

RETHINKING CONFIRMATION

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Introduction

Confirmation is and has been a part of the ministry tradition of my church – Anglican – from its beginning; and has been a part of the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, from which it which it broke away, since the 3rd Century CE.¹ It is not the Rite of Initiation in the tradition. That prerogative belongs to baptism. Nor is it a supplementary rite. Rather, traditionally, it is the Christian parallel to the *Bar Mitzvah*; the rite of passage in the Jewish tradition in which a youth, at age 12, personally assumes the “yoke of the law”.² Confirmation, similarly, provides Christian youth with the opportunity to take a personal stand for Christ – to confess, personally, and publicly the faith of Christ crucified that parents and godparents confessed on their behalf during their baptism as an infant or young child.

Up until the mid-1970’s, Confirmation was also the rite of initiation into the mysteries of the Holy Eucharist. As such, it marked the end of Sunday School since the initiated became a part of the adult congregation, with full rights of ‘membership’ in the body of the Church. Unfortunately, for many, it also appeared to mark the beginning of the end of their full time attendance at worship services; particularly with the increasing secularization of the society, and the competition from sports and leisure pursuits for attention on Sundays.

With liturgical reform throughout the Anglican Communion during the 1970’s came an understanding that since the rite of Baptism was the full and complete initiation into the church no further preparation was required to participate in the Eucharist; and that, indeed, young children were welcome to the table if their parents so wished. Moreover, it came to be believed that the appropriate age for confirmation was eighteen or older, when the young person

¹ Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987), 102

² *ibid*,

could make an adult decision for Christ and the Church. Unfortunately, the apparent result of that decision has been the precipitate decline in confirmations, since most young people age eighteen or so had long since ceased to attend church at all, as Reginald Bibby has revealed time and again in his sociological studies into declining membership in the Canadian church.

In the particular ministry setting of the writer – the Anglican Church in Sri Lanka – the practice is still to confirm young people in their early to mid teens. The specific setting is a home for destitute children (The Paynter Children's Home), a residential facility for some twenty-nine children of both sexes. Recently, ten of them have completed 'Confirmation Classes', and have indeed been confirmed – three boys and seven girls, ages thirteen to eighteen. Despite careful and thorough preparation by the priest, and a glorious and moving service, there has been little apparent change in their behaviour; particularly among the boys. They are still disobedient, thoughtless and selfish in many ways. They whack each other for the slightest transgression. They steal if they can get away with it. The girls are less obvious in their behaviour, but are by no means angelic.

Yes, some of this is due to the fact they have – for the most part – been street children, and are living in an institutional environment. But they like church. Church is the highlight of their Sunday. The older children are the Church Choir. Some of them are acolytes. Moreover, they attend chapel at the Home twice a day, where they sing lustily and pray, extemporaneously, quite exquisitely – even the youngest children. However, it is clear that something did not take during the confirmation classes. Indeed, it would appear that they were seen as just another boring class to be got through, not a life-transforming process.

It appears, to the writer, that confirmation needs to be rethought, if it is to be effective. The "old" process, as it is perpetuated in Sri Lanka, does not appear to have much of a transforming effect. The "new" process of adult

confirmation, as it is practiced in Canada, appears to have a negative effect as evidenced by declining church membership.

The purpose of this paper is to “rethink” confirmation. To begin, let us consider what confirmation is supposed to be and do.

What Confirmation is

Confirmation, is a sacrament of initiation that marks the beginning of a journey toward a deeper knowledge of God. Confirmation candidates join us in claiming our heritage. For years to come, they will bear witness to what loving and believing people have handed on to them—all in the Spirit of God.

First and foremost, Confirmation is a public profession of faith, a “confession” of belief. Public confession of faith is an integral part of Christian belonging. Confirmation is the way some churches make provision for this.³ It actually consists of 2 confirmations not one: The candidate confirms his or her Christian profession; and the Lord, through the medium of the Bishop, confirms his protection and strength for the battle ahead.⁴

Secondly, Confirmation is a domestic rite bringing the candidate into full accreditation and recognition within a particular branch of the church. Whereas baptism is not denominationally oriented – one is baptized into Christ - Confirmation brings one into full communicating and voting standing in a denomination.⁵

Thirdly, Confirmation is a commissioning for service. It is NOT a passing out parade. Indeed, the liturgy contains a prayer that the candidate may continue Christ’s forever and daily increase in his Holy Spirit.⁶

These purposes are laudable. Indeed, they would seem to be essential to the ongoing health of a Christian community; whether they are to be fulfilled through Confirmation, or through some other process. For the churches that have a tradition of Confirmation, it would appear to be more effective to

³ Green, 111

⁴ *ibid*, 105

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

strengthen what is already a part of their fabric, than to attempt to develop something entirely different.

