

Age & Attendance Recommendations

“Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love.” Ephesians 4:5-17

The Confirmation Collaborative believes that individuals who are presented for confirmation should be sixteen years or older (10th or 11th grade). Since Confirmation is making a “mature” commitment to one’s faith, we believe these age guidelines will support young people in making decisions that can have a life-long impact. It is also recommended that candidates be active members of the congregation for at least one year prior to beginning preparation instruction, since affirmation of one’s Baptism is rooted in living in community.

Rationale

A group of scholars give us insights into the development of adolescents. Jean Piaget wrote about cognitive development while Erik Erikson was concerned with psycho-social development. The work of James Fowler, Gabriel Moran, Lawrence Kohlberg, Carol Gilligan, John Westerhoff, and James Loder help us understand where the adolescent is in his/her/their faith journey. Development in each of these areas impacts a young person’s ability to “make a mature decision” to receive the laying-on-of-hands at Confirmation in the Episcopal Church.

In the course of development, adolescents begin to question and doubt the beliefs they have acquired in childhood and early adolescence. When moving from concrete to abstract thought, young people learn not all questions have finite answers, and questions of faith cannot always be proved. Adolescents are looking for proof. Not until adulthood do young people pass beyond this stage of disbelief and decide to set their heart on something beyond themselves, recognizing that human beings are never able to reduce life and faith in God to a rational system.

Many of the developmental changes of adolescence revolve around several key tasks that all children must accomplish as they move toward adulthood. As the individual moves through adolescence, the developing of an identity, coming to terms with one’s sexuality, developing autonomy, and a planning for the future are important issues. The church can play an important role in assisting our young people move through these tasks.

Adolescence can be broken up into three chronological parts: early (11-12 years), middle (13-15 years) and late (15-17 years). However, no two adolescents develop in the same way chronologically. Yet they ask the same questions: Am I competent? Am I normal? Am I lovable and loving? Physical, emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual development occurs in each young person differently. Some will be more focused on physical changes, while others will be more interested in the spiritual aspect of their lives. Each area of development offers the community an opportunity to support youth in their journey.

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The issues faced by middle school/junior high and early high school students (ages 11-15) involve a focus on self and peer group. They are mostly interested in the present, with limited thoughts of the future as far as their own plans and expectations. In late adolescence their intellectual interests expand; they usually have greater persistence and interest in physical, mental, and emotional challenges. They are concerned with 'being normal' and with their relationships. It is also a time when friendship patterns shift. It is a time of experimentation and limit testing. Their consciences are showing more consistency toward recognizing positive and negative behavior, and they are developing the capacity for abstract thought. It is a time of "*acquiring a religion*," a transitional time of holding the beliefs of the faith community as experienced in worship and instruction. It is a time when a person assumes the beliefs and faith for him or herself.

This time of search involves questioning, judging critically, and experimenting through the use of reason and argumentation in addition to feelings and experiences. It is very much a "faith of the head" rather than a "faith of the heart." Faith will often express itself in the form of doubt and the struggle to frame philosophical formulations. Through this personal search for truth, the adolescent moves from dependence on others' understandings and ways to a state of autonomy. To find a faith of their own, adolescents need to doubt, question, and test what has been handed down to them. They need to criticize the tradition in which they were brought up and to question their own feelings and experiences. During this period, parents (and other adults) need to be especially sensitive to the fact that changes don't necessarily mean that faith is being discarded; it may only be that the expressions of faith, which belonged to others – often parents – now need to become uniquely those of the adolescent. It is a time to embrace and support the young person in their search for meaningful faith. Not all teenagers are ready to make a commitment to a life-long faith decision at this point. Each person should come to Confirmation when he or she is ready to make that commitment.

For John Westerhoff, the adolescent is moving between an *affiliative faith* – the sense of belonging – to a *searching faith*. In late adolescence, due to a broadening worldview and education, a person begins to doubt and question those values and statements that were fundamental to understandings of faith in previous years. Erikson states that adolescence is a struggle between *identity vs. identity confusion*. Between twelve and eighteen years, an individual becomes more interested in a personal relationship with God, but may be opposed to institutional religion and reject the religious belief of their parents. Deep religious questions are asked but may be kept to one's self because of a fear of rejection or ridicule. An adolescent can make a commitment one day, then change their mind the next, especially if a more attractive opportunity or friend has a different view. According to Fowler, faith is a process of becoming. An adolescent's new cognitive abilities make mutual perspective-taking possible and allows the individual to integrate their faith into their identity and the new realities of their lives.

By late High School (age 16 and older), there is an increased level of independence and a more cohesive sense of identity. Individuals are more likely able to examine their inner experiences and think ideas through with more emotional stability. They can show concern for others, delay

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self-gratification and compromise. Peer relationships remain important, but now take a place among their other interests. They are more concerned with the future and the importance of one's role in life. Social and cultural traditions regain importance in their lives, and there is an increased interest in moral reasoning, personal dignity, self-esteem and setting goals. It is a time to encounter and nurture one's spirituality as well as plan for the future, further education, career and adulthood.

Young adults are able to enter into critical reflection on their beliefs and values, gaining perspective on life and understanding of the self as part of a social system. The internalization of authority and the assumption of responsibility for making explicit choices of ideology and lifestyle open the way for critically self-aware commitments in relationships and vocation. This "individuating-reflective" faith is an appropriate time for a person to make a commitment and re-affirmation to a particular belief system, such as being confirmed.

All of this leads to the recommendation that Confirmation be offered to older adolescents. In doing so the Church will be supporting young people in their wrestling with issues and coming to a mature decision as they move from the faith of their parents to assuming for themselves their own faith. When everybody in the eighth grade is expected to be in the Confirmation class, we run the risk of pushing young people who are not ready and it may be impossible for them to resist being confirmed along with their classmates, even if they are given a choice. This is often exhibited with the comment, "Everybody in my grade at church is doing it." This doesn't respect their autonomy, it follows the desires of parents or peers. Such an approach does not take into account the faith development and maturity of the individual. This model of confirmation ministry can resemble a rite of passage, a reward for attending classes or arriving at the end of the education process in the church. Confirmation should be a sign of one's growing commitment to his/her/their faith and the responsibilities that comes with being part of the Christian community.

Parental expectations:

Many parents and congregations are not ready or prepared for this change. For some congregations moving to this model may mean putting a "moratorium" on confirmation classes for several years. If there absolutely must be a rite of puberty due to social and parental pressures, local clergy might consider special recognitions in the context of congregational worship to mark an individual's milestones. Such prayers might ask for guidance during the forthcoming period of questioning and growth, for strength in the development of adult faith and for the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In communities where young people leave home to attend boarding or preparatory school, it has become customary in some parishes to confirm them before their departure, regardless of age or previous participation in the faith community. This practice is contrary to an individual making a personal, mature decision and should be discouraged. Instead, parents and students should contact the school chaplain and find ways for the student to participate in the faith community of the school they will be attending. If the school does not provide a spiritual

component as part of its student life, a local Episcopal Church can be an avenue for building new relationships in a faith community. Most boarding schools help students to understand that they do not exist apart from society, that society's issues are their issues, and that they are called to respond to the needs of others. Students are encouraged not just to share what they have with others, but also to understand the issues and complexities of society and to consider what their individual and corporate responsibilities are and to take action. It is in such an environment when one lives away from home that questions of faith and strengthening of one's belief system can nourish and grow. This is the community that witnesses and supports the young person who is not able to attend the church community of his or her parents. It is within the context of this community that it is most appropriate for one to make a public affirmation of their faith. And it is this community that can continue to support the young adult in their faith journey.