

Reconsidering a Bold Proposal: Reflections, Questions, and Concerns Regarding a Theology of Confirmation

JOE GOODWIN BURNETT*

The 1979 Book of Common Prayer restored the centrality of baptism to the church's sacramental economy. Since then an emerging "baptismal ecclesiology" has had positive and far-reaching implications for the church's unity, mission, and equality of ministries. Nevertheless, questions about the theology and practice of confirmation persist, especially with regard to the role of the bishop. This article affirms that "all that is involved in becoming Christian is signified in baptism," and thus any attempt to make more of confirmation inevitably ends up making less of baptism. While multiple opportunities for reaffirmation are appropriate, catechesis and formation—both for adults and for sponsors of infants being baptized—should be an ongoing and integral part of living into the baptismal promises, and should not imply the necessity of any further initiatory rite.

Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ's Body the Church. The bond which God establishes in Baptism is indissoluble.
The Book of Common Prayer (1979), p. 298

Confirmation, according to the 1979 Prayer Book, is simply the first occasion of "mature public affirmation" of the baptismal commitments by "those baptized at an early age," in the presence of, and with the laying on of hands by, the bishop (BCP, p. 412). As such, the theology of confirmation is no more and no less than the theology implied and expressed in the recapitulation of those foundational bap-

* Joe Goodwin Burnett is Bishop of the Diocese of Nebraska. This article was originally prepared for the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops and presented at the meeting of the House of Bishops, March 2005.

tismal commitments. Thus confirmation, so understood, confers no distinct sacramental character or additional status of membership.

In exploring this topic I will recall a pivotal chapter in the unfolding story of the evolution and development of the 1979 Prayer Book rites of initiation, and offer a brief overview of continuing responses to these rites during the last quarter century. I will also reflect briefly on my own and others' use of these rites and on the implications of what has been termed an emerging baptismal ecclesiology in the life of the church since the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book. Finally, taking into account some nagging liturgical, theological, and canonical questions about the church's understanding and practice of confirmation, I will consider ways in which we might move toward a fuller recognition and appropriation of that baptismal ecclesiology.

In August of 1972 I drove several hundred miles home to Mississippi from the United Methodist Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, Texas, where I was about to enter my middler year. The purpose of the trip was my confirmation in the Episcopal Church. It was a decision I had made after a long process of prayer and discernment, culminating in formal preparation in a class taught by a canon pastor at St. Matthew's Cathedral in Dallas. My confirmation took place in a small, rural mission where the Bishop of Mississippi made his visitation that Sunday. I recall very little about the details of the service, only that I was elated both to have reached this point, and to have the bishop then say to me immediately following the service that he was that day also making me a postulant for holy orders from the diocese of Mississippi.

At the time there was no question in my mind that what I was doing was joining the Episcopal Church, but at no point did I sense or feel or believe that what was happening in the ritual and ceremonial action amounted to any sort of completion of my baptism. I had been baptized as an infant in a small Methodist Church where my father served as pastor, and subsequently I had not only been confirmed in a class of fellow sixth graders, but had also on numerous occasions responded to the invitations to Christian discipleship and altar calls issued by my father and other ministers in revivals or other special worship services. Regularly rededicating my life to Christ was, at least where I came from, simply part of the piety of the "people called Methodist." Yet for me the defining reality of my life—since before I had any knowledge or awareness of it, and before I could even try to remember or give expression to it—was that in and

through my baptism I had been primally owned and blessed and loved by a gracious God.

This experience has come to mind several times while I have been exploring once again the general topic of the “theology” of confirmation as part of the ongoing work of the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops. During this same period another long buried memory has also come to the surface. Just four months after my confirmation in Mississippi I was told by a friend and mentor-priest in the diocese of Dallas that one of the working committees of the Prayer Book revision process was holding an important working session at the cathedral. Though somewhat impressed to hear that news, I thought little of it at the time. Only recently did I realize that the gathering to which he was referring was actually a combination of three committees—the Standing Liturgical Commission, the Prayer Book Committee, and the Theology Committee of the House of Bishops.

In his book *The Liturgical Revolution*, Michael Moriarty explains that this meeting, which took place in Dallas in December of 1972, led to an ad hoc report entitled “Statement of Agreed Positions,” in which the group, responding to considerable negative fallout from *Prayer Book Studies 18: Holy Baptism with the Laying-On-of-Hands*, affirmed that “Christian initiation is an unrepeatable act of ‘baptism by water and the Spirit,’ administered in a rite that [includes] hand-laying, consignation (with or without chrism), prayer for the gift of the Spirit, and eucharist, presided over by a bishop when one is present.” Moriarty adds:

But the statement went on to say that nonetheless a mature affirmation of faith before a bishop was strongly encouraged as a normal component of Christian nurture—though it was not completion of baptism, was not necessary before admission to communion, and could be repeated at significant times in a person’s life. Still, the occasion when we affirm the baptismal vows made on our behalf in infancy is a significant and unrepeatable event. It is one’s “Confirmation Day.”¹

¹ Michael Moriarty, *The Liturgical Revolution* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1996), 170. The pastoral and theological debate about the relationship of confirmation to baptism has a long and complex history which is beyond the scope of this article. For brief but helpful summaries of pertinent scholarly conversations around these issues, both historically and during the two decades or so preceding

Moriarty says that this meeting and this statement were the beginning of the disintegration of the bold proposal of *Prayer Book Studies 18*, which had sought to reintegrate the initiatory rites and, ultimately, to enable the bishop to delegate the celebration of the rite to presbyters.² The principles of agreement reached in Dallas by the separate groups eventually led to what now appears in the 1979 Prayer Book, and is widely regarded as a compromise.³

As I have reflected on this juxtaposition of seminal events in my own life and in the life of the church, and on the continuing and evolving discussion of these issues since that time, it occurs to me first and foremost how well this compromise has worked in many respects. The so-called sacrament in search of a theology seemed to find at least temporary rest from that quest in the multiple options for wording and interpretation of formulas to accompany a bishop's imposition of hands for confirmation, for reception, and for reaffirmation. Indeed, as early as 1978, Bishop Frederick B. Wolf, who had chaired the committee that prepared the rites of initiation for the Proposed Book of Common Prayer, wrote that the rites were "shaped by the conviction that Confirmation is the mature, freely determined renewal of our baptismal vows and the personal appropriation of the gifts bestowed in Baptism, with the recognition that Confirmation is one great moment in a [lifelong] series of moments of deepening commitment and of appropriation of the baptismal gifts."⁴

With somewhat less enthusiasm, Theodore Eastman, in his book *The Baptizing Community*, spoke of the 1979 Prayer Book rite as ambiguous, and yet he claimed to make what he called "the best possi-

Prayer Book Studies 18, see Moriarty, 162-166. See also Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 252-283, and Ruth Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation: Re-Visioning Baptism in the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1997), especially chapters 4, 6, and 8.

² See also *Holy Baptism with the Laying-On-of-Hands* [*Prayer Book Studies 18: On Baptism and Confirmation*] (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1970). Later that same year the Standing Liturgical Commission published *Prayer Book Studies 24: Pastoral Offices*, which provided opportunities for baptized persons to affirm and renew their personal commitment to serve Christ in the world. Moriarty reports that "the form was included in *Services for Trial Use* in 1971 and ultimately passed into the 1979 Prayer Book, but not as a replacement for confirmation, as the SLC had envisioned" (p. 169.)

³ Moriarty, *Liturgical Revolution*, 171.

⁴ Frederick B. Wolf, "Christian Initiation," in H. Barry Evans, ed., *Prayer Book Renewal* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 40.

ble use of an equivocal circumstance” by focusing on the pastoral and pedagogical opportunities he saw presented in the various forms of reaffirmation:

In view of our uncertainty about adolescence and rites of passage, the central criterion for the renewal of baptismal vows must not be chronology but the readiness of a person to move into a new phase of maturity in faith. This moment will be different for different people; it cannot be tied to a fixed point in time. Because everything is linked to individual development, the church will have to give up some of its customary but often empty routines. All twelve year olds will no longer report for confirmation instruction automatically. Great pastoral sensitivity will be required to know when the fullness of time has arrived for a particular person. Parishes will have to establish certain regular times when all members of the congregation are challenged to examine seriously the state of their lives in the light of their baptism. Processes of preparation will have to be ready to help those who find themselves at a turning point that may lead to confirmation, reception, or reaffirmation.⁵

My sense is that many in the church have attempted over the past three decades or so to make the best of an ambiguous situation. Yet in the years that have followed the adoption of the Prayer Book, many questions and concerns have persisted around the pastoral rite of confirmation, and its related forms of reception and reaffirmation, and their interpretation and implementation in the life of the church. Beginning with the work of the combined committees in Dallas, and continuing through to the present day, the “compromise,” as Moriarty termed it, has led to some interesting situations.

Early on, for instance, a rubric inserted into the Proposed Book of Common Prayer (1976), and ultimately into the 1979 Prayer Book, affirmed that those persons baptized as adults—unless baptized by a bishop with the laying on of hands—were “expected to make a public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism in the presence of a bishop and to receive the laying on of hands” (BCP, p. 412). Some would say that this preserves the es-

⁵ A. Theodore Eastman, *The Baptizing Community: Christian Initiation and the Local Congregation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 28-30.

sential role of the bishop as a symbol of linkage to the whole church. Others question whether this role of the bishop is not best provided in the wider exercise of the episcopal office:

The bishop is present implicitly through the baptismal and Eucharistic rubrics which delegate the authority to baptize and preside to local parish priests, and through the oil of baptismal chrismation and anointing for healing and last rites. The bishop is present explicitly as chief pastor in parish visitations, as overseer/administrator at the cathedral and/or diocesan offices, and as visionary theologian in writing, teaching, doing social justice, and otherwise representing the unity and teaching authority of the church. The bishop is named regularly in the prayers of the people.⁶

It has also been claimed by some that the rite of confirmation is still useful as an adult commissioning for ministry. Yet, as Bishop Wolf argued in his essay some years ago, it has become problematic to continue to teach, as the church at times has done, that “Confirmation is ‘ordination to the priesthood of the laity,’” for “it is theologically very difficult to separate that priestly vocation from membership in the priestly fellowship given in Baptism.”⁷ Or, as bluntly stated in one of the sectional reports in the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation meeting in Toronto in 1991, “All that is involved in becoming Christian is signified in baptism.”⁸ What is the sense of commissioning for ministry those who, having been baptized, are already commissioned for ministry in and through the promises of the baptismal covenant?

Another reason often cited for a continuing and even renewed emphasis on confirmation for adults baptized at an early age in the Episcopal Church has to do with the perceived inadequacy of ongoing catechesis and formation. It is thought that there is still pastoral value in offering a ritual step to celebrate and recognize a person’s

⁶ Katherine Grieb, in Ellen Charry and Katherine Grieb, “Three Models for Thinking about Confirmation for Discussion at the College of Preachers” (privately circulated paper, House of Bishops Theology Committee, June 15-16, 2004), 1.

⁷ Wolf, “Christian Initiation,” 37.

⁸ David R. Holeton, ed., *Growing in Newness of Life: Christian Initiation in Anglicanism Today*, Papers from the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (Toronto: The Anglican Consultative Council, 1991), 230.

“outward and visible” growth in faith and understanding as a result of some required process of preparation, be it weeks or months or even years. However, Aidan Kavanagh, who has affirmed the pressing need for ongoing Christian formation, nonetheless claims that to “view the concept of confirmation as a ‘ratification’ . . . of one’s baptism in infancy” is a misunderstanding of confirmation which comes about when confirmation “floats away from baptism, thus finding itself in need of ‘new understandings’ which then intensify the original misunderstanding.” The result of all this, Kavanagh says,

is that we *sacramentalize* what is normally an essentially *homiletic and pastoral* matter, i.e., we turn this into a debate on *confirmation* when in truth it is a matter of good preaching and ascetical and sacramental practice which precipitates growth in grace and faith. . . . One “reaffirms” one’s baptism in living, constantly, a Christian life; how *confirmation* “ratifies” or, even worse, “validates” one’s baptism is most unclear to me. *All* the sacraments do these things—marriage, penance, holy orders, communion, etc. Is confirmation the *only* rite of passage we have after baptism? I think not. All sacraments, indeed all Christian life, are baptismal.⁹

My very fruitful experience in using the Journey to Adulthood materials in a parish reflects what Ruth Meyers, in her book *Continuing the Reformation*, has indicated as a positive benefit from developing such new rites for the church:

By introducing new rituals, the program [J2A] may respond to the human need for rites of passage to mark significant turning points in the life-cycle, a need which was not originally the purpose of confirmation but which confirmation nonetheless came to fulfill for many. Instead of moving adolescents to an affirmation of faith which all too often is treated as the completion of their formation and thus the occasion for departure from active participation in the life of the Church, the program endeavors to build appreciation for ongoing faith development and periodic reaffirmation of commitment to one’s baptismal faith. This may in turn allow confirmation to function more fully as a rite of *mature* affirmation of faith.¹⁰

⁹ Quoted in Eastman, *The Baptizing Community*, 28-29, note *.

¹⁰ Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 241.

In that same study Meyers also takes note of the fact that recent surveys have found much confusion about the definition of the terms confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation, and have also uncovered a wide diversity of liturgical practice in the administration of these rites. Some of the areas of divergence include the use of chrism at confirmation, the appropriate age for confirmation, and the appropriate form for welcoming those who come to the Episcopal Church from other Christian traditions (pp. 238-247).

With regard to the first issue, a number of questions have been raised as to the importation of chrism from its liturgical and rubrical location at the post-baptismal anointing to an unspecified place in a rite of reaffirmation not intended for the imposition of that sacramental sign. A 1986 survey found that a significant number of bishops used chrism at every confirmation. Whether this is an attempt to imitate what is taken to be catholic practice, or to forge a symbolic link with baptism, is not always clear, but the result is problematic. For one thing, it seems to reflect some confusion about which initiatory symbols and actions have primacy. In any event, “to introduce chrism into confirmation is to suggest an additional sealing with the Spirit in confirmation and thereby to undermine the sufficiency of baptism as full Christian initiation” (p. 239).

With regard to the question of how we welcome those from other traditions, Daniel Stevick ventured some thoughts in an article published in 1994, entitled “To Confirm or To Receive?” in which he examined the adequacy of Episcopal practice in the light of historical, contemporary, and ecumenical considerations. Pointing out that newcomers had routinely been received or confirmed depending “on whether or not their former churches had the historic episcopate,” he went on to analyze some assumptions inherent in this approach. We must consider the implications, he claimed, of the fact that many Roman Catholics we have received were earlier confirmed at the hands of a designated presbyter, and many Orthodox Christians we have received were chrismated in infancy as part of a unified initiatory rite. In neither case would we necessarily be dealing with persons who had previously been confirmed according to our expectations.¹¹

¹¹ Daniel B. Stevick, “To Confirm or To Receive?” in Ruth Meyers, ed., *Baptism and Ministry: Liturgical Studies One* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 55-85. See especially p. 62: “Since the chrism is consecrated by the Patriarch or the bishop, some western observers have considered it a token presence of the

Stevick's conclusions were that confirmation is "the first occasion of adult restatement of baptismal commitments by one who had been baptized in infancy," and as such it "is not suitable for committed and active adult Christians who come to the Episcopal Church from another," nor should it be repeated with "adults who are baptized when a bishop is present and ministers the post-baptismal prayer and action." Reaffirmation "is a repeatable act and may be used for a variety of personal occasions at any stage of adulthood." Reception is most appropriate for baptized adults coming new to the Episcopal Church, for "the sum of this argument is that no distinction should be made between baptized Christians of mature faith who come to the Episcopal Church from other communions" (pp. 73-79).¹² Quoting Charles Price, he added that "the expectation of 'mature commitment' must not be taken so literally as to question persons from Eastern churches, whose liturgical system has no public occasion of owning the faith. . . . Presumably a life of adult faithfulness speaks for them" (p. 82).

In the parishes I served from 1974 to 1999, I lived with the ambiguity and variety of theology and practice that played around the various questions just considered, and others like them. In my diverse parish settings we made the best of what Eastman called an "equivocal circumstance" by working to develop a rich liturgical life, and by implementing a wide variety of programs of education. Using emerging models such as *Godly Play*, *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, *Living into Our Baptism*, the catechumenate (locally adapted), *Rite 13*, *Journey to Adulthood*, *Kerygma*, *Education for Ministry*, and *Disciples of Christ in Community*, we sought to provide a Godly arena of theological inquiry, spiritual discernment, informed engagement, and ritual formation. In times and seasons identified by the 1979 Prayer Book as particularly appropriate for baptism, the assembly (along

bishop, thereby making 'chrismation' the equivalent of western 'confirmation.' Eastern Christians, however, usually see such an argument as an awkward attempt by Westerners to define them in western terms. In eastern thinking, it is simply the bishop's ministry to bless the chrism, and it is the priest's ministry to use the chrism blessed by the bishop. An Orthodox participant in a recent discussion remarked that if there is at baptism an extension of the bishop, it is not the blessed chrism but the priest." See also Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 245-246.

¹² Stevick does say that "persons who were baptized in another church but who later received no nurture whatever in Christian faith and life should no doubt be confirmed" (p. 79).

with those presented for baptism) shared in the corporate renewal of baptismal vows. This was further enriched at those times when the bishop was present to preside over these rites, along with confirmation, reception, and reaffirmation. My point is that in spite of any ambiguity and equivocation in the initiatory rites of the current *Prayer Book*, I found them to allow a workable and user-friendly liturgical framework for carrying out the work of parish evangelism, renewal, revitalization, and conversion.¹³

However, something else was also emerging during those years, something the liturgical scholar Louis Weil referred to as a “baptismal ecclesiology” in his book *A Theology of Worship*. What is a baptismal ecclesiology? Weil says it is “an understanding of the church that defines Christian community in terms of the common ground that all the baptized members share. This understanding of the Church sees baptism as the defining sacrament of incorporation into its life.”¹⁴

One consequence of such a baptismal ecclesiology “is the realization that *the celebration of the liturgical rites is not the whole of the church’s public life,*” but is “one dimension of a much larger and more complex mosaic of the ways in which the church relates to the life of the world through the daily lives of its members” (pp. 13-14). Therefore, as Weil puts it:

baptismal understanding of the church does not narrowly focus on sacramental rites, but is rooted in the real world where we live. There the church proclaims in its ministry of evangelization the Christ whose life, death, and resurrection offer the key to the meaning of the whole creation. To those who respond to that proclamation, the church must offer a ministry of formation so that the full implications of faith in Christ may be claimed and lived. Thus we may speak of a baptismal theology in which all the

¹³ I realize that my experience is anecdotal in nature, but it seems that such testimony has a long and distinguished history in Anglican/Episcopal pastoral and liturgical theology. For one such popular and recent anecdotal report on the remarkable diversity of forms of parish vitality, see Diana Butler Bass, *Strength for the Journey: A Pilgrimage of Faith in Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002). See also her newly published book, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Alban Institute, 2004).

¹⁴ Louis Weil, *A Theology of Worship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, The New Church’s Teaching Series, Vol. 12, 2002), 13. It is interesting to note that the term “confirmation” hardly appears, though the “catechumenate” and emphasis on repeated renewal of baptismal vows figure prominently.

baptized are equal and integral participants in its common life, bearing witness week after week to the God whom they acclaim as the Creator, the Incarnate Lord, and the Holy Spirit. When the Great Thanksgiving is said in each celebration of the eucharist, it is that baptismal faith being proclaimed among God's people to renew and nourish their faith. Then they are sent forth to serve the world in God's name (pp. 18-19).

Second, a baptismal ecclesiology understands that "the full vision of baptism" is one of "human solidarity." We are all, he says, "called to be members of the one family of God." Thus in a time of increasing polarization and religious and ethnic conflict, baptism "lifts up a radical sign of the unity of all people in their common vocation to be the people of God" (p. 20). A baptismal ecclesiology "acknowledges the diversity found in the history of Christianity, but it holds that through baptism Christians are given a unity in Christ that is more fundamental than church polity or governance" (p. 14).

Third, Weil claims that such a baptismal ecclesiology undermines our familiar tendency to distinguish between clergy and laity, a tendency which has resulted in an "implied difference of status within the liturgical assembly." Jesus created "a community of equals," he says, and thus "baptism creates a radical unity in the body of Christ":

The ministries of the ordained are distinctive, but so are the gifts that others bring to the common life of the community. When this larger community discerns particular gifts for pastoral leadership and care, then preparing for ordination as a priest or deacon may be appropriate. But the local church needs diverse gifts for the building up of its common life, and most of these gifts are not directly related to a vocation for ordination. . . . If the seminaries are to serve the church of the future, the pattern of formation must be intentionally grounded in a baptismal ecclesiology, and must find effective ways to place the vocation to ordination within this more inclusive baptismal context (pp. 19-21).

Weil concludes that it is precisely the 1979 Prayer Book's recovery of the centrality of baptism and the paschal cycle that has enabled the development of such an ecclesiology. And though its emergence has shaped the church's practice in profound ways, its full significance has yet to be widely appreciated.

My own conviction is that the church would do well to embrace and live into this reality with a great deal more seriousness and in-

tentionality. If we understood the trajectory of Christian growth in grace as issuing from that fundamental common ground of baptism, instead of aiming toward some future and further sacramental rite of passage, it would enable us to concentrate more attention and energy on the lifelong development of distinctively Christian practices and piety that could form and sustain mature and responsible discipleship in and for the world.

I began this paper by recalling the occasion of my confirmation in the Episcopal Church, a note of nostalgia which might seem to endorse the claim often made that one's "confirmation day" both is and should be memorable. Yet in the years since that confirmation I have spent far more emotional, psychological, and intellectual energy recalling and retracing the long journey of liturgical reform and revision which have led us in the church to *PBS 18*, then to *PBS 26*, then to the Book of Common Prayer (1979) and now through twenty-five years of use to the present day—and to our lingering concerns, questions, and discussions. Throughout these years my own recollections and continuing reflections, enriched by many whose liturgical sensitivity, pastoral understanding, and theological acumen surpass mine, have convinced me that *whenever we in the church set out to make more of the pastoral rite of confirmation, we inevitably end up making less of the foundational sacrament of baptism.*

I agree with Byron Stuhlman that "the most obvious reading of the [1979] rite with its three categories of formulas for administration is [one] which, in the words of the catechism, bestows 'strength from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the laying on of hands by a bishop' upon those who are ready to make 'a mature commitment to Christ' in an affirmation of their baptismal covenant." As such, it does not confer "a distinct character," nor is it one of the sacraments of the gospel. It is an "intensification," rather than a completion, of one's "baptismal relationship with God." But I also agree with Stuhlman when he adds that "continued use of the title 'confirmation' for this rite leads to a certain amount of confusion in the meaning and function of the rite."¹⁵

Further compounding this confusion, Stuhlman maintains, is "the canonical expectation that an adult baptized by a presbyter in the

¹⁵ Byron David Stuhlman, *Occasions of Grace: An Historical and Theological Study of the Pastoral Offices and Episcopal Services in the Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1995), 54.

Episcopal Church will make another affirmation of baptismal vows before the bishop and receive the laying on hands” as well as “the continuing canonical recognition of ‘confirmed’ status” (p. 55). This latter expectation becomes especially problematic when it is made a prerequisite for certain leadership positions in the church. In this regard I find Ruth Meyers’s comments worthy of further reflection and consideration:

It can be argued that it is appropriate to require leaders to have made the conscious affirmation of faith that is part of confirmation, a commitment that the prayer book “expects” of the Church’s members. But *to require* confirmation is a step beyond *expecting* it and suggests that confirmation confers additional status. Certainly those who are leaders in the Church should make a conscious commitment to their baptismal faith. Yet confirmation is only one means of making this commitment. The primary recommitment and renewal of baptism occurs each time a person participates in the baptism of another, as well as in the renewal of the baptismal covenant at the Easter vigil and on other baptismal days when there are no candidates for baptism. Requiring confirmation for those who hold office emphasizes this specific, one-time rite of baptismal renewal rather than an ongoing deepening of faith and commitment through regular participation in the celebration of the eucharist and the primary feasts of the liturgical year.¹⁶

I was recently reminded of the basic pastoral relevance of Meyers’s remarks when I received an e-mail from a priest in my diocese requesting help with a situation in her small congregation in a very small Nebraska town:

Dear Bishop, I have a question for you. In our diocesan canons it states that a vestry member or warden has to be a “member of the church,” confirmed or received. We have a man here at St. Mary’s who has attended regularly for nearly 30 years. He is a faithful contributor. He plays music when we need him to at children’s chapel. He serves on a committee as a lay person and member of the congregation. His family attends as often as he does and they are all very active at St. Mary’s. I would really like him to be the Junior Warden this coming year. Is it possible?¹⁷

¹⁶ Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 243.

¹⁷ E-mail letter from a diocesan priest, Nebraska, December 2004.

Is it possible? It all depends on what constitutes, in Ruth Meyers's words, "a conscious commitment to . . . baptismal faith," and, to paraphrase Daniel Stevick's remark quoted earlier, whether "a life of adult faithfulness" can speak for him.

Meyers ultimately recommends the elimination of the term confirmation, claiming that "it has had too many meanings historically to enable further reinterpretation," although she also offers a number of suggestions that, short of such a step, would help clarify some of the confusion and multiplicity of administrations. Among her recommendations are to remove the word "confirmed" from the appropriate canons; to encourage the baptism of adults by the bishop, and to administer reaffirmation rather than confirmation to those adults not baptized by a bishop; to remove the rubric expecting those baptized as adults subsequently to be presented to the bishop for laying on of hands; to receive, rather than confirm, those affiliating with the Episcopal Church who have been communicant or adult members of another Christian church; and to include a definition of reception in the prayer book.¹⁸

I believe these recommendations are worthy of serious consideration. I also believe it is time to reconsider the essence of the "bold proposal" which constituted the original document prepared for inclusion in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The intention of *Prayer Book Studies 18* was to reunify the rites of initiation, and provide for the option of presbyteral administration of those rites. With only slight rubrical modification, as Meyers has suggested, the rites as they now appear in the 1979 Prayer Book can provide latitude sufficient to address our long-standing dilemma around the theology and practice of confirmation. This term and its widely varying liturgical practice have long been fraught with confusion, and have long been in search of an adequate theological rationale. This term and its widely varying practice have also long been a barrier to full recognition of the sufficiency of baptism, not only in other traditions, but even in our own.

I believe it is time to reconsider both the use of the term confirmation, and its widely varying practice. In so doing, we might find it possible to embark on a more productive journey. That journey—both individual and corporate—might well bring us to the flaming center of the baptismal ecclesiology that Weil has named as an emer-

¹⁸ Meyers, *Continuing the Reformation*, 247.

gent reality in the church's common life. In such an ecclesiology baptism would be properly understood and celebrated as the primary commissioning for ministry and mission. In such an ecclesiology, the whole life of the baptized, before and after the sacramental event itself, would properly be one of ongoing formation for, and in, ministry and mission. In such an ecclesiology, the bishop would be understood as chief pastor and shepherd in a wider community of ministers, lay and ordained, all utilizing to the fullest possible extent the marvelous diversity of gifts for ministry and mission given by the Spirit in baptism. In such an ecclesiology, the continuing opportunity for reaffirmation and renewal of baptismal promises would be a deeply rooted and normative liturgical discipline. Finally, in such an ecclesiology, through worship, ministry, and mission, the community would ever be put in mind of the foundational promises that constitute our undeserved, unearned, and unconditionally gracious relationship with God in Christ, in and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

All that is involved in becoming Christian is signified in baptism.