As to the appropriate age for Confirmation – teen or adult - Andy Hickford, in Essential Youth, has noted that young people are the single largest group of non-Christians regularly attending Church.⁷ Later he notes that statistically most Christians are converted in their teenage years.⁸ Ministering to a group with the highest potential of conversion would appear to be just plain common sense.

If we can accept the continued need for Confirmation, and that it is appropriate to administer the rite in the teenage years – as the Jews do with Bar Mitzvah – what remains is to examine the program currently being used, and evaluate it in the light of what is known about youth and its trials and tribulations.

The Current Confirmation Program

In Sri Lanka, the Confirmation curriculum was revised in 1997, and published under the title, *“Go into the world in peace ... Be of Good Courage: Confirmation Notes – Cycle 1 and Cycle 2”*. The new material is in use in both the Diocese of Colombo, in which jurisdiction the Paynter Home is located, and the Diocese of Kurunegala. Cycle 1 is a pre-confirmation program, consisting of 15 lessons, each of one and one half hours duration, organized into 6 broad themes as outlined below:

1. Initiation
 - a. Link between Baptism and Confirmation
2. The Faith and the Trinity
 - a. God, Creation and Environment
 - b. Jesus, Person of Jesus
 - c. The Ministry of Jesus
 - d. God the Holy Spirit

⁷ Andy Hickford, Essential Youth, (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1998), 112

⁸ *ibid*, 196

3. Discipleship and Devotional Life
 - a. Conversion
 - b. Discipleship
 - c. Stewardship
 - d. Vocation and Career
4. The Bible
 - a. Introduction to the Bible
 - b. Prayer and Quiet Time
5. Sacrament and Liturgy
 - a. Eucharist
 - b. Liturgy and Lay Participation
6. The Church
 - a. History of the Church in Sri Lanka
 - b. The Church's Calendar and Ornaments

The intention is to impart the important teachings of the Church in a group discussion format, led by teams of clergy and trained lay people. Homework questions are provided, to be done with the parent's guidance and assistance, in order to confirm understanding of the material taught.

The program is far more than the one the writer experienced, which was principally memorizing the Catechism. The material covered is, it is felt, appropriate to the purpose of equipping young candidates to take their place as full members of a particular denomination. Cycle 2, a seven lesson post-confirmation program, is intended to reinforce that knowledge from the perspective of an initiate who is now experiencing full participation in the life of the Church.

On the surface, the Confirmation program, as revised, appears to be well-suited to the task for which it was designed. However, there remains the actual experience of the candidates from the Paynter Home in whom there was little, if any discernible change in behaviour following the program. In order to evaluate

the program more thoroughly and propose any change, let us consider the matter from the perspective of the youth.

Understanding Youth

Paul Borthwick, in Youth and Missions, notes that among youth friendship is the top priority – the glue that holds youth society together. Only those considered peers are considered “real” friends.⁹

Young people, he notes, do not integrate their faith. Many make no connection between Sunday faith and Friday night choices. After all, they have grown up in a school system that teaches faith is a private matter which should not interfere with the public areas of our lives. Moreover, they see no contradiction in this.¹⁰

Generally speaking, they are low in initiative. They have a sense of entitlement, without the expectation of the toil and hardship their own parents experienced, that leads to a low desire for leadership, and a tendency towards apathy. Me-ism, Borthwick observed, is very alive in youth culture today.¹¹ Perhaps, then, it is no surprise that students desire independence, both from their parents and from any absolutes, which bodes ill for organized religion. As Don Posterski has noted, “Religion is often viewed as an enemy of freedom. In the perception of many, God has an anti-freedom reputation.”¹²

Young people today are pragmatic; however, relativistic thinking and non-integrated faith often reduces Christian faith to an “it works for me” attitude. For example, “Mission / Service is good because it makes me feel good about myself.” Subjective feelings, then, have become the basis for service; rather than an objective, ideological commitment, or being obedient.¹³

On top of everything else, Borthwick feels that students are frustrated. Many choices are open to them at younger and younger ages - heterosexual,

⁹ Paul Borthwick, Youth and Missions, (Waynesboro: OM Literature, 2000 ed.), 16-17

¹⁰ *ibid*, 20

¹¹ *ibid*, 21-22

¹² *ibid*, 22

¹³ *ibid*, 23

homosexual or bi-sexual “options”, examples of peers who are alcoholics and drug users. They are, he believes, progressively frustrated with their own experience in life. What they have been led to expect about life is not occurring.¹⁴

Borthwick believes that to work effectively with youth, we must:

1. Take them seriously - if we treat them as adults, they will be more inclined to behave that way. They passionately desire to be taken seriously.¹⁵
2. Help them Integrate, to relate faith to every area of their lives; not by making them feel guilty, but by helping them realize faith in Christ affects all of life.¹⁶
3. Show them how to make a difference in practical and realistic ways. We must let them serve.¹⁷
4. Give youth a place of belonging - youth group projects, teamwork and active involvement in the Church. Only with involvement do they feel they belong.¹⁸
5. Tell students the truth; that Christianity does not provide easy answers. Service may not be fun, but growth often comes more through hardship.

Borthwick quotes Ernest Becker, who said “Youth is not made for pleasure but for heroism”. He goes on to say, to understand youth, respond to their needs and involve them in being heroes.¹⁹ “Teenagers”, he says, “must be challenged by the Great Commission of Jesus Christ – challenged to dedicate themselves to the fulfillment of Christ’s mission on earth ...they must be given the chance to help solve the problems of repression, ignorance, and superstition that they might help the downtrodden to find opportunity to find life, fulfillment and redemption in Christ.”²⁰ The educators from the Association of Church Missions Committee appear to agree when they said, “Youth are

¹⁴ Borthwick, 24

¹⁵ *ibid*, 26

¹⁶ *ibid*, 28

¹⁷ *ibid*, 30

¹⁸ *ibid*, 31

¹⁹ *ibid*, 33

²⁰ *ibid*, 42

looking for a life to emulate. Youth leaders, teachers, parents, pastors, Christian nationals and missionaries need to present integrated, authentic, consistent lives as world Christians for youth to emulate.”²¹ In Borthwick’s words, “As Jesus said to his disciples, and as Paul said to his, we need to say to the young people of our ministries, “Follow me”. Nothing motivates students more than a real model.”²² In other words, we need to make them disciples.

Making Disciples

Howard A. Snyder, in “New Wineskins”, said “Many churches do not share the gospel effectively because their communal experience of the gospel is too weak and tasteless to be worth sharing. It does not excite the believer to the point where he wants to witness, and ... is not all that attractive to the unbeliever.”²³ The resulting lack of commitment, according to David Watson, is marked by shallowness of fellowship, flabbiness in evangelism, absence of body ministry, neglect of spiritual gifts, sterility in worship, feebleness in prayer, and general lack of love.²⁴ He goes on to note that the reason cults are growing while church is declining is that cults call for strong discipleship, as do the revolutionary and terrorist groups capturing so much of the world.²⁵ It may be no accident that suicide bombers are overwhelmingly young and passionately committed to the righteousness of their cause, to the point of being willing to die for it; as were Perpetua and Felicitas, two of the Early Church Martyrs.

David Watson notes that without a strong commitment to discipleship there can be no authentic Christian community, and without such a community there can be no effective mission.²⁶ The importance of this is revealed in the

²¹ Borthwick, 53

²² *ibid*, 54

²³ Howard A. Snyder, “New Wineskins”, quoted in David Watson, “Discipleship”, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 41

²⁴ *ibid*, 68

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*, 42

fact that It was not the doctrine, institution or religious activity of the apostles that became the foundation of the church, it was the apostles themselves and the sharing of their lives that pragmatically formed the basis of the Christian church. In their corporate life they came to know Him on a deep, intimate basis. To achieve such knowledge Jesus called his disciples into a living, loving community. This was a top priority as He began task of building the church. They worshipped together, prayed together, worked together and shared their possessions together as various needs rose.²⁷

The disciple, according to Watson, is:

- Willing to serve
- Learning to listen
- Willing to learn
- Willing to be corrected.

