



COMMISSIONED TO CHANGE THE WORLD

CONFIRMATION FOR THE MATTHEW 25 CONGREGATION

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OUTLOOK**

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WRITER'S BIO

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR CONFIRMATION IN A MATTHEW 25 CONGREGATION?

CONFIRMANDS WILL:

- Attend a weekend retreat and a worship service that affirm them as God's beloved children and members of the church by baptism, who are created in the image of God and commissioned to reflect God's character in the world.
- Experience confirmation as a "personal Pentecost," the Spirit's promise to strengthen them for living as God's people.
- Commit to a six-month covenantal relationship with their mentors to practice serving Christ in the spirit of Matthew 25.

WHAT DOES MATTHEW 25 OFFER THE CHURCH?

In the spirit of Matthew 25:31-46, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) seeks to act boldly and compassionately to serve people who are hungry, oppressed, imprisoned and poor, showing God's love, justice and mercy. In so doing, congregations will enliven their shared faith, shared worship and shared outreach in a biblical response to the compassionate justice of God.

In Scripture, as in life, crossing boundaries of race, gender identity, socioeconomic status and religious certainties unleashes vulnerability, humility and a willingness to be transformed by God's Spirit. Matthew tells us that God breached the boundary between heaven and earth in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. The Incarnation tells us that God is invested in the re-creation of the material world, especially where injustice blocks transformation. Christ calls us to incarnate God's purposes.

WHAT DOES MATTHEW 25 OFFER THE CHURCH'S MINISTRY WITH YOUTH?

The church committed to the Matthew 25 initiative can be a seedbed for developing a new generation of disciples committed to the way of Christ. Adolescence is the perfect time to challenge teenage church members to a compelling vision of compassion and generosity, a time to take healthy risks – like breaching the boundaries that divide people – in reflective conversations with trusted adults.

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However, most young people forsake active participation in the church after confirmation at age 13 or 14. In contrast to the vision of Matthew 25, adolescent confirmation typically offers teenage Christians a feeble vision of church membership centered on the privilege of voice and voting during congregational meetings. Ironically, when offered the mantle of active church membership, most teenagers opt out. The only boundary crossed is the one under the exit sign. But it doesn't have to be this way!

How do we stem the tide of young people leaving the church, not for the sake of improved numbers and full worship services but for the sake of the world that God loves?

WHAT DOES MATTHEW 25 OFFER THE CHURCH'S CONFIRMATION MINISTRY?

Imagine Matthew 25:31-40 as a confirmation service. As the nations present themselves before the throne, there is no creed, no profession of faith, no examination of their intellectual grasp of the Bible or church history and no declaration of church membership. The sheep, unaware of having done anything special, are invited to "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34). "Inheritance" implies a familial relationship; they already belong. Belonging has somehow resulted in behavior that reflects God's character: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Exodus 34:6).

Confirmation in the Matthew 25 congregation focuses on the church's affirmation of the teenager as the beloved child of God in baptism and the community's covenant embrace through the laying on of hands. Confirmation also confers a priestly vocation through the anointing with oil. We are God's image-bearing stewards of the goodness and beauty of creation, empowered by the Spirit's gifts of grace: "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord," the spirit of joy in God's presence (Isaiah 11:2-3a).

WHAT IS A MATTHEW 25 CONFIRMATION PROCESS ABOUT?

CONFIRMATION INSPIRED BY MATTHEW 25 REAFFIRMS THE MEANING OF BAPTISM IN ITS FULLNESS:

- Baptism means full membership in the church. Confirmation reminds the baptized and the church that they are members of the body of Christ, marked once and for all as God's own.
- Baptism constitutes commissioning to the ministry of declaring God's restoration of creation in word and deed. A baptism is an ordaining event, the moment of our commissioning to active membership. Confirmation reminds the baptized that they and the church have been called to live not for themselves but for others.
- Baptism welcomes the baptized into a congregation of mutual support. Confirmation reminds the baptized and the church that they are members of a covenantal embrace of mutual encouragement and accountability.

