

Confirmation: Overview

INTRODUCTION

Confirmation refers to the decision a person makes to respond to God's grace with intentional commitment, publicly reaffirming his or her baptismal vows before the congregation. Most confirmands are youth between the ages of eleven and fourteen, who have been nurtured in the church since their baptism as an infant or young child. Most churches offer a deliberate time of preparation before this service. During confirmation class, confirmands learn about the meaning of Christian faith; the history and teachings and The United Methodist Church; and an explanation of the baptismal and membership vows they will be professing.

BACKGROUND

Baptism and Confirmation

In the early church, baptism, the laying on of hands and Holy Communion were unified into a single ritual moment. Over time the three actions were separated from each other. In Christendom (from the fourth century to the modern period when the church occupied a central place in Western culture), baptism of infants was assumed. Laying-on of hands as a confirming sign was left for later, partially because only the bishop could confirm and he might not be available until sometime later. Gradually, first communion happened at a different time.

In the current ritual in our hymnal and book of worship, these separated actions have been reunified in "Services of the Baptismal Covenant." Confirmation is both a strengthening sign enacted by the church and a profession of faith by the person. It is a response of faith to the gracious covenant into which God baptizes us.

-An excerpt from "*What Is the Appropriate Age for Baptism and for Confirmation?*" by Daniel Benedict.

Confirmation as Preparation

Sometimes United Methodists use the word *confirmation* as reference to the class or preparatory time before the ritual of confirmation. This time or group experience should more accurately be called "confirmation preparation." What is the person preparing for? *By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism* describes it this way:

When persons who were baptized as infants are ready to profess their Christian faith, they participate in the service, which United Methodism now calls Confirmation. This occasion is not an entrance into Church membership, for this was accomplished through baptism. It is the first public affirmation of the grace of God in one's baptism and the acknowledgment of one's acceptance of that grace by faith. This moment includes all the elements of conversion—repentance of sin, surrender and death of self, trust in the saving grace of God, new life in Christ, and becoming an instrument of God's purpose in the world. The profession of Christian faith, to be celebrated in the midst of the worshiping congregation, should include the voicing of baptismal vows as a witness to faith and the opportunity to give testimony to personal Christian experience. Confirmation follows profession of the Christian faith as part of the same service. Confirmation is a dynamic action of the Holy Spirit that can be repeated. In confirmation the outpouring of the Holy Spirit is invoked to provide the one being confirmed with the power to live in the faith that he or she has professed. The basic meaning of confirmation is

strengthening and making firm in Christian faith and life. The ritual action in confirmation is the laying on of hands as the sign of God's continuing gift of the grace of Pentecost. Historically, the person being confirmed was also anointed on the forehead with oil in the shape of a cross as a mark of the Spirit's work. The ritual of the baptismal covenant included in *The United Methodist Hymnal* makes clear that the first and primary confirming act of the Holy Spirit is in connection with and immediately follows baptism.

Two things should be noted here: One, confirmation is not becoming a member of the church. Baptism already celebrated that! Two, confirmation is a person's first public affirmation of the faith of the church as being his or her own faith. In other words, the confirmand is taking responsibility for living as a member of the body of Christ and for fulfilling God's purposes. *By Water and the Spirit* illuminates this further:

An infant who is baptized cannot make a personal profession of faith as a part of the sacrament. Therefore, as the young person is nurtured and matures so as to be able to respond to God's grace, conscious faith and intentional commitment are necessary. Such a person must come to claim the faith of the Church proclaimed in baptism as her or his own faith. Deliberate preparation for this event focuses on the young person's self-understanding and appropriation of Christian doctrines, spiritual disciplines, and life of discipleship. It is a special time for experiencing divine grace and for consciously embracing one's Christian vocation as a part of the priesthood of all believers. Youth who were not baptized as infants share in the same period of preparation for profession of Christian faith. For them, it is nurture for baptism, for becoming members of the church, and for confirmation..

So, confirmation preparation aims at leading youth and others to embrace their vocation-the calling of God to live and witness to the reign of God announced in Jesus Christ.

-An excerpt from "*What Is the Appropriate Age for Baptism and for Confirmation?*" by Daniel Benedict.