

Role of the Faith Community

We have all been charged with the call to “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” Ephesians 4:12-13

“When two or three are gathered together in my name.” Jesus has called us as Christians not to be isolated but to be in community, calling us out into the world in mission. We are members dependent on one another to be the Body of Christ, upheld by the basic principles of the Baptismal Covenant. As expressed in *The Book of Common Prayer*, this covenant maintains that individuals and institutions are called by God to adopt certain fundamental disciplines and dispositions in order to fully embrace their basic identities. As embodiments of the Christian faith, our Episcopal Churches are created to be communities that honor, celebrate, and worship God as the center of life. They are created to be models of God’s love and grace. They are created to serve God in Christ in all persons. They are created to “strive for justice and peace among all people and [to] respect the dignity of every human being.” These principles are the basis on which Christian identity and vocation exist. It is important for young people to participate in the life of the community so that they can also experience the love existing in such a community. Christian formation encompasses many aspects of our life in the community of faith and takes form in a variety of ways. Candidates should be involved in parish life and mission as their skills and gifts lend themselves to growth and new understandings.

Youth ministry is the responsibility of the entire congregation. Youth ministry, including confirmation ministry, ought to be rooted in relationships. Balanced leadership of adults from a variety of ages, socio- economic, and cultural backgrounds are most effective in helping youth identify with the wider church. Candidates should also have a mentor from the congregation to accompany them throughout their preparation period. Mentors (selected and organized under “safe church guidelines”) take on a special relationship with the candidate that is different than other mentor relationships found in the secular world. They are companions on the journey, and they understand that Christians walk with Christ together, not independently.

Rationale:

Over *fifty* years ago, young people could not receive communion until they were confirmed. This is no longer the case. Churches offer a wide range of practices for formation of young children and families as they experience Holy Eucharist. Our ministry to pre-adolescents, adolescents, and post-adolescents is broadening to reflect the church’s understanding of Baptism and the church’s appreciation of human development so that we can minister to and with them in developmentally appropriate ways. The focus of confirmation preparation is no longer about receiving communion (or becoming a member of the local church), but about making a mature commitment to faith and affirming the promises made at Baptism.

Dioceses are comprised of cities and suburbs, towns, and rural areas. All our struggles are similar, no matter where we live. All communities, regardless of size or wealth, face the

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enormous challenge of fragmentation. Family life is seriously threatened by the schedules we keep. Often our young people lack the sense of community beyond family that is critical to understanding the Church and its mission. Experiencing community life as lively, energizing, and interdependent is critical to understanding our Baptismal Covenant. Faith and religion are caught, not taught. Our church communities can offer a context for learning about loving relationships, honesty, justice, forgiveness, and all the other values essential to our faith. We can help families deepen their sense of Baptismal life.

Involving the congregation in the confirmation process encourages the development of one-to-one relationships between youth and adults. Mentors assist those exploring their faith to share in the journey by offering insights, questions and the shared wisdom of what it means to be part of a faith community. Mentors should be baptized members of the church community. They should have a serious commitment to sharing their faith, meeting regularly, and supporting the candidate in his/her/their spiritual life. They should be faithful in attendance, stewardship, and participation in the life of the community. Besides giving encouragement, mentors are living examples of what it means to be an Episcopalian, putting faith into practice.

The congregation as “cheerleaders”: Our young people desire to be known by name, listened to, and involved. Depending on their interest and gifts, young people can participate in committees and ministries, such as service and mission projects, worship (acolyte, lay Eucharistic minister, lector, choir, altar guild, usher, etc.), and fellowship opportunities. They should not be just tapped for “grunt work” but asked of their opinions and ideas in planning. Following confirmation, they should be invited to participate as Vestry members, search committee members, worship teams, and other important leadership roles.

And most importantly, the faith community can pray for candidates for confirmation in the Prayers of the People throughout their time of preparation. The community can support the confirmands by offering both the time and money for mission trips, pilgrimages, or any other events.

If the Rite of Confirmation is held in another parish, members of the congregation should make a "pilgrimage" together for the service, signifying a deep and necessary response to Jesus, who calls us to leave the familiar and move out into new life. It is important for confirmands to know there are members of their home community present for regional celebrations of which they are re-affirming their faith in this context of the Church gathered. On the Sunday following the such a joint liturgy, each congregation should (in the context of the main liturgy of the day) recognize individually those who have re-affirmed their Baptism.