He or she:

- Submits to those over him
- Shares life with others in open and honest fellowship
- Is learning humility
- Is learning to examine his or her own life before criticizing others
- Knows his or her weaknesses
- Is learning to accept himself or herself
- Is able to forgive
- Has stickability
- Can be trusted
- Minds his or her own affairs
- Does little things well
- Uses leisure time wisely
- Aims first and foremost to please God
- Is quick to obey when God speaks
- Has faith in God
- Is willing to trust ultimately in the love and faithfulness of God, and

²⁷ Watson, 36

- Has a clear understanding of God's priorities for his or her life.²⁸

This list is, it could be argued, a statement of what the ideal Confirmation initiate should be like. This is what we are trying to achieve by the whole process, to raise young people who meet that description. The question is, "How?". Perhaps the answer lies with Jesus, who is - after all - the primary discipler.

How Jesus Worked

Jesus trained his disciples using the model

- I hear, I forget
- I see, I remember
- I do, I understand²⁹

He loved them, cared for their needs, taught them, corrected them, stimulated their faith, instructed them concerning the kingdom of God, sent them out in his name, encouraged them, listened to them, watched them, guided them; and told them to do the same to each other.³⁰ His teaching style was centred on the learner, not the subject. Learning took place in a community, and the friction in that community added to the learning dynamic. His concern was not the transmission of a fact but the TRANSFORMATION of a person. Moreover, he inseparably related learning to everyday life.³¹ He asked questions to make people think and involved them practically. Practical sessions were followed up by debriefings, and retreats for more learning. Basically, he provided a living example, teaching informally and using opportunities as they arose - particularly questions - to take people deeper in their understanding.³²

He provided an example for his disciples to emulate; and this is, perhaps, the answer we are seeking. In India, farmers plow their fields with a pair of

²⁸ Watson, 75-76

²⁹ *ibid*, 80

³⁰ *ibid*, 36

³¹ Hickford, 153

³² *ibid*, 154

oxen, kept together by a yoke on their necks. When a new ox is trained to the plow - it is yoked with an experienced ox. It is thus compelled to walk in same direction at same speed as experienced ox.³³ In the same way, Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon us.

“Come to me and I will give you rest – all of you who work so hard beneath a heavy yoke. Wear my yoke ... and let me teach you (as the older ox teaches the inexperienced one) ... and you shall find rest for your souls; for I give you only light burdens.” (Mt 11: 28-30 TLB)

In order to improve the Confirmation program, we need to do what Jesus did: make disciples, and provide living examples for them to emulate.

A Proposal to Improve the Confirmation Program

From the writer’s perspective, the problem with the Confirmation program is that it is time limited. It has an end, and once it has ended the initiate is abandoned to his or her own devices; which in a church with a weak and tasteless experience of the gospel can be disastrous. Basically, the initiates are divided and conquered by the relative indifference and lack of commitment of the older congregation. The solution is to provide a continuing program of discipleship, under the guidance of adult mentors. Such a program would not need to replace the existing study module; but would enhance it by providing the opportunity for its practical application in the life of the initiates.

The “*Cursillo*” program provides a model that could be used to meet the perceived needs of youth: to build peer relationships, provide challenge, and provide opportunities for mentorship. *Cursillo* – a three day retreat designed to empower laity to ministry – has a continuing feature called a “Fourth Day Group” – a small group of 4 to 6 persons who agree to meet together weekly to share their faith journey: their study, their observations, their triumphs, their failures, and the things for which they need prayer. Another feature of *Cursillo*

³³ Zac Poonen, Where Do I Go From Here, God?, (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1976), 15

is the *Ultreya* – a gathering of fourth day groups for a common program of renewal and fellowship, held on a periodic basis.

As a *Cursillist*, the writer has experienced the significant sharing and depth of community building that such a program promotes. This program has now been introduced to the recent Confirmation initiates at the Paynter Home, who have agreed to meet together on a weekly basis for the foreseeable future, using the guide attached as Annex A as the guideline for their meeting. As things progress, it is intended to hold the renewal program as a one day retreat, on a periodic basis, to supplement the activities of a youth group that will be starting in the new school term. The youth group is intended to provide opportunities for discipleship through deeds and words – social and community action projects as well as peer evangelism – in addition to the normal fellowship opportunities such groups usually provide. Mentorship opportunities will be provided both in the Fourth Day Groups – initially and until routines are established, an adult leader will facilitate the groups - and in the context of the Youth Group. As time progresses, it is intended that adult leadership be phased out as youth leadership develops. Adults will, of course, remain available as advisors and mentors.

At this point it is too early to know what the results will be.

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FAITH

“without me you can do nothing” Jn 15:5

How have I sought to deepen and live out my Christian Faith?

