

Faith Formation: A Model for Healthy Congregational Culture

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In the light of recent efforts to better understand the process of faith formation for children and youth, the CRC has uncovered a variety of gems that had been overlooked. We learned that baptism needs to be regularly affirmed to remain a vital forming force in our lives; we learned that young children need to join us at the Lord's Table; we learned that faith formation is a life-long process; we learned that public profession of faith is a vital pastoral tool; we learned that a welcome to the Lord's Table does not have to be chained to a public profession of faith as an entrance rite; we learned that every stage in life from beginning to end has its own challenge for the continual formation of faith; and we've learned a lot more....

All these learnings have put us in a position as a denomination to reshape the entire culture of the church in these matters. In an effort to help us get the big picture of this new culture which is slowly taking shape, and to form a helpful overview of it all, we suggest that this scenario as a model may help us to better integrate our ministry efforts.

Phase 1 – Birth and Baptism

All faith formation begins somewhere – where a man and woman covenant before God to enter marriage, create a setting for receiving and training children, and take up that task with a deep sense of calling before God. This involves...

- Establishment and nurture of secure marriages to receive children.
- Parental preparation for receiving children.
- A keen and appreciative awareness of God's covenant love.
- Birth or adoption of covenant children.
- Sacrament of infant baptism in worship, including:
 - Declaration of God's promises.
 - Vow-taking by parents.
 - Blessing of the child.
 - Affirmation and vow-taking by the congregation.
 - Time of congregational celebration.

Phase 2 – Spiritual Formation through an Affirmation of Baptism

The covenant family, as the basic building block of God's plan, sees baptism as identity-giving. In our baptism, we are marked as belonging to God and all of life is to be shaped accordingly. Our baptism may give us our identity, but it does not yet form our faith, but rather marks the beginning of this formation process. Our baptisms, therefore, will be regularly affirmed in multiple ways and locations, such as...

- Regular Verbal references in worship liturgy.
- Affirmations through children's messages in worship.
- Liturgical Reaffirmation of Baptism Vows on occasion (see SNC 240)
- Conversations at home between parents and children.
- Observance of Baptism Birthdays within the family.
- Instruction in Children's Worship and education classes.
- Regular focus in the educational ministry for children and youth.
- Encouraging conversations with Pastors and/or Elders.
- Parental support for church education.
- Regular observance of milestones of faith development – in the family and in church community.

Phase 3 - Welcome to the Lord's Table

Soon, those whose faith is being formed are welcomed to the Lord's Table in an age- and ability-appropriate way as they respond to the call of Scripture to "examine themselves", to "discern the body", to "proclaim the Lord's death," and to "wait for others". In doing so they focus their faith, are nurtured in God's promises, and strengthen the unity of the Body of Christ. This major step is supported and encouraged by actions such as the following...

- Learning opportunities about the significance and meaning of the Lord's Supper.
- Teaching and conversations aimed to stir and nurture the desire to come to the Lord's Table.
- Parental conversations which link their desire to come to the Table with their baptism.
- Children's expression to their parents of the desire to come to the Table.
- Pastor and/or Elders are involved in such conversations.
- Either (depending on the policy of the local congregation) permission is granted by the parents or the Elders.
- The congregation has a meaningful liturgical moment for welcoming children to the Table.
- Regular participation in the Lord's Supper by children.
- Children's participation in local opportunities of Christian service in their pre-teen years.

Phase 4 - Public Profession of Faith

The church has historically held that a public profession of faith before the congregation is a vital practice to be encouraged for the process of faith formation. We are encouraged to give testimony and profession of our faith regularly before others in all of life, however, the public profession of faith within the congregation is a vitally important step which affirms our baptism and gives public expression to our acceptance of God's promises.

- Mentoring, either personally or in a group, prepares a youth for this step
- The congregation (pastor, elders, or youth sponsor) intentionally plan pro-active efforts to encourage youth in this step of Profession of Faith.

- An interview with Elders and Pastor takes place, including:
 - A personal expression/testimony of faith
 - An understanding of the basic teachings of the Christian Faith
 - An affirmation of the significance of their baptism
 - A commitment to a life of Christian obedience.
 - An agreement with the creeds and confessions of the church
 - A commitment to the life and work of the Christian Church
 - A fitting and meaningful liturgical moment to hear the profession and express thanks to God.
- The age of 15-16 years seems ideal but is not mandatory.
- Consideration is given to timing this before the senior year of high school so that it can be preparation for potentially leaving home or the community.

Phase 5 - Life-long Growth and Learning

The public profession of faith is not to be viewed as a end in itself, but rather as one more milestone on the journey of faith formation. This journey continues life-long, including, among other, such dimensions as these...

- A follow-up interview a year or two after public profession of faith.
- The right to vote on congregational matters is given at 18 years of age.
- Continued mentoring relationships.
- An engagement in Christian service both within and beyond the congregation.
- Encouragement for education to continue with small group participation.
- The continuation of personal spiritual disciplines for devotional growth.
- Faithfulness in weekly worship
- Participation in generous stewardship.
- A growing appreciation for regular professions of faith in personal relationships and in worship.
- Encouragement to share their faith and reach/disciple others.
- Pastoral/elder contact with those who have not chosen to make public Profession of Faith
- Entering some leadership role in the congregation
- Congregational contact with those who have moved away for work or college or.... (both those who have professed their faith and those who have not.)
- Potentially becoming a parent and presenting children for baptism.
- Retirement and new avenues of service.
- Reaching the end of our earthly life with hope, gratitude, trust, and a wholesome witness.

(Faith Formation Committee)