

## **Report of the Confirmation Task Force to the Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington**

This report provides the views of the Confirmation Task Force (TF) to the Board of Directors of the Reformed Institute (RI). Necessarily the information contained is limited in scope and meant to be indicative rather than comprehensive. All the TF participants are drawn from Presbyterian congregations within the Washington DC metropolitan area.

The report focuses on:

- A. Our Understanding of “Confirmation” in the Life of a Christian
- B. The Role of Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith
- C. What a Life Journey of Reaffirmations of Faith Might Look Like
- D. Issues Regarding Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith
- E. Recommendations

Appendices

### **Composition and Deliberations of the Task Force**

The TF is composed of eleven members from nine churches of varying sizes (with memberships of under 100 to over 1,000), including laity and church professionals, current and former confirmation teachers, parents of recent or current confirmands, professional educators focused on the middle and high school age group, and a recent confirmation graduate. We regretted our ethnic homogeneity. Appendix I contains a complete list of TF members.

We met on five Saturdays, December 2003 through April 2004, for about 6 hours each time. In addition, between meetings, individuals did many hours of reading and research. None of this would have come together without the able assistance of Mary Hill, RI Program Coordinator, and the leadership at crucial junctures of Bruce Douglass, RI Director.

The TF was constituted to look carefully at the purpose of confirmation for adolescents, taking into account our denomination’s history and the current practices. Early in its work, the TF began struggling with the meaning of confirmation within the context of a Christian’s entire life journey. What follows is offered in the spirit of discussion and study for the strengthening of the people of God.

## **A. Our Understanding of “Confirmation” in the Life of a Christian**

### 1. The Book of Order

The TF has been guided by the *Book of Order*'s descriptions of confirmation found at W4.2001 (Services of Welcome and Reception):

*...These aspects of Baptism are given further expression in worship through welcoming the baptized to the Lord's Table, confirming and commissioning, and receiving new members....*

And at W4.2002:

*...When a person is baptized as a child, the session shall equip and support the parent(s) or those exercising parental responsibility for their task of nurturing the child for receiving the Lord's Supper. (W0s.3012) When the child begins to express a desire to receive this Sacrament, the session should take note of this and provide an occasion for recognition and welcome.*

And at W4.2003:

*The church nurtures those baptized as children and calls them to make public their personal profession of faith and their acceptance of responsibility in the life of the church...In that service the church shall confirm them in their baptismal identity.*

Additionally, the TF is mindful and wholly supportive of viewing the life of a Christian as a journey with periodic times of (special) re-affirmation of the baptismal vows. In particular we refer to W-4.2006:

*In the life of a believer there are times of special awakening, renewal, and fresh commitment, which call for public expression, recognition, and celebration. People should be encouraged to share with the minister(s) and with the session these decisive moments and stirrings of the Holy Spirit. It may often be appropriate for people to make public this sense of deepened commitment in a service of worship, and for the church to acknowledge it with prayer and thanksgiving.*

The TF reflected on the meaning of membership and cites G 5.0101:

*...One becomes an active member of the church through faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and acceptance of his Lordship in all of life. Baptism and a public profession of faith in Jesus as Lord are the visible signs of entrance into the active membership of the church.*

## 2. The Book of Common Worship

*The Book of Common Worship* has also guided the TF by its services for “Baptism and Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant.” These services provide the ways for a worshipping community to celebrate special times of public profession of faith and the re-affirmation of baptismal vows. The services intentionally express these celebrations in the theology and language of the Reformed tradition:

*The Sacrament of Baptism*

*Baptism and Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant*

*Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for Those Making a Profession of Faith*

*Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for Those Uniting with a Congregation*

*Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for a Congregation*

*Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant Marking Occasion of Growth in Faith*

*Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for Pastoral Counseling*

## 3. History of Confirmation

The TF explored the history of confirmation with emphasis on the Reformed tradition. Confirmation is not a sacrament in the Reformed tradition. In the early (200 A.D.) church, baptism with water, chrismation with oil, laying on of hands, and admission to the Eucharist were separate elements of a unitary rite of initiation of adult converts into the Christian faith. Confirmation, or the chrismation and laying on of hands, was distinguished from the baptism with water and also from the Eucharist in that only the bishop officiated at these moments within the rite, whereas the ordinary parish priest was empowered to perform the others. Over time and through a number of circumstances, children became the subject of initiation and in the geographically large medieval dioceses the bishop became an infrequent visitor. The unitary rite of initiation was separated into several rites: baptism, confirmation and first communion.

Confirmation continued to be exercised only by the bishop and became a rite occurring at the end of childhood at a much younger age than is currently practiced. As all of these elements have been associated with some activity of the Holy Spirit or the ecclesiastical dispensation of the Holy Spirit, confirmation came to be associated with the particular gifts of the Holy Spirit of strengthening to withstand the temptations and challenges of adult Christian life, and also the mature gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, etc.). The exercise of confirmation remained solely with the Bishop.

John Calvin rejected an understanding of the sacraments that hinged upon the person of the celebrant. He rejected confirmation altogether as a sacrament. The grace of baptism was seen to be fully sufficient. There was no second dispensation of grace or Holy Spirit at adolescence. However, Calvin did not object to the practice of parents bringing their children as they reached early adolescence (Institutes Book 4, Chapter 19.13) to profess publicly their faith, since they had been unable to do so when their parents had brought them to be baptized as infants. In the Reformed tradition, emphasis shifted from episcopal bestowal of grace to catechizing and profession of faith. In the United States,

this profession of faith on the part of an adolescent was deemed necessary for participation at the Table – so that the Supper would be respected and participation would include only those who could properly perceive the Lord’s body and blood.

The Pastor’s Communicants Class, preparing youth to receive the sacrament, was an institution among American Presbyterians for 100 years; but prior to reunion in 1983 both the PCUS and the UPCUSA determined that children should not be barred from the Table. If the children were instructed in the Church School, they were to be welcomed to the Table and the grace that was signified and celebrated there. However, once instruction and participation were no longer linked it became common practice for many younger children to take the elements without instruction.

In light of this change, a Communicants Class of early adolescents was rendered obsolete. In place of the former practice, a number of Presbyterian Churches began holding “confirmation” classes and holding “confirmation services,” although the Book of Common Worship does not use the term, “confirmation,” with all of its episcopal connotation. The Book of Common Worship suggests a service for Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant for Those making Public Profession of Faith.

See Appendix II for a quote from pp. 17-21 in *Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 2 to the Book of Common Worship*.

#### 4. The Term “Confirmation”

The TF had lengthy discussion regarding the term “confirmation.” It carries the weight of considerable tradition. The TF concluded that it would be wise and helpful to shift the emphasis in terminology from “confirmation” to “Baptism or Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant” or “Profession of Faith” for those making their first public profession. The TF recognizes that at any age in a life journey of faith there may be a first profession of faith. Acknowledging the awkwardness of the language, profession of faith or baptism or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, the TF shortened the phrase to profession or reaffirmation of faith. It is recognized that this shift in emphasis in terminology will come slowly given the weight of tradition as well as the peer pressure from others within the Christian community who use the term “confirmation.”

The terms “profession of faith” or “reaffirmation of faith” will be used instead of confirmation for the rest of the paper.

#### 5. The Life Journey Accompanied by Profession of Faith and Reaffirmations of the Baptismal Covenant

One of the fundamental claims of this report is that the experiences that are reflected in the terms “profession of faith” and “reaffirmation of faith” have a different meaning than that which is experienced in a “confirmation” event. Far from the one-time experience often practiced in Presbyterian churches today, which suggests finality, the TF

understands public profession or reaffirmation of faith to be, potentially, repeated throughout the life process.

So often Christians wear the mantle of faith much like an overcoat that can be removed when it becomes uncomfortable. If, instead, the metaphor for the Christian life is that of a journey of faith, a pilgrimage with purpose and filled with challenges, including times of doubt as well as resting places, then the church will approach its educational task differently. If the Christian life is a journey of faith then the church will prepare its people for travel, decisions to make when a fork in the road is encountered, dangers and the need for food and prayer. Each step of the journey will be accompanied by recognition that God's irresistible grace claims persons, and compels them to affirm their reliance on the One who saves.

The TF recognizes that the weekly worship of the church as well as other occasions in the life of the congregation provide regular, ongoing opportunities for affirming one's faith. Such occasions include: the use of creeds, the installation and ordination of officers, commissioning a mission trip group, recognition and commissioning of those completing a Stephen ministry course, commissioning church school teachers and adult seeker classes. Other events such as the arrival of children, the death of loved ones, marriage (and divorce), job changes and retirement offer opportunities for individuals to explore the meaning of God's Word for their lives.

Of course not every one would avail him or herself of the opportunity for reflection these occasions provide, but the opportunities are there, to be taken advantage of as the individual and congregation decide.

Of more importance to the work of the TF are those special times designated by the church for public profession of faith or baptism and the reaffirmation of baptismal vows. Baptism and later opportunities for profession or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant provide youth and adults with a deeper understanding of their faith lives as a journey, and they can also be used to anchor the sacramental education of children.

In practice these elements of baptism, admission to the Table, public profession of faith on the part of young people, reception as active (see G 5.0101 cited above) members of a particular church as well as reaffirmations of faith that may be sparked by "decisive moments and stirrings of the Holy Spirit" are not clarified theologically or distinguished liturgically as well as they might be by the church, and are often experienced as being out of sync with the lives of the individuals. The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), puts it this way in a task force document from 1985, "Confirmation understandably now appears, in many of our churches, to be a rite in search of a theology. And the principal cause of this recent problem is that children are now being admitted to the Lord's Supper earlier than before, when confirmation could still be seen as itself the final preparation for being received at the Table." (*Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 2 to the Book of Common Worship*, p. 19)

As a consequence of this development, the TF spent considerable time considering what it might mean to embrace an understanding of the Christian life as an ongoing, lifelong faith journey. The TF reflected on what it might mean for the life of the church to think of the matter that way. Above all, what it means, the TF thinks, is that people should be given repeated opportunities to affirm their faith and to be supported in their faith development from infancy through adulthood. With regard to young people, special attention must be given to psychosocial development during adolescence in order to determine the best plan for supporting faith development. As the life circumstances and responsibilities of Christians change over time, the context for their faith changes and the affirmations of faith manifest themselves in evolving practices of the visible means of grace.

In the view of the TF, as persons live out their lives in faith with opportunities for repeated “affirmations of faith,” the more the faith development of Christians would be strengthened. Because the *Book of Order* provides the guidelines for the Reformed theology of baptism or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant and the *Book of Common Worship* provides the public services to celebrate these events, the TF recognizes the essential value of the church using these Reformed standards in the process of preparing for and celebrating professions or reaffirmations of faith.

## **B. The Role of Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith.**

### 1. Overview

The TF recognizes that in the Reformed tradition, youth profession or reaffirmation of faith has been related theologically to infant baptism and reception of the Lord’s Supper. Some brief but essential observations about infant baptism and reception of the Lord’s Supper are offered in the section “What a Life Journey of Reaffirmations of Faith Might Look Like.”

The TF understands that youth in profession or reaffirmation of faith classes can span a very wide range of adolescent development (ages 10-18). Ideally this offers two opportunities for education and public profession of faith. The first would be a profession of faith by young adolescents (5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders).

A second opportunity could be for mid to older adolescents (early high school) following an intensive period of education. Traditionally, the profession or reaffirmation of faith by mid to older adolescents (early high school) is also associated with moving into active membership\* in the congregation. The active aspect is signaled by being placed on the active rolls, voting and being eligible for elected office within the congregation. Frequently, however, the active aspect is not of any great practical significance to the young person or to the congregation. The problem this poses is that if there is no practical difference, this can undercut the significance of their profession of faith.

\*According to the Book of Order active membership commences with a profession of faith. Use of the word “active” was also noted as problematic because the TF recognizes

that younger children are also active as baptized members of the church community and active in its programs and mission.

## 2. Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith

Traditionally the church has offered to young adolescents a public opportunity to join a particular church after a period of intensive education. For those who were raised in a church environment, it is not uncommon for baptized infants to mature through a number of years of church school education until a point before or during adolescence when they feel the Spirit urging them to profess publicly their faith.

Ideally this act should be the product of a conviction that is strongly held and well understood. But experience suggests that often something else is happening. Many participate in profession or reaffirmation of faith classes because of peer and parental pressure and the weight of tradition. The TF does not attempt to distinguish or judge the motivations that lead youth to participate in the educational process and/or the services of profession or reaffirmation of faith. Individuals can vary greatly in their development and in their desires to be identified with Christianity or with a particular church, and they should be treated according to their individual needs.

In caring for its youth, churches have created opportunities of a concentrated education period leading to a public profession. These classes are commonly referred to as “confirmation” classes. Also appearing in these classes are individuals who may not have participated in church school classes and thus may be even more deficient than those raised in the church in their biblical, ethical, theological, and ecclesiastical knowledge.

The TF also acknowledges that various approaches are taken in offering opportunities for first public profession depending on church size, the number of adolescent youth, interest in the classes and resources of the particular church.

## 3. Adolescent Development and Pedagogical Style

The TF spent some time examining the psychosocial development of older preteens and young teens. In particular young teens are increasingly asserting their independence, their thirst to explore and test boundaries of all types, their ability for abstract thinking, their initiation of activities, and their self-management including interaction with those whom they find sexually attractive. These concerns must be taken into account in an educational setting. See Appendix III for materials on adolescent development that the TF found helpful.

Increasingly the TF is cognizant that secondary schools include curriculum items that explore the differing religions of the world. In doing so there is, frequently, a stress on the elements of commonality. These explorations of history, religion and cultures frequently carry with them values of fairness (personal and societal), equality, even-handedness and consistency. As young people begin to mature in their moral reasoning

they can be quick to identify hypocrisy, intolerance and social justice issues. There can be a special quickness to question authority.

The TF recognizes that youth are receiving extensive education in secondary schools about these matters, but have limited knowledge of the Bible, church and theology. Many of the church's youth, as well as adults, do not understand the Reformation ("Are not all non-Catholic churches reformed?"), the role of tradition, priest, hierarchical government in the Roman Catholic tradition ("Does authority flow up or down?") nor the fundamental differences in worldview among many major faiths (Do Christians, Hindus and Buddhists share a common world view?" "What is the difference between Methodists and Presbyterians?"). As illustration, attached in Appendix IV, are some materials adapted by a public school history teacher for use in a "confirmation" class.

In contrast to a teacher in the secondary schools who is required to be noncommittal to a particular faith or tradition, it is important that the teachers of preparation for profession or reaffirmation of faith classes bear witness in stating what they believe as they guide the students in articulating what may be fairly inchoate faith statements.

It is hard to exaggerate how much impact education in the secondary schools, with its neutral, even-handed style of presentation, contrasts with a style of presentation by a teacher in the church affirming a faith commitment. It is especially important that profession or reaffirmation of faith teachers be well versed in their faith content in order to present effectively a faith position. The students are likely to gravitate to the most controversial topics, thus requiring careful preparation by the instructors of both the material they plan to cover as well as what is likely to arise.

Frequently there is resistance to the advocacy of a particular theology and doctrine. The teachers must both move and engage the individuals as well as bear witness to their faith. This witnessing stance however will be markedly different from the teaching stance received in school. The mere change in stance will both attract and repel, making attention to pedagogy even more important. In any case the teacher must take each student as s/he presents her or himself.

#### 4. Findings on the Current Situation

The TF finds:

- little common understanding of the purpose and method of approaching youth profession or reaffirmation of faith and thus confusion for churches, young people, parents, Christian educators and pastors. Parents may see youth profession or reaffirmation of baptismal covenant as a rite of passage; youth may see it as an expectation of their parents and the church; and the session may see it as tradition. Often viewed as a stand-alone educational experience, the education leading up to profession or reaffirmation of faith is frequently not well integrated into the childhood and adult education programming and does not usually involve a component for parents.

- a wide variety of understandings of how youth profession or reaffirmation of faith fits into the evolving life of youth, their parents or their church community.
- a wide variety of understandings of how youth profession or reaffirmation of faith is connected to participation as adult members of the congregations (committees, etc). If it is such a “big event,” how come the next Sunday feels so much the same?
- confusion about the age-appropriateness of profession of faith and active church membership
- confusion regarding the content of a profession or reaffirmation of faith class. The elements of biblical knowledge, Reformed history and theology, mission practices, local church history and culture and church government are all present to a greater or lesser degree depending largely on the instructor, length of the class (4 weeks to 9 months) and interest of the students. There is little or no consistency in profession or reaffirmation of faith instruction between churches and sometimes not within the same church from teacher to teacher.
- a wide variety of emphases on the application of Reformed principles to the world of today’s youth. What aspects of our Reformed heritage should be emphasized?
- a wide variety of approaches to education and preparation. For example, small churches may integrate more with general membership classes or provide a one-on-one or mentoring experience while churches with large numbers of youth conduct separate classes.
- little or no training for profession or reaffirmation of faith class teachers, especially laity. Instructors have no community of learning, infrequent opportunities to take training in content and pedagogy, and even no way to contact others who are teaching profession or reaffirmation of faith classes. As a result, new instructors often feel overwhelmed.

### **C. What a Life Journey of Reaffirmations of Faith Might Look Like**

The TF cannot state strongly enough the necessity of parental involvement in a child’s Christian education at every step up until maturity. *Every profession or reaffirmation of faith by a child or an adolescent should be accompanied by education by and for the parents or guardians.* It is the parents’ or guardians’ responsibility to nurture children in the faith and the church’s responsibility to assist parents and guardians in preparing to fulfill their obligation.

## 1. Baptism of Infants and Children

While there are youth and adults who will not have been baptized as infants, in churches of the Reformed tradition many youth and adults who profess their faith have received this sacrament prior to their preteen years.

When an infant is baptized, the infant's parents affirm their faith and agree to rear the child in the Christian faith. The importance of preparation of parents for bringing a child to Baptism cannot be overstated. It prepares the parents for their supporting role in the child's life journey of faith.

## 2. Education for Participation at the Table

Education about the meaning and significance of participation at the Table is one of those times in a young child's life when the parents of the child and the church should take a serious and carefully planned approach to learning. While the Presbyterian church has stated that partaking of the meal should be open to children at any age, and while the TF agrees that there is a mystery surrounding this sacrament and that no one can fully understand its significance, it does not appear that the church has done a good job of educating children properly about the meaning and significance of the sacrament. Many children come to worship as preschoolers and kindergartners, and their parents find themselves in a dilemma when the children are invited to participate at the Table and may not understand its meaning. The practices of education for this sacrament vary widely, although many churches do provide it in the young years (ages 4-8).

The result of a lack of solid sacramental education is a sense that the sacrament is optional and less important rather than a gift and an opportunity to stand in awe of the majesty of God's offer. Education for the sacrament of communion has been neglected and needs to be significantly strengthened.

## 3. Younger Youth Professions of Faith

As children enter preadolescence, that is 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, there is often a strong desire to identify with larger groups. It is appropriate that a first Public Profession of Faith be combined with a program of education for the child. It is also recommended that education for parents be instituted which parallels that of the child. In *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith* (1980) John Westerhoff, one of the most recognized experts in the field of Christian education of the last 30 years and a former editor of the journal of the Religious Education Association, outlines a typology of faith development which the TF has found helpful. Westerhoff's theory proposes three expanding rings of growth: affiliative faith, searching faith and mature faith. This first public profession often grows out of an affiliative faith phase of development when preadolescents feel a strong loyalty to authority and institutions. Profession of faith by preadolescents is developmentally appropriate, both psychosocially and in their growing faith journey.

However, it may be less appropriate for active membership roles. The TF acknowledged a tension with the *Book of Order*'s criteria on active membership.

#### 4. The Dilemma of Older Youth Profession of Faith or Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant

While the TF has been of one mind about the life journey of faith, educating parents for a child's baptism, educating children for coming to the Table, and educating younger youth for a first public profession of faith, there is a difference of opinion among the TF members about the church's expectation for a profession of faith or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant during mid to older adolescence. Certainly it has been common practice to offer "confirmation" classes at the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> grade level, which is paralleled by the profession of faith described above at the younger youth level, and this practice is certainly common in other traditions as well. Although the TF has been unable to resolve the tension, at this point the issues will be lifted up for further discussion in the life of the church.

There are two issues with which the TF wrestled. The first issue is whether or not to prepare mid and older adolescents through an educational class for a profession of faith or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, which would be celebrated in a rite of the church. Now that receiving the sacrament for the first time has been separated from making a first public profession of faith, the church is left only with educating for a public profession of faith. While there may be individuals who would wish to do so at this age, the psychosocial and faith development of many mid and older adolescents is often in conflict with the act of ascribing to a particular creed. For the church to expect a mid or older adolescent to align himself or herself with a traditional creed or confession of the church at a time in that person's development that is marked with individuation either renders the profession or reaffirmation of faith false or encourages a profession of faith that strays too far from the church's creeds and confessions.

The second issue is found in the church's understanding of "active" membership in the church. Although the *Book of Order* makes a distinction between baptized and active members of the church, the TF finds some of that distinction to be artificial in practice. Baptized members, including children, participate in the work and worship of the church as much as active members. The shift to active membership seems, in practice, to indicate the right to vote and hold office and to be eligible for a per capita assessment for the denomination. While these marks of active membership are important, they are not more important than the marks of a baptized member, nor do they seem to hold particular fascination for adolescents. In fact, just the opposite seems to be true. Many mid and older adolescents seem far more concerned about professing faith that is fully owned, than about voting rights.

In this point of view the journey of faith would include profession of faith with or without active membership rights at the younger youth age described above. Mid to older adolescence would be a time for digging critically into the questions of the faith, guided by the Bible and the confessions, but not being asked to settle the questions. Critical

thinking about biblical and theological material would be encouraged without a prescribed outcome of public profession of faith. Joint participation by parents and their mid to older adolescents in a class which raises these questions could go a long way toward achieving healthy discourse about these matters in the home as well as at church.

In addition to assisting mid to older adolescents in their questioning, the church should support older youth as they make the transition from middle school to high school and from high school to the next phase of life through recognition and prayer. If a first profession of faith were not made during the younger youth years, then a first profession of faith could wait until young adulthood when persons are ready again to be called to commitment. Voting responsibilities could be assigned at a particular age for adolescents or would accompany a profession of faith for adults.

On the other hand, many members of the TF sense a great responsibility to provide an opportunity as adolescents move into abstract thinking to set aside a time and a place for reexamination of the church's creeds and confessions in light of the church's history, worship, government and practice. As a result of a new or renewed understanding of the church's beliefs there may be the recognition on the part of the teen and the church that a public profession of faith is an appropriate response to a new stage of growth in faith.

As high schoolers (typically 14-18 years old) come to desire fuller participation in a particular church, accepting the rights and responsibilities, a formal joining of the particular congregation is appropriate. Marking that moment with education, baptism or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant, a reception into active membership by the congregation and placement on the rolls as an active member independent of parents offers a distinct developmental opportunity for the congregation and adolescent to celebrate. Again, education for parents which parallels that of the adolescent is highly recommended.

However the dilemma is resolved by churches, the TF agrees that adolescence is an appropriate time to learn and practice the marks of membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA). This approach provides adolescents with an experience of the visible means of grace, which can be reflected upon with peers, parents and teachers. The support offered to youth by mentors in the church, whether by design or spontaneous, can effectively enhance the life journey of adolescents in any of the scenarios explored above. Careful selection and preparation of mentors is essential in order for a mentoring program to work effectively, often through years beyond the assigned periods.

##### 5. Adult Profession of Faith and Affirmation of Baptismal Covenant

Typically for adults who come to a particular congregation desiring to be baptized, profess or reaffirm the baptismal covenant and live a life of faith, churches have membership, seekers, new members or other such labeled classes prior to public profession and joining as active members. The church must accept greater responsibility for educating and nurturing younger, mid-life and maturing adults in taking this step into

a deeper life of faith and practice. Finding ways to celebrate appropriately those moments and support the person in responding after a reaffirmation of faith would be ideal.

Recent research by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), available at [www.pcusa.org](http://www.pcusa.org), indicates that at least half of all Presbyterians come to the PCUSA from other religious traditions or no tradition at all. When adults are ready to explore the differences among denominations and the importance of understanding what it means to identify with a tradition and, particularly the Reformed tradition, the church should provide an educational opportunity which may result in a profession or reaffirmation of faith. Even those who were baptized as infants and professed faith as a child or adolescent often express a strong desire to better understand the particular tradition with which they identify because they have reached a level of life experience which calls for a deeper understanding and commitment.

The TF recognizes there are searching and maturing adults who need a significantly different education program as they approach baptism, profession or reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. Adults who are in the maturing phase of their faith journey should be supported in reexamining their questions and convictions. Of course a strong adult education program supplements this.

The church should identify those persons or groups, such as pastors, elders, deacons, Stephen Ministers, and committee chairs, among others, who may be alert to the transition cycles in a person's life when s/he might be most open to the stirrings of the Spirit. Frequently these points are joined with educational efforts that increase the individual understanding of the church's theology and mission as well as the practices of grace.

## 6. Summary

While there is no right age for a person to make his or her first public profession of faith we strongly encourage the provision of opportunities beginning with 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents and continuing through older years. Upon reflection, the TF realized that sections 2 to 5 describe celebrations within a sanctified life, about which John Calvin taught. By so doing churches anticipate and offer individuals of all ages and church backgrounds the opportunity to profess their faith in an educated manner. It is also appropriate that these first public professions of faith whether as a preteen, early teen or much older adult be treated by the congregation as an opportunity to celebrate with the appropriate services provided by the *Book of Common Worship*.

This would change the context of youth profession of faith or reaffirmation of baptismal covenant from a "last chance to educate and cram it all into their heads" into a point in a life long journey of education and periodic reaffirmations as one's life unfolds. These moments may come frequently or less so in individual lives and should be treasured and honored by the person and the congregation.

Thus youth profession of faith or reaffirmation of faith may be the first in a series of adult affirmations and reaffirmations of the baptismal covenant of grace. Seen as the first, it does not have to be viewed as the end but as the beginning and so the start of a life lived in the Spirit. This might well reduce the pressure to pour a lifetime's worth of education into a few short weeks.

## **D. Issues Regarding Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith**

### 1. Approaches to Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith Classes

A wide variety of models and approaches seem to be appropriate based on the demographics of the individual church, the understanding by the session of the role of youth profession or reaffirmation of faith and the structure of the Christian education program. Some churches prefer a year long course or a semester course or a youth and adult mixed course or any number of other approaches. Many formats are acceptable as long as the understanding is that this is a first profession of faith and the beginning of an adult life of faith.

### 2. Tenets of Reformed Christianity

The TF wrestled with what might be the essential tenets of Reformed Christianity taught in an age appropriate way in a youth class. (See Appendix V for suggested reading in this area.) In many ways the participants of the education course and time available help define the content. Some of the more distinctive Reformed tenets such as the sovereignty of God, reliance on Scripture (*sola scriptura*), the lordship of Jesus Christ, covenant community, election, self-governing, ascribing to confessions, study of the Bible under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and within the life of the community and the ordination of laity who serve to lead the congregation in worship and mission would be taught in more depth. If the participants are unschooled in the Bible and have a naïve understanding of their profession, then the course content may necessarily be simplified. It is likely that classes will contain individuals with a wide range of backgrounds.

In addition to biblical background and basic teaching about the doctrine of the church, younger and older youth should learn the story of our Reformed heritage, which undergirds the doctrinal beliefs of the church, for each supports the other. Knowing the story of the Reformation, the development of the particular branch called "Reformed," its movement within Europe and to Scotland, then finally to America provides a context for discussing the theology of the church and how it has evolved through the years. An introduction to the individuals who influenced the direction of the Reformed tradition from its inception to today makes real the challenges and conflicts which have led to schism and reunion over doctrinal issues. In short, youth need to know that faith matters, that through the centuries people of good faith have disagreed and have shed blood and died for their beliefs, that the church has reformed and will always be being reformed because it is subject to the word of God and God's work in the covenant community.

### 3. Pedagogical Approach

The pedagogical method of such classes should model the essential tenets of the Reformed faith. The classes should be biblically, historically and doctrinally based and encourage an informed discussion on the interpretation and application of course content to current life activities. They should engender a sense of call and function in ways that reflect a covenantal community based on respect, prayer, and the priesthood of all believers, among other qualities of the community. Regular participation in Reformed worship should be understood as one of the expectations.

It should be expected that class participants could give age-appropriate responses to such questions as: Why be a Christian? What difference does faith make? What does this mean in my everyday life? Why should I be part of the church? Why am I a Presbyterian?

The participants should begin to understand what it means to be a witness, with that behavior well modeled by the teacher(s), as well as gain critical tools in shaping their own approach to living (start with the Bible, apply critical thinking, seek guidance from traditions of the community of faith). Frequently focusing on the moral, ethical and political issues they face daily is a helpful way to engage young adolescents. The TF would encourage teaching styles that best engage youth and thus are not primarily lecture.

Please see Appendices VI and VII for a list of available curriculum and outlines of class content.

### 4. Desired Outcome

The goal is for youth going through profession or reaffirmation of faith classes to begin to grasp and practice the visible means of grace such as prayer, mission outreach, participation in corporate worship, acts of compassion and justice, stewardship of self and resources, and evangelism. In any case, the goal of the class is to have the individuals proudly publicly claim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and commit themselves to live a Christian life.

The TF recognizes this to be a tall order in a world which offers youth and adults many options ranging from “whatever, as long as you don’t hurt someone,” to detailed prescriptions of how to live each moment. Inviting our youth and all worshipping adults into a community in which conversation, prayer with God, reading of scripture and shared wrestling with how to conduct our individual and corporate lives is more challenging and exciting than living either “rudderless” or within a straightjacket. It is even more challenging when the focused audience is young teens seeking safe outlets to express their growing individuation apart from their families.

The TF acknowledges the weight of youth and parental expectations that something is expected of the church as a youth reaches the beginning of his or her teenage years. It is also appropriate to have elements of parental participation, leadership and education as

part of the youth profession or reaffirmation of faith process. This would be especially positive for those youth and parents who were involved in infant baptism.

## 5. Overview of a Life Journey Incorporating Youth Profession or Reaffirmation of Faith

In each step along the journey it is essential that a planned program of Christian education for parents and their children be implemented. This same stress on education should apply to adults without children as well.

### Life Journey Model

- + Infant Baptism
- + Participation at the Table
- + Baptism or Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant Class and Public Profession of Faith (5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade)\*
- + Baptism or Reaffirmation of Baptismal Covenant for middle and older youth\*
- + Baptism or Reaffirmations of Baptismal Covenant at “times of the Spirit’s stirring”\*

\*Active, meaning governing, church membership is allowed by the Book of Order at any of these stages.

## **E. Recommendations**

- 1) The Reformed Institute should help congregations build a new understanding of what the church is about when it prepares people for baptism, first profession of faith and reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant and for active church membership.
- 2) The Institute should help promote the Profession/Reaffirmation of Faith concept and language in place of confirmation.
- 3) The Reformed Institute should establish a community of learning for those teaching youth Profession of Faith classes. Classes in content and teaching techniques for Profession of Faith instructors would be offered.
- 4) The Reformed Institute should provide to its constituent churches access to a person(s) who can assist youth Profession of Faith instructors. The Reformed Institute should consider means for creating such access.
- 5) The Reformed Institute should establish annual, or more frequent, training opportunities for Profession of Faith leaders. These gatherings would focus on content,

appropriate activities and pedagogy. The Reformed Institute should keep the presbytery and all NCP churches informed of such events.

6) The Reformed Institute should advocate the development of a curriculum that includes a) intellectual background, b) age and content appropriate activities, and c) solid pedagogical approaches. This could be done by either a) developing appropriate modules and/or b) agitating for higher judicatories to do so.

7) The Reformed Institute should develop a short set of curricular materials that outlines the principles of the Reformed faith in age-appropriate language for several age categories.

8) The Reformed Institute should strengthen sacramental education for young children, their parents and guardians, and for interested adults as well.

9) The Reformed Institute should encourage congregations to explore, encourage and educate older preteens to express professions of faith.

10) The Reformed Institute should encourage congregations to explore, encourage and educate younger and older adults in making Reaffirmations of their Baptismal Covenant.

11) The Reformed Institute should address approaches to creating a stronger sense of the Reformed tradition within Presbyterian congregations so that well educated youth are supported before and after the public Profession of Faith or Reaffirmation of their Baptismal Covenant.

12) The Reformed Institute should create a rigorous program of instruction for youth, teachers and parents in criticism of the Bible, thus supporting a healthy environment for first Profession of Faith or Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant.

13) The Reformed Institute should create a plan for involving adolescents as strong members of the church.

## APPENDICES

- I. List of Task Force Members
- II. From *Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism: Supplemental Liturgical Resource 2 to the Book of Common Worship* for The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) 1985
- III. Understanding Adolescents and Adolescent Development Theories
- IV. Supporting Resources
- V. List of Resources for Further Reading on Reformed Tenets
- VI. Available Curriculum
- VII. Class Outlines