CONFIRMATION INSPIRED BY MATTHEW 25 IS NOT ABOUT:

- Personal salvation — the confirmands have already been saved by grace through faith.
- “Joining the church” — people are joined to the church at baptism.
- A crash course in Presbyterianism — there are other, more appropriate venues for such learning.
- Profession of faith and examination by the session — teenagers do not have to prove they belong to Christ and his church by asserting what they believe. They already belong through baptism.

WHY NO PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH?

Confirmation and profession of faith are not synonymous. This difference is the first thing to come to terms with when instituting a Matthew 25 approach to confirmation.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

Typically, churches today use the term “confirmation” to designate the public profession of faith. The profession includes saying the Apostle's Creed and responding to the four interrogatories:

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- Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?
- Who is your Lord and Savior?
- Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?
- Will you devote yourself to the church's teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers?

Answering these questions in the affirmative, the confirmands “confirm” their baptisms and join the church or become “full,” “responsible” or active members.

Confirmation in the Christendom paradigm focuses on asserting belief before belonging. Categories of membership designate children as “half members.” Thus, when they come to the appointed age, the congregation calls them to accept a set of beliefs before fully belonging. The young people tacitly agree to believe and behave like church members, thus confirming their belonging as full members.

However, most confirmation-age youth who have grown up in the church and participated in Sunday school, children's choirs or vacation Bible school are some of the church's most active members. If they have been baptized, they know that they are God's beloved children. Even if they haven't been baptized, they know that they belong. They regularly profess the church's faith when they join in the Lord's Supper or reaffirm with the congregation the baptismal covenant. Claiming that the confirmand is “joining the church” or becoming a full, active member discounts the child's sense of belonging.

In the ancient church, “confirmation” designated the occasion when the bishop placed his hands on the confirmands' heads and prayed for their strengthening in the Holy Spirit. (In Latin *confirmatio* means “to encourage, strengthen.”) Confirmation in the Matthew 25 church – the laying on of hands, praying for the Spirit's gifts and anointing with oil – indicates the church's reaffirmation of the confirmands' identity as God's beloved and their vocation as co-creators of good in the world.

Post-Christendom sensibilities value belonging first. Those who belong learn the community's traditions and mores by behaving as one of the family. Belonging and behaving provide the context for learning the community's creed, leading to belief in the most total sense — knowing, trusting, loving, serving and worshiping God in Christ.

WHEN DO YOUNG PEOPLE MAKE A PROFESSION OF FAITH?

As the *Book of Order* says, “When those who have been baptized as children are ready to make a public profession of faith and accept the responsibility of life in the church (sometimes called ‘confirmation’), the session shall provide an opportunity for them to do so” (W-4.0203). Notice that there is no stipulated age, only the counsel when they “are ready.” How do you know when they are ready?

The profession of faith is best thought of as a pastoral tool that ministers and teachers employ in conversations with people who desire to articulate what they believe. No longer does the profession represent a transition to active membership.

Professing faith is not like baking a cake — there is no timetable. The church will know when baptized persons are ready to profess faith at whatever age or circumstance because a relationship of reflective conversation with them has been established. They will feel called to declare themselves grounded in the knowledge that they belong to Christ and his church.

That being said, confirmation inspired by Matthew 25 can provide an opportunity for young people to come to terms with the questions of the profession. The shared activities and reflective conversations may spark a desire in the young persons to make public their commitment to Christ. The mentors are in the perfect position to evaluate a young person's readiness and initiate a conversation about the profession. Again, do this with care and without coercion in the assurance that the confirmands already belong to Christ and his church.

WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO ARE NOT BAPTIZED?

Being unbaptized should not preclude any young person's participation in the confirmation process. Confirmation might inspire the unbaptized to explore what baptism means for them.

WHAT IS THE SESSION'S ROLE IN CONFIRMATION?

As confirmation is usually practiced, the session serves as the gatekeeper to full church membership for the baptized. The session approves the curriculum, appoints the mentors and conducts the examination of the confirmands. In a Matthew 25 approach to confirmation, the session still approves teaching-learning resources and approves the mentors. However, since the baptized are already full church members, there is no gatekeeping to be done, no examination to conduct. Instead, the session fulfills the role of chief nurturer, encourager, cheerleader and coach for the confirmands and mentors. The elders understand the goal and purpose of confirmation as a commissioning to Christ's service and provide helpful interpretation of the process to the congregation.