

Confirmation in the Missionary Practice of the Diocese of Coventry

This Paper is in three parts. First an introduction explaining its origins and function (paragraphs 1-6). Second, a proposal for a theology of confirmation (paragraphs 7-30). Third, some proposals for the missionary practice of confirmation in the diocese (paragraphs 31-49).

PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

Origins of the paper

1. This Paper was written for the *Fourth Theological Conference under the Porvoo Agreement*¹ held in Copenhagen on 8-11 October 2012. The conference brought together Anglicans and Lutherans to consider the theme of ‘The Sacraments in the Life of the Church’. Lutherans, it seems to me, have a greater theological clarity about confirmation than is found among Anglicans; and their practice of confirmation has a pattern and purpose that has not been seen in the Church of England for at least fifty years. For example, Lutheran confirmation courses are long and thorough, and in most Scandinavian countries and in Iceland a significant proportion of teenagers are confirmed.

The aim of my paper was to explain to Lutheran colleagues the place of confirmation in the Church of England in its own particular missionary situation and to show how this particular

¹ The Porvoo Communion was formally established in 1992 through the Porvoo Common Statement. It includes the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, the Church of Ireland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Lithuania, the Church of Norway, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Church of Sweden, the Church in Wales, the Diocese in Europe and the Spanish Episcopal Reformed Church.

The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Latvia act as observers, to monitor cooperation within the Porvoo Communion.

Anglican bishop is trying to apply his inherited theological tradition to the present missionary challenge.

2. I shared the Paper with clergy who attended the Bishop's Lent Book morning in the Diocese of Coventry, in January 2013. I revised the Paper in the light of their responses and presented it at the Bishop's Study Day in November 2013. This version is a further revision following responses to the Paper on the day and afterwards. I am very grateful to have had the chance to develop and refine my ideas with clergy and other colleagues in the diocese and I hope that, as a result, this Paper will be seen as a collaborative venture.
3. The Paper's purpose is three-fold.
 - i. To stimulate theological thinking across the diocese on confirmation and its relation to initiation and participation in the fullness of Christian life.
 - ii. To challenge every parish, benefice and other Christian community in the diocese to ensure that confirmation is fully integrated into its missionary strategy.
 - iii. To encourage every parish, benefice and other Christian community in the diocese to develop accessible processes of (a) evangelism and of (b) initiation into the full involvement in the life and witness of the Church and
 - iv. of (c) training for life, ministry and mission in the life of the Church.
4. I am not too concerned whether clergy, readers and other ministers of the gospel agree with the theology of confirmation proposed in this paper. I would like us to see confirmation, however, as an invaluable missionary tool. Furthermore, I would be glad if it could be seen by us all as a gift hidden in the life of the Church, and a God-given means of grace, for the deeper embrace of Christ into his life and the fuller empowerment of the Spirit for his work.

5. The 58% decline in the number of confirmations since 2000 is firm evidence that we are not using this tool and receiving this gift to its full effect and that we need to address this deficit urgently.²
6. Fundamentally, my hope is that together we will better integrate confirmation into the missionary practice of every parish, benefice and deanery of the diocese.

² In 2000, a total number of 496 candidates were confirmed compared to just 208 in 2013. Confirmation of candidates between the ages of 12 -15 has fallen by 71%. More information on confirmation figures can be found by visiting www.dioceseofcoventry.org/confirmation.

PART TWO: A THEOLOGY OF CONFIRMATION

Confirmation contested

7. Confirmation in the Universal Church is a contested matter. Some ecclesial traditions insist on confirmation as an integral part of Christian initiation. Others do not. Among those who do, some require bishops (and for some these must be bishops in the ‘historic episcopate’) to be tangibly involved in the rite, even if remotely. Although there is a measure of canonical clarity in the Church of England about the place of confirmation in Christian initiation, some sanctioned and much unsanctioned practice (to which I shall refer later), confuses the picture. Moreover, there is considerable disagreement among English Anglicans, reflecting the same disagreement across the Anglican Communion, about the place of confirmation in Christian identity. There are broadly three positions among the Churches that practise confirmation. Brevity requires a certain crudity of expression, for which I hope I can be forgiven.
8. There is what might be called the ‘Catholic position’, that confirmation is some form of sacramental completion of baptism in which the fullness of the Holy Spirit is given. A more qualified definition would be that the life of the Spirit given in baptism is strengthened in confirmation. Either way, confirmation is seen to provide a necessary dynamic of the Spirit to Christian identity. This may take the form that is most common in the Western Church, of confirmation following some years on from baptism, or it may be the form normative in the East, but also commended and adopted in some traditions in the West, of a signification of the Spirit as a distinct initiatory moment immediately after baptism.
9. There is the ‘Reformation’ view, that confirmation completes baptism—and conceptually infant baptism is in mind—by providing an opportunity for candidates to confess and confirm the Faith into which they have been baptised. Generally the Reformation position does not regard confirmation to be a sacrament on the grounds—

most clearly articulated by Luther in the Babylonian captivity and repeated in the Church of England's Articles of Religion (XXV)—that confirmation lacks dominical command and, indeed, 'scriptural proof'. Nevertheless, Luther and Reformed Anglicanism allow confirmation a sacramental character expressed in the laying on of hands.

10. Then there is the 'Revisionist' position that dissociates confirmation from sacramental initiation on the grounds that baptism is sufficient and repackages confirmation as a pastoral rite of adult commitment.

11. The classic Anglican position attempts some sort of balance between the 'Catholic' and 'Reformation' positions, though there are many in the Church of England who hold to the Revisionist position in common with some of the Churches of the Anglican Communion who express it more formally and liturgically. The Book of Common Prayer regards confirmation as an integral part of the process of Christian initiation to be administered by a bishop. Its brief rite, which has clear sacramental characteristics, combines both an expectation of *edification*, leading to conscious confession of faith on the part of those who 'have now come to the years of discretion', and an *epiclesis* of the Spirit for their strengthening in Christian life by the 'daily increase' of the 'manifold gifts of grace'. Confirmation, or at least the desire of confirmation, acts as the gateway to Holy Communion in the Prayer Book. Nevertheless, it should be said that until the development of railways in the nineteenth century, which allowed bishops more mobility, and the Catholic revival in the Church of England, which recharged sacramental and Spirit-giving notions of confirmation, it was probably—at best—unevenly celebrated, and communion was received as much by those desirous of confirmation as by those who had actually received it³.

³ Notwithstanding its commitment to the Western Catholic Position, Roman Catholic practice involves admittance to communion before confirmation, though after a period of instruction. Reformation positions would generally discourage admittance to communion before the adult commitments of confirmation. The Prayer Book allows for admittance to communion of all who are 'ready and desirous to be confirmed'. The Revisionist position generally encourages admittance to communion before confirmation.

12. Today, the situation is complicated by a number of factors.
- i) Our contemporary (*Common Worship*) initiation liturgies include both a post-baptismal signification of the Spirit *and* a rite of confirmation that is required for full sacramental initiation into the life of the Church.
 - ii) Providing certain conditions of preparation are met, children are now permitted to receive Holy Communion before confirmation. Often adults do as well.⁴
 - iii) Teenage candidates for confirmation have plummeted in a way not seen—or not yet seen—in our sister Porvoo churches. At the same time, the proportion of adult candidates for confirmation has become greater and a typical confirmation will have candidates aged from around nine to ninety.
 - iv) Many baptisms are of teenagers or adults, who are then confirmed immediately after baptism or at some point later when the bishop appears. Some do not become confirmed, either because they grow cold in the Faith or because they can see no point to a further rite of initiation.
 - v) Many people, including clergy in the Church of England, are not convinced about the initiatory significance of confirmation and would prefer it to be seen as an optional pastoral rite of affirmation of faith.
 - vi) Many parishes, including several in the Diocese of Coventry, do not attempt to integrate confirmation into their missionary practice.
13. And this is where I get personal. With Bishop, John, I am called to lead the diocese in mission and, therefore, the question that I must ask of confirmation is what part it is to play in the missionary practice of the Church today. By addressing that question, it may

⁴ See note 3 above.

be that the questions which have proved so difficult to answer in the past about the initiatory status and sacramental character of confirmation come into a new focus.

