it would be appropriate to include the Renewal of Baptismal Vows, and the verbal renewal might be accompanied by the

²⁹ *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, para. 14, 23, 207, 232, in study ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1988), pp. 7, 9, 123, 145.

³⁰ BCP 1979, 518.

³¹ See, for example, "The Examination" in the Ordination of a Bishop, BCP 1979, 517-519; *Growing in Newness of Life*, 249-251; and *The Windsor Report*, paragraph 63.

³² *Growing in Newness of Life*, 229, 250-251.

Thanksgiving over the Water and the sprinkling of the congregation with the blessed water.

Moreover, in planning a bishop's visit, it is important to consider not only the bishop's liturgical leadership but the entirety of the event. What sort of teaching and other interaction will best allow the bishop to support and encourage all the baptized in their ministries? How might the bishop's visit enable members of the congregation to deepen their relationship with the diocese and the wider church? I do not wish to minimize the power of ritual to shape Christian faith and life. Yet ritual is usually most effective when we can connect it to other experiences and relationships in our lives. There is power in a bishop's ritually laying hands on a baptized person who has come to a place of renewed or deepened faith. There is even more power when that baptized person also has opportunity, for example, to reflect with the bishop on her gifts for ministry or to share some of his faith journey with the bishop.

Confirmation: Reaffirmation of Faith

In addition to imposition of hands by a bishop, the rubrics introducing the 1979 rite of confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation articulate the expectation that baptized Christians will make a mature public affirmation of faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their baptism. This public reaffirmation of baptismal commitments has been an explicit part of Anglican confirmation rites since 1662. However, in the 1979 Prayer Book this reaffirmation is set within Christian faith and life and is not a rite subsequent to baptism that completes Christian initiation. Moreover, the 1979 book offers a much broader understanding of reaffirmation of faith.

Once the 1970 General Convention rejected the bold proposal to eliminate confirmation altogether, theologians, bishops, and other church leaders began to consider the possibility of a repeatable rite of reaffirmation of faith. The December 1972 meeting of the Standing Liturgical Commission, the Theological Committee of the House of Bishops, and the Prayer Book and Liturgy Committee of the House of Bishops resulted in agreement not only about baptism but also concerning what was then called a "postbaptismal affirmation of vows." Such a rite could provide an opportunity for a "mature personal acceptance of promises and affirmations made on one's behalf at infancy" and serve as well for other occasions such as affiliation with the

Episcopal Church and return to active Christian life after a period of lapsed or perfunctory faith.³³

Prayer book revision resulted in a rite that does much of what the bishops envisioned in 1972. The 1979 rite allows for confirmation for those baptized as infants, reception of those affiliating with the Episcopal Church and Anglican Communion, and reaffirmation by any who want to reaffirm their baptismal vows. There are some important differences, however. The title “confirmation” was restored to prominence, over the objections of the Drafting Committee on Christian Initiation. The 1972 principles suggested that the affirmation of faith by those baptized in infancy ought to be voluntary, though strongly encouraged; the introductory rubrics to the 1979 rite say that this affirmation is expected, and the canons require it for many positions of leadership. Most significantly, the 1976 General Convention added the rubric setting forth the expectation that those baptized as adults, unless baptized with laying on of hands by a bishop, are also expected to make an affirmation of faith in the presence of the bishop. This rubric has been criticized—rightly so, in my opinion—because it undermines the sufficiency of baptism as full Christian initiation, and the canons that require this separate laying on of hands for leadership positions exacerbate the problem.

Perhaps we ought to reconsider the spirit of the 1972 agreed statement. Those principles view confirmation and other postbaptismal rites of affirmation as pastoral rites. For those baptized as infants, such an affirmation ought to be a “normal component of Christian nurture” and so is “pastorally and spiritually desirable.”³⁴ Here I would emphasize that the Prayer Book as well as the 1972 principles describe this as a *mature* commitment. It is not a rite of puberty, suitable for children in early adolescence, when they are just beginning the cognitive developments that accompany adolescence. Several years ago, guidelines adopted by the dioceses of Michigan, Northern Michigan, and Western Michigan recommended:

Candidates for Confirmation are expected to be mature in their convictions, and themselves responsible for the major decisions of their lives without parental direction regarding, e.g., their use of time, their choice of relationships, the nature and direction of

³³ *Holy Baptism*, Prayer Book Studies 26, 4-5.