What experiences allowed me to focus on God’s presence this week and what special message or feeling can I share?

- ☐ Holy Communion
- ☐ Corporate Worship
- ☐ Private meditation or Prayer
- ☐ Spontaneous prayer
- ☐ Family prayers
- ☐ Christian gathering
- ☐ Daily Bible reading
- ☐ Seeking God’s guidance
- ☐ Personal commitment
- ☐ Seeing God in others
- ☐ Sharing my faith
- ☐ Examination of conscience
- ☐ Confirming “Thy will be done”
- ☐ Other ...

At what moment did I feel closest to Christ this week?

STUDY

“Study to show yourself approved unto God ... rightly handling the work of truth” II Tim 2: 15

How have I studied this week?

- ☐ Scripture, spiritual books etc
- ☐ Daily scripture guides
- ☐ Study of my surroundings

What led me to study this week?

- ☐ Planned study schedule or guide
- ☐ Spontaneous study or observation
- ☐ Group study activity, etc

What wisdom or valuable knowledge have I obtained from my study which I can share?

- ☐ Better understanding of my needs
- ☐ Insight on spiritual growth
- ☐ Improved knowledge of relationships
- ☐ Deeper knowledge of God
- ☐ Keys to discipline / self-control
- ☐ Historical insight on scriptures
- ☐ Recognition of human weakness
- ☐ Identification of gifts and blessings
- ☐ Recognition of community needs
- ☐ Messages suggesting Christian action

How does my study relate to God’s kingdom?

- ☐ What message is there for the world?
- ☐ How has my study transformed me?
- ☐ How can I apply what I have learned?

ACTION

“I came not to be served but to serve” Mt 20:28

Were unexpected demands of the week accepted as opportunities for Lay Ministry or service involving:

- ☐ Difficult relationships
- ☐ Unusual work demands
- ☐ Stressful family situations
- ☐ Requests for assistance
- ☐ Moral or ethical positions
- ☐ Defending my faith

Did I undertake or move ahead with planned Christian activity related to:

- ☐ Opportunities to deepen my faith
- ☐ Christian study
- ☐ Bringing Jesus to a friend
- ☐ Encouraging Christian community
- ☐ Supporting my clergy
- ☐ Sharing my faith

Has any of my Christian action resulted in visible results? If so, remember the first letter of Peter 4:11 which states: “In all things so act that the glory may be God’s”

How has God strengthened me through failure?

CHALLENGE

“If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me.” Mt 16:

What does God want me to learn?

What spiritual assistance do I need to pick up my cross and make my life anew in Christ’s image?

How could my prayers focus on my needs?

What do I need to do for growth as a follower of Christ?

- ☐ During the coming week?
- ☐ Tomorrow?
- ☐ Today?

Does my Christian commitment to God’s Kingdom need to involve my:

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Church
- ☐ Workplace
- ☐ Neighbour
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Community’s poor
- ☐ Others ...

Page 1 to Annex A
To “Rethinking Confirmation”

OPENING PRAYERS

Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love.

Send forth your spirit, and they shall be created.

And you shall renew the face of the earth

O God who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy his consolations

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

AMEN

Glory be to the Father and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.

AMEN

CLOSING PRAYERS

Yahweh, Blessed be thy Name.

May your grace be reflected by our lives to flow throughout Your Kingdom.

Lord, let us share ...

- ☐ Our joy in your presence
- ☐ Our burdens to be lightened, and
- ☐ Our wisdom to better serve Your will.

Enable us to grow in Your Spirit, supporting each other as we walk in Your Presence.

As we know when two or more are gathered in Your Name, You are present with us ...

We ask support for our petitions, giving you thanks and praise for your infinite love.

Let us continue in prayer as the spirit moves us ...

- ☐ Thanks
- ☐ Praise
- ☐ Concerns

Let us say the prayer that Jesus taught us ... "Our Father ..."

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore.

AMEN

**DISCOVERY
PRAYER
CARD**

King-Bay Chaplaincy

**Our need is great
For His Kingdom**

Inspiration.....Example, Insight
Encouragement

Sharing.....Joy,Burdens,
Wisdom

Goals.....Objectives,
Commitments

Reality.....Search out God's
Truth

Empathy.....Aspirations,
Difficulties

Acceptance.....Total &
Unconditional

Time.....For Christian
Community

**Christian community guided
by the Holy Spirit ... The key
to spiritual renewal and His
Kingdom on earth.**

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To "Rethinking Confirmation"

