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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

To Continue in the Covenant: Sacramental Practices and Confirmation

Confirmation, the most popular manifestation of the Affirmation of Baptism liturgy, is the point at which the church has provided an opportunity for youth (12 to 14 years of age) to intensify their involvement in the church's community and mission. The *Statement on Sacramental Practices* implicitly raises the question of why we would reserve confirmation to the teenage years *only*. How might we make confirmation a way for *all* of God's baptized people to intensify their relationship to the church? How might we provide opportunities for everyone in the congregation to affirm their baptism?

In the Affirmation of Baptism liturgy (LBW, page 201), the minister addresses those making affirmation: "You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in Holy Baptism?" This question is addressed to all who make affirmation—confirmands, persons restored to membership, new members received into membership from other than Lutheran congregations, worshippers making a corporate renewal of baptismal vows. The question is inclusive of all God's baptized and gathered children, and therefore implies that the baptized *continually* affirm the covenant God has made with them (SP 3.6, 4.10).

In the introduction, *Statement on Sacramental Practices* recognizes that confirmation has been traditionally related to both Baptism and Communion (SP 1.5). However, the church has chosen not to discuss confirmation *within* the *Statement*. By so doing, the church establishes a foundational precept about confirmation's context and relative importance. Baptism and Communion are, themselves, the logical foundations for our concept and practice of confirmation. Confirmation then becomes an opportunity and a rite in which a person may express *continuation in the covenant*, the covenant having been established for us fully by God, in Holy Baptism, and continually renewed and strengthened, in Holy Communion (SP 5.8, 6.9).

Various statements on Baptism and Communion in *Statement on Sacramental Practices* suggest some implications for the Christian's daily walk, in general, and for confirmation practice and attitudes, in particular. Two important issues for confirmation revolve around creating and providing opportunities for persons to: a) affirm their baptism at any age and especially at moments of passage and significance; and b) deepen and intensify their relationship to the church.

Baptism: Daily Remembrance

We must raise our people's awareness about what it means to *daily die to sin and rise to newness of life* as a baptismal remembrance (SP 3.6). Primarily, this means that we must continually assert, in our preaching and teaching, that baptism affords opportunity for a daily remembrance of the covenant God has made with us, and that baptism is given expression in what we say and do each day, in every action and moment. Baptism is not just what was done at the font in some time past. Baptism is not simply *remembering* what happened at the font. Rather, it is a reliving of death and resurrection that occurs in many aspects of our lives.

Devotional and worship opportunities that are seized, *daily*, help introduce and maintain this very present and continuing sense of baptismal spirituality.

Confirmation is a stage in which we focus more closely on what the daily remembrance of baptism means. In our generation, those seeking confirmation do not necessarily fall into the 12 to 14 year-old category familiar to many of us. Fewer people are seeking or desire confirmation at a younger age; many are seeking it at a much later age, *if at all!* Different issues are faced when one does confirmation at age 12, 25 or 39. Those differences must be carefully addressed in each circumstance so that all people are enabled to participate fully at their particular stage of faith development.

In any event, confirmation ministry needs to be much more than an educational programme, whether the focus is on young adolescents or mature adults. Confirmation must include the whole ministry of the church—worship, witness, support and service, as well as learning. A daily remembrance of baptism will include opportunities for involvement in worship, practice in stewardship, outreach into the community, and service to those who require help, care, compassion and nurture.

Worship as Context for Affirmation

The worship life of a congregation is an excellent place wherein corporate affirmation of baptism, on appropriate Sundays and festivals, can be accomplished. The Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints, the Baptism of Our Lord, and the seasons of Lent and Easter come to mind. Weddings and funerals also provide liturgical opportunities for affirmation of baptism (SP 4.10).

It is imperative that people in a confirmation ministry programme be active in the worship life of a congregation, where they may experience, first-hand, a continual liturgical affirmation of baptism in the worship of the gathered assembly of believers (SP 5.6).

Opportunities to celebrate Holy Communion, at rites and moments of passage, and at other significant times of the life journey, help to strengthen the work of the Spirit in our lives, creating opportunity for God to awaken faith and to strengthen people for the work to which they are called in the world (SP 5.3). Weddings and funerals are two obvious occasions when the gifts of the Lord's Supper can be received in celebration and recognition of God's presence in our lives. Congregations need to be prepared, through teaching and worship, so that they are enabled to seize opportunities to deepen their relationship to God and the church.

Eucharistic Hospitality

Holy Communion is not a gift of *human agency*. It is by *Christ's* invitation that Holy Communion is celebrated. Our participation is to be understood as a great and wonderful privilege, boldly entered—into *because* of our baptism (SP 5.8, 6.9).

People in a confirmation programme need to be part of the eucharistic fellowship in the worshipping community.

As well, as we grow, so our understanding of the eucharist grows and changes. Other pilgrims, within the wider Christian community, will enrich that understanding as we allow them. Ecumenical worship, wherever and whenever possible, gives opportunity for such encounters to occur. Ecumenical activities provide for the exchange of ideas and growth in faith. Eucharistic hospitality, as a general principle, sees us more eager to welcome others than to protect our communion tables and assemblies from those who have not previously been admitted (6.13).

Discussion, prayer, worship, education and interaction with Christians of other congregations and denominations are all avenues that may challenge an assembly's practice of communing *only certain people* or *only at a certain age*. A re-thinking of the "age" for first communion, for example, will be a significant opportunity for growth in the life of a congregation.

Growth, as we know, happens slowly, and practices change slowly. Within a congregation, the rewards will be great if any process wherein our eucharistic hospitality is extended more broadly—such as happens when Holy Communion is offered as *the meal of the baptized* as opposed to the meal of those of a certain age, or the meal of those who are Lutheran, or the meal of those who are confirmed...—is approached as an opportunity for *growth*.

Congregations will have to practise pastoral sensitivity as they receive new members or welcome guests who come from a place where the age of first Communion is different. Whether confirmation is practised as the moment to receive first Communion, or not, what must remain important for individuals is a climate which promotes growth in faith and discipleship. Communion can hardly be denied to someone who has already been regularly receiving. The spirituality of earlier reception cannot be denied, or dismissed, because of a given congregation's differing practice (SP 6.10).

Learning as Context for Affirmation

Confirmation ministry and learning ministry are not simply for youth. Rather, they must embrace the whole people of God, regardless of age, so that we may build one-another up in the faith, in reflection of the strength and nourishment that we have been afforded through God's Word and sacraments (SP 6.12). This is an affirmation of faith and affirmation of baptism! As a practical matter, congregations might do well to focus a certain part of the Church Year—Lent, for example—on growth in understanding of Word and Sacrament.

Consider, too, that *catechetics* needs to be separated from confirmation as we approach confirmation practice in our immediate future. Catechetics might be defined as "study of the Catechism," i.e. the sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, the

Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments. Confirmation may include, but must not be restricted to, *catechetics*. Confirmation embraces many other aspects of Christian faith, experience and education. This distinction suggests that catechetics might be included in many areas of the church's ministry, beyond confirmation. Catechetics should be available to persons of all ages, respecting, of course, the cognitive abilities of all concerned.

Pastors, and those involved in learning ministries, need to seek out curricula in which the Catechism may serve as a basis for, or supplement to, teaching. Thus, for example, as Sunday School participants learn more of their faith from a *biblical* perspective, they might also learn more of their faith from a *catechetical* perspective. Sunday School children (ages 4 to 10, for example) are extremely receptive to learning (yes, and even memorizing!) the Catechism, as a part of their Sunday learning programme. This, too, is an affirmation of faith and an affirmation of baptism.

A large part of our relationship with one-another involves passing on the faith. All baptized persons need to be made aware of their role in yielding their faith to others, and to be present as role models for that faith in worship, witness, learning, support and service.

To Continue in the Covenant

Confirmation is practised as one moment of affirmation of baptism, in a life-long series of opportunities, in the lives of the baptized, to affirm their faith. With the dis-association of confirmation and Holy Communion, the importance of confirmation as a solitary affirmation of baptism may be lessened. Other life stages, however, gain importance as fertile ground for affirmation. While the dramatic sense of finality connected with confirmation may be lessened, other opportunities are provided to affirm our faith. *To continue in the covenant*, congregations will need to provide opportunities for renewal of baptismal vows and confirmation for all ages. This will mark the *beginning* of our taking seriously our *Statement On Sacramental Practices*.

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