³⁴ *Holy Baptism*, Prayer Book Studies 26, 4.

their commitments. Normally such maturity is not achieved until high school, and often it may be later. It is inappropriate to designate all young persons of a certain age or grade level as confirmands, or to pressure individuals to present themselves for Confirmation in the absence of clear motivation, commitment, or initiative on their part.³⁵

Rather than focusing programs for teens on confirmation preparation, we ought to be providing ongoing formation that supports development of their faith and encourages reflection on the implications of Christian faith for the challenges of daily living that our teens face today.³⁶

Just as confirmation is pastorally desirable for those baptized as infants, a ritual reaffirmation of baptismal commitments is also a suitable pastoral response on other occasions in Christian life. The 1991 Anglican Liturgical Consultation suggested: "The laying on of hands, with prayer for further strengthening by the Spirit, is open to many uses. Such a 'stretched' rite, perhaps termed *commissioning* or *affirmation*, able to be repeated as different pastoral needs arise, and creatively adapted to various times and places, may bring new life to this distinctive Anglican heritage [confirmation]." The report continued, "The church long ago recognized that the journey of the baptized in their exploration of the life of faith is a process punctuated by failure and forgiveness, repentance and renewal."³⁷

The 1979 rite of Confirmation, with forms for Reception and for the Reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows, allows us to recognize and give ritual expression to many occasions of renewed or deepened faith, as one possible pastoral response to Christian experience. As we in the Episcopal Church consider anew the understanding and practice of confirmation, I propose that we more fully implement the 1979

³⁵ "Guidelines for the Celebration of Rites of Christian Initiation and Renewal of Faith" (Dioceses of Michigan, Northern Michigan, and Western Michigan, n.d.), 17.

³⁶ For reflections on the religious and spiritual formation of teenagers from the perspective of youth ministers, see Chanon Ross, "Challenging Youth Ministry: Jesus Isn't Cool," *Christian Century*, September 6, 2005, 22-25, and Gregory C. Syler, "A Confirming Imagination: Some Considerations and Ideas," in "Becoming God's People," Diocese of Chicago newsletter for Christian Formation (Fall 2005), 2-3. For a recent discussion of youth and religion, see Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁷ *Growing in Newness of Life*, 245.

rite as it was intended, as a pastoral rite that includes mature public affirmation of faith and laying on of hands by a bishop, conveying God's blessing and the strengthening gift of the Spirit.

A New Approach to Confirmation

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that I am *not* advocating a reinvigorated practice of confirmation. Rather, I recommend that the Episcopal Church offer confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation as pastoral responses to significant turning points in Christian life and, more importantly, as part of a fuller and richer practice of baptism and baptismal renewal.

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer introduces a baptismal ecclesiology in which the church is understood as a body rooted in baptism. Louis Weil, Professor of Liturgics at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, puts it this way:

[The 1979 Book of Common Prayer] offers a new set of liturgical imperatives based on a recovery of the significance of baptism in the lives of all Christians. . . . The model of baptism as the fundamental sacrament of identity in the church is sometimes referred to as a "baptismal ecclesiology"—that is, an understanding of the church that defines Christian community in terms of the common ground that all baptized members share. This understanding of the church sees baptism as the defining sacrament of incorporation into its life. . . . A baptismal ecclesiology affirms that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given to all members so that *ministry can be understood as shared by all of the people*, whether lay or ordained, each according to the nature of the gifts that the Spirit has given.³⁸

In the context of a baptismal ecclesiology, confirmation and related rites of affirmation might serve effectively as ritual expressions of renewed and deepened commitment. But let us be clear that these are rites of reaffirmation, not rites of commissioning for ministry and not prerequisites for leadership in the church. Recognizing that the 1979 rites must be administered by a bishop, let us view this particular ministry of the bishop as just one expression of the bishop's overall

³⁸ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship*, The New Church's Teaching Series 12 (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2002), 12-14.

ministry as chief pastor and teacher, encouraging all the baptized to utilize their gifts for ministry to the fullest extent possible. Finally, let us administer confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation in the context of lifelong Christian formation, as forms of renewal and reaffirmation complementing the periodic renewal of baptismal vows—for example, at the Easter Vigil—and the weekly celebration of the Eucharist.

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