The sacramental action of God clarifying the order of salvation

14. “God unconditionally precedes and man can only follow”⁵, implored Karl Barth. Whether Barth applied his principle of grace to his theology of baptism is not for me to say but it is true for the Porvoo Churches⁶ that the priority of grace lies at the heart of our baptismal theology. Hence, any missionary practice which calls people to conscious confession and intentional following of Christ has to place the challenge of human decision in the context of God’s prior saving work that is signified in baptism. One of the great didactic benefits of sacramental initiation in the economy of God is that it makes very clear that God is the prime mover in salvation—even, through its powerful drama and imagery, in the case of adult believers’ baptism.

15. A question that churches which have been shaped by the Reformation are forced by the doctrine of grace to answer is whether our practice of confirmation meets the same criterion of grace. Does the Reformation emphasis on one’s personal confirmation of baptism undermine the divine confirmation of the calling of the baptised to live by the Spirit which the older understanding of the rite sought to preserve? Is there a proper place for the signification of the Spirit in confirmation which does not undermine the baptismal gift of the Spirit? Aidan Kavanagh is right when he says that, “one thing [confirmation] cannot possibly do is to supply a Holy Spirit who was somehow absent from baptism—as though the Holy Spirit were alien to the baptised until they are confirmed”⁷. At the same time, Thomas Aquinas’ principle

⁵ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 29.

⁶ That is the Church of England and other churches mentioned in note 1.

⁷ Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1988), 117.

that confirmation is given “to confirm’ what it finds already there”⁸ may have something to tell us.

16. What of the life of the Spirit might confirmation signify, and how can this be related to the work of the Spirit through baptism? The Church of England’s confirmation liturgy in its Prayer Book and in its contemporary liturgy suggests that what is signified is not reception of the Spirit, but rather the ongoing appropriation and activity of the Spirit in the life of believers so that the presence of the Spirit may be seen in increasing intensity.⁹ The liturgy prays for the confirmands’ place in the divine life and their participation in the divine work to be demonstrated through the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit in anticipation of the coming of Christ in the ‘everlasting kingdom’.
17. This signification *clarifies* rather than *competes* with baptism in a way that is analogous to the relationship between Jesus’ ascension and his death and resurrection. The ascension of Christ clarifies the reality of his saving death and resurrection and in this sense is the completion of it. It is not that it adds to the salvation of the cross and resurrection but rather that it confirms that the new creation has begun and the power by which God raised Jesus from the dead is now distributed to the Church in gifts of grace that are a ‘working advance’ of the kingdom of God—a working advance in the sense that they not only anticipate the coming kingdom but provide a working capital to be put to use for the sake of the kingdom, and to hasten its arrival. In other words, the ascension is the consolidation, culmination and conclusion to the saving events of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection so that the effects may be applied through his heavenly ministry and appropriated by his people as they are commissioned for the messianic mission through the outpouring of the gift-giving Holy Spirit. The giving of the Spirit through the ascended Christ and the gifts of the Spirit are clearly laid out in such texts as Acts 2.33 and Ephesians 4.7.

⁸ *Summa Theologiae* III, 72, vii, ad. 2.

⁹ This was well expressed by one response to an earlier version of this paper which described confirmation in terms of releasing the Spirit more into our lives and letting the Spirit empower us more in God’s service.

18. In a similar way, confirmation may be seen as consolidation, culmination and conclusion to our initiation into Christ, and as our ecclesial commissioning for intentional involvement in the sign of the messianic mission through the empowering of the gift-giving Spirit. Hence, Tertullian exhorts those preparing for baptism: “Therefore, you blessed ones . . . when you come up from the most sacred bath of the new birth, when you spread out your hands for the first time in your mother’s house with your brethren, ask your Father, ask our Lord, for the special gift of his inheritance, the distributed charisms, which form an underlying feature [of baptism]”.¹⁰
19. In this sense, confirmation is the sign of the completion of our sacramental initiation and the sign of the commissioning of our active service in the messianic mission of Christ ordered within his messianic community. This is the sort of pattern we see in the third century both in Tertullian’s writing and in the liturgy of the *Apostolic Tradition* when the bishop lays hands on the newly baptised and, before anointing them with messianic oil, says:

Lord God, you have made them worthy to receive remission of sins through the laver [that is, bath or font] of regeneration of the Holy Spirit: send upon them your grace, that they may *serve you according to your will*; for to you is glory, to the Father and Son with the Holy Spirit in the holy Church, both now and to the ages of ages.¹¹

20. At the same time, it is worth remembering that confirmation, like other liturgical actions, is the signification, objectification and ritualisation of what is already happening experientially and subjectively in the life of the person. So, saying that confirmation is ‘the sign of the commissioning of our active service in the messianic mission of Christ’ is not to deny what has gone before and what will come afterwards. Rather, it is to say that precisely *the sign of the life*

¹⁰ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, Ch.20.

¹¹ Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. and trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 112.

to which we are called signifies what has already begun, is to continue and will deepen.

An excursus triggered by a Coventry Comment

21. Prompted by a member of the clergy in the Diocese of Coventry I am inclined to think that the pattern of initiation for which I am arguing is discernible in Hebrews 6. The writer exhorts his readers to:

go on towards perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith towards God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement. (Hebrews 6.1-3)

As my colleague makes clear, we have here five key elements of fundamental Christian catechesis (instruction) and initiation into Christian life:

- Repentance (from acts that lead to death);
 - Faith in God (through Jesus Christ);
 - Instruction for baptism (and presumably baptism itself);
 - Laying on of hands (for the Spirit);
 - Teaching about (the eschatological realities of) resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement.
22. The writer implores the Church to ‘go on to perfection’ (6.1) in order to ‘inherit the promises’ (6.12). This is the eschatological language of Christian mission. It is a call to live the life of the kingdom of God and reach out towards all that God has for the world. This is the heart of Christian mission.
23. Very interestingly, and more speculatively, it is worth noting that the writer then goes on to speak about the oath that God made to Abraham after the obedience he showed in the land of Moriah

when he proved himself ready to sacrifice his son Isaac in Genesis 22. The Lord, who has already promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations (eg. Genesis 12. 3,7), now ‘guarantees it by an oath’ (6.17) that ‘he swore by himself’ (6.13). God has, therefore, promised his covenant (‘the unchangeable character of his purpose’) ‘through two unchangeable things’ (6.17). That is a pertinent idea in relation to baptism and confirmation as we will see in a moment.

Furthermore, the writer compares this with an oath that a person swears which is ‘given as confirmation (*bebaiōsin*) [and so] puts an end to all dispute’ (6.16). *Bebaiōsis* is also used in Philippians 1.7 where Paul seems to be saying that the gospel is confirmed in some way by the faith and obedience of the Christians in Philippi. The gospel is, of course, prior to and independent of the life of the Philippian Christians. Nevertheless, its veracity is defended and confirmed by them in the authenticity of their discipleship which displays and performs the gospel so effectively.

24. All this is very interesting and leaves me wondering whether there is some sort of nascent sacramental theology here that will help us to see some of the questions with which this Paper has been wrestling in a clearer light. For example:

- On the question of the sacramental status of confirmation, it is significant that Greco-Roman language and concepts of oaths led directly to theological language of sacraments in the Western Church. The Latin *sacramentum* means oath. Do we see here a connection between the oath that confirms a promise and the Christian rite of confirmation that confirms the promises made at baptism?
- On the question of the relationship between baptism and confirmation, it is significant that in God’s dealings with Abraham (and therefore with all humanity), the Lord has the capacity to guarantee or confirm one unchangeable thing with another unchangeable thing, without in any way undermining the reality of the first. Do we have a

theological precedent for God's use of confirmation to confirm that which he unambiguously promised at baptism?

- On the question of the relationship between confirmation and full, conscious participation in Christian mission, it is significant that the writer to the Hebrews talks about God 'guaranteeing his promise by an oath', so that 'through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us' (6:17-18). Do we not have here a strong indication that a second 'unchangeable thing' may be given in God's grace and kindness to enable us to live more fully for the kingdom, 'to seize the hope that is before us' and, thereby, to draw the world into the 'taste of the heavenly gift' (6:4)?

The sacramental action of God initiating us into active participation in the kingdom of God and its coming

25. A commentator on Barth reminds us that "The Christian life does not end with the reconciliation accomplished vicariously by Christ but we are summoned to participate in this reconciliation as active subjects through particular practices"¹². This seems to be what Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* has in mind by the bishop's post-baptismal prayer and action. It also seems to be the function of confirmation envisaged by Aquinas. The Spirit for Aquinas is not given in confirmation for Christian *identity*—that has already been established in baptism. Rather the Spirit is given in confirmation for Christian *activity* so that we "may be strengthened by the Holy Ghost to publish [our] faith"¹³ and to "receive power to do those things which pertain to the spiritual combat with the enemies of the Faith"¹⁴, empowered "to fight against our visible foes, against

¹² A.J. Cocksworth, 'Karl Barth's Theology of Prayer: Contemplation, Petition, and Invocation' (PhD thesis, the University of Cambridge, 2013), p. 84.

¹³ *ST III*, 72, vi, sc.

¹⁴ *ST III*, 72, v, resp.

the persecutors of the Faith, confessing Christ's name".¹⁵ The anointing with the sign of the cross in oil "on the forehead as in a conspicuous place"¹⁶ is to show publically that we are soldiers signed with "the sign of our leader"¹⁷, and the balm that is mixed with the oil is to make us the fragrance of Christ in a corrupt world.

26. Aquinas' emphasis on our "enrollment as Christian soldiers"¹⁸ through confirmation bears closer study. He describes confirmation as the sacramental means by which we "attain to the perfect age"¹⁹. He means much more of course than what the Book of Common Prayer was later to call 'the years of discretion'. This is not about the threshold of adulthood. He also means something different from entry into some sort of static spiritual existence, exalted above baptismal life. He seems to be envisaging something much more dynamic: a conscious, intentional, active engagement in the life of the kingdom of God ("the perfection of the spiritual age",²⁰ as he puts it) in which we do battle with whatever external forces are resisting its coming. And for this we need "fullness of spiritual strength"²¹. Furthermore, the soldier of the kingdom motif helps Aquinas to explain why both sponsors and bishops are needed for confirmation. The sponsor, as "one who is already enrolled as a Christian soldier"²² brings the baptised to the bishop who is a 'commander' in the messianic army.

27. This is where we have arrived: that confirmation is the sign of the consolidation of our initiation into Christ by the Spirit and, thereby, of our empowerment in the Spirit for active service in the messianic mission under the orders of the Church. Within this framework, the episcopal role of the bishop—as Aquinas hints—begins to make more sense.

28. The bishop bears and shares the apostolic calling of the Church. This apostolate—this sending—into which Jesus gathered his

¹⁵ *ST III*, 72, v, ad. 1.

¹⁶ *ST III*, 72, ix, ad. 1.

¹⁷ *ST III*, 72, iv, resp.

¹⁸ *ST III*, 72, x, ad. 2.

¹⁹ *ST III*, 72, i, resp.

²⁰ *ST III*, 72, viii, ad. 2.

²¹ *ST III*, 72, iv, resp.

²² *ST III*, 72, x, ad. 2.

disciples is nothing less than the sending of the Son by the Father in the Spirit, the movement of the missionary God, to create and redeem the world. The bishop, as the personal sign of the apostolate (the sending) of the Church, is the chief minister of the sacraments of initiation into the life of the kingdom of God and its coming. It is fitting, therefore, that the rite that confirms believers in their baptismal life in Christ and empowers them in their intentional participation in the messianic mission, has a tangible connection with the bishop as the personal and visible expression of continuity with the originating sending of the apostles.

29. We can imagine the visibility of this connection in the early centuries as Hippolytus in Rome lays hold of the newly baptised, prays the Spirit on them, anoints them with sweet smelling oil and kisses them as he sends them into their first experience of the eucharist. It was even more dramatic a hundred years later in Jerusalem, in the early hours of Easter morning, when the newly baptised emerged into the body of the basilica freshly clothed after their naked bath, and Bishop John of Jerusalem, who had been instructing them in the faith for weeks, now laid his hands upon them, poured oil over them and sent them into the heart of the messianic community to celebrate the marriage feast of the Lamb on the day of resurrection.

30. Is there any way contemporary confirmation could capture that sense of incorporation into not only the messianic people but also into the messianic mission, empowered for service with the power that raised Jesus from the dead? That is my dream for confirmations in our own diocese. That I—or our own Bishop John—get hold of the baptised people of God, whether baptised moments or months or years before, and say “join us in the great apostolic mission that stretches back to Jesus’ sending of his disciples and through that to the sending of the people of the twelve tribes of Israel to be a blessing to all the nations, and which reaches back into the heart of the missionary God who sends his Son by the Spirit to make and save the world, and then empowers his disciples with the gifts and graces of God’s Holy Spirit”.

PART THREE: OUR MISSIONARY PRACTICE OF CONFIRMATION

The sacramental action of God used strategically in the missionary policy and practice of a diocese

31. Dreams do not get fulfilled without practical arrangements: so it is time to turn to these. Before doing so, it is worth identifying the broad categories of candidates for confirmation with whom we find ourselves dealing in England.
 - i. There are the young—anywhere between about nine and fifteen—who were baptised as infants. Some of these will have been faithful to Christ through their childhood, taking an active part in the life of the Church. They may already have made a personal commitment to follow Christ. Others will have had only passing contact with the Church, and may not have reached a point of decision for themselves. Among them, maybe, are some children and young people who are very new to the Faith but who have become candidates for baptism and/or confirmation through the work of clergy in schools.
 - ii. Then there are adult candidates for confirmation who were baptised as infants. Similarly, some will have been followers of Christ for most of their lives but will have delayed confirmation for all sorts of reasons, many of them very good ones; indeed some may have come to faith in Church traditions that do not confirm or at least do not confirm through the historic episcopate.
 - iii. Others will be ‘returning apostates’. Baptised as infants, they may have—implicitly or explicitly—turned away from the Faith, only later to return and accept it, ready now to follow Christ fully.
 - iv. Others will be converts—young people and adults of all ages—who have not been baptised and have had little or no

effective contact with the Church but have now found faith in Christ and are ready to enter into full participation in the life and mission of his people. These will need to be baptised as well as confirmed, though in practice some are likely to be baptised in their parishes before coming to the bishop for confirmation.

- v. There are others who have been baptised and confirmed in years gone by but have come now to a lively and committed faith and who are seeking to re-enter their baptism in a public and ritualised way.
32. These five groups, with their various sub-groups, will need different strategies of engagement and different processes of sacramental initiation. The common theme, though, will be full incorporation into the messianic mission of the messianic community, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Many of these candidates will have been brought to this point of their spiritual journey by courses and processes for enquirers into the faith. This is one of the great encouragements in the life of the Church of England. We have a number of such courses that appeal to different styles of Church life across Anglicanism such as the Start Course, the Emmaus Course, the Alpha Course, the Christianity Explored Course and now the early part of the Pilgrim Course.
 33. They bear many resemblances to the catechumenate processes that took root in the life of the Church in the third and fourth centuries and that have been structured for contemporary use in the Roman Catholic Church's *Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults* (RCIA). They combine hospitality and accompaniment with teaching and some element of worship and broadly correspond to the periods of enquiry and acceptance in the RCIA. They are producing some wonderful fruit in the lives of people whose are finding faith in Christ for the first time or a past or latent faith being rekindled into life. Generally, however, they are less good at integrating the spiritual journey of their participants with the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, though some, especially the Pilgrim Course, are better at this than others.

34. How might we attempt to better integrate these excellent spheres of Christian evangelism and nurture into the sacramental processes of the Church for the making of disciples who are sent by Christ to participate fully in the apostolic mission to proclaim the kingdom of God until he “appears a second time . . . to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9.28)?
35. The ancient patterns of evangelism and initiation moved from **exploration** of the Faith to serious **engagement** with it and then to the point of **election** (essentially a point of existential decision-making when catechumenates chose to follow Christ publically and to take their full place in the life and mission of Christ’s Church through the sacraments of initiation).
36. The various enquiry courses that are taking place across the Church are good at bringing people to a point of appropriation or re-appropriation of the Faith. It should not be difficult to structure this culminating stage in the course in such a way that it becomes not only a point of confession of faith in Christ but a point of **election** for full participation in the life of the Church through sacramental initiation, whether that be baptism and confirmation, just confirmation or even renewal of baptismal (and confirmation) vows by those who have been previously confirmed.
37. At this point, following ancient patterns, a new and further process of catechesis begins for those who have **elected to follow Christ fully and enlisted into his missionary work**. This is the time for which Lent was designed in the ancient Church: a season of purification and enlightenment for those heading for their baptism, confirmation and first participation in the eucharist. But other seasons can work as well depending on the rhythms of the parish.
38. In one sense there is nothing particularly new about the catechetical content of this **enlisted** stage of disciple-making but there is a shift in intensity and focus. The aim is to form the converted for active, intentional participation in the kingdom of God and its coming.

39. It is sometimes a cause of concern for evangelical consciences that the New Testament pattern of baptism following hard on the heels of confession of Christ (as with the Ethiopian Church in Acts 8.35-38) had become, by the fourth century, a much more elongated practice and that this stretched and staged process of initiation is being commended today. The reason is that converts to Christ in the New Testament, and in times now gone by in most of British culture, were already formed in some sense in, let us say, *godly society*. The situation was very different for the Church of later centuries as it moved beyond Judaic culture, and the same applies to much of Britain today as people are not only increasingly distanced from the Church but are formed by a culture that is increasingly alien to the gospel. Alan Kreider describes how the ancient patterns of catechesis aimed ‘to re-form pagan people, to resocialize them, to deconstruct their old world, and reconstruct a new one, so that they would emerge as Christian people who would be at home in communities of freedom’.²³
40. The Pilgrim course, having been published in 2013, is still new and somewhat unknown. Its structure, though, looks very promising and follows the sort of pattern that I have been proposing. It commends a season of ‘Sowing’ in which people are attracted to the Faith and challenged to explore it more fully. It then envisages a ‘Nurture’ or ‘Follow’ period and provides four courses which, at the appropriate point, lead to baptism and or confirmation. It then proposes a ‘Grow’ period and offers four more courses to take people deeper into the life of Christ²⁴.
41. There is much for the Church of England to learn about effective catechesis not only from the example of the ancient Church but also from our Porvoo partners with their disciplined and ordered approach to confirmation preparation, which puts us to shame. At the same time, there may be a challenge for all of our Churches to

²³ Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 1995), 23.

²⁴ More information about the Pilgrim course can be found at <http://www.pilgrimcourse.org>. From time to time the Diocesan Training Partnership provide training courses about *Pilgrim* and other similar courses.

shape our preparation for sacramental initiation for the sort of Christian activity envisaged by Aquinas—being witnesses and, if so called, martyrs, for the cause of Christ in an inhospitable world, contending for Christ with those who contend against him.

42. This sort of growing of the Christian missionary will involve **formation in the truth of Christ**, the reformation of the mind according to God's 'secret and hidden' wisdom of the cross (1 Corinthians 2.7).
43. To be learners (*mathetes*, disciples) of Christ and his cross requires **formation in the way of Christ**, being deeply and sometimes painfully shaped in Christian character. In his time Origen noted that only those capable of changing their 'conduct and habits' are 'capable of hearing the word'.²⁵ The ancients knew that the integrity of the Christian community and its witness depended on converts who could in some authentic way reflect the light and love and peace of Christ. The same is true in modern British culture where the capacity to embody authentically one's beliefs and to demonstrate their practical usefulness is a fundamental criterion of claims for truth. For Faith Communities this involves more than the testing of individuals. It is also an examination of the group. As Lesslie Newbigin was fond of saying, "the Congregation is the hermeneutic of the gospel"²⁶, the environment in which the Christian proclamation of the coming kingdom of God is—*literally*—fleshed out in a community of people who anticipate its arrival.
44. Hence, at the heart of the shaping of disciples is **formation in the life of Christ**—the life that Christ lives before the Father through the Spirit and the life that Christ lives, through the Spirit, for the world, the life that Rowan Williams reminds us is "simultaneously in *sinu Patris* and in *sinu peccatoris*: in the bosom of the Father and in the bosom of the sinner".²⁷ To be situated in the life of the

²⁵ Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 22.5. Quoted in Alan Kreider, *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom*, 22.

²⁶ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1989), 222–34.

²⁷ Rowan Williams, "'The Fellowship of the Baptized' — The John Coventry Memorial address" (talk given at a meeting of Inter-Church Families at the Church of the

missionary Messiah is to be inexorably bound to what Bonhoeffer called “Christ’s encounter with the world”.²⁸

45. I have suggested that the sacramental initiation processes of the Church should intersect with the evangelistic courses of parishes at the point of decision-making. Those who elect to express their intentional, active participation in the Christian community and its mission should be enrolled on an intensive programme of training that prepares them for baptism, confirmation or renewal of vows — **enlisted for service**, as I have called it. In order to make this work in the life of a diocese, attention would need to be given to the timing of both processes and of the rites of initiation themselves. This should not be difficult. If confirmation were to be offered at, say, pre-Advent and Epiphany, Eastertide, Ascension-Pentecost and Michaelmas, both stages (the evangelism and the enlisting) could be timed accordingly and the bishops’ missionary ministry in the diocese designed around it as they call and challenge people to engage with those courses at the appropriate point.
46. In *Common Worship*, confirmations may end with a Commission in which the newly confirmed are sent to live out their Christian identity in the world, often leaving church holding a lighted candle, as they carry the light of Christ into their everyday lives. This is another hinge point in their formation. Just as the ancient patterns of initiation followed-up the awesome ceremonies of initiation with mystagogical catechesis in which the full significance of their sacramental experience was explained, so our processes of evangelism, catechesis and sacramental initiation should lead to a further period of training and mentoring for the particular apostolate of the newly initiated to which God is sending them. What is the actual form of their participation in the messianic mission in their workplace, their families, their friendship groups

Immaculate Conception, Farm St., London W1, 20th March 2010). Transcript available online at <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/583/the-fellowship-of-the-baptized-the-john-coventry-memorial-address>.

²⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6)*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 159.

and leisure pursuits, among the poor and dispossessed, the sick and suffering, and how are they to be supported to exercise it?

47. One expression of their apostolate (their ‘sending’) will be to share their faith in the saving Messiah with others and then accompany them through the cycles of evangelism, catechesis and missionary training that will continue through the year. Their public witness in the service will have been a powerful testimony to many people. Hence, at the end of each service Bishop John and I would like to be able to invite those who have been challenged or touched by what has happened to join the next evangelistic course and/or the next enlisting course.

A final word on the proposed patterns

48. The sort of pattern, therefore, I have in mind follows:

- i. Evangelistic activity ideally involving some form of evangelistic type course (The Pilgrim Course calls this stage ‘Sowing’. In paragraph 35 I have called it the process of ***exploration*** of the Faith leading to serious ***engagement*** and then to the point of ***election or existential decision-making***).
- ii. Intensive preparation for baptism and/or confirmation in which those who have elected to follow Christ are being made ready to serve him fully. (The Pilgrim Course calls this stage ‘Nurture’. In paragraph 44 I have called it ***enlisting for service***.)
- iii. Baptisms and/or confirmations at the following points in the year:
 - i. pre-Advent and Epiphany,
 - ii. Easter Day and Eastertide,
 - iii. around Pentecost,
 - iv. around Michaelmas.

iv. Further formation in the way, truth and life of Christ which necessarily involves more focused training and mentoring for their particular role in the life and mission of the Church. (The Pilgrim Course calls this stage 'Growth'.

In paragraph 3 I have called it ***training for life, ministry and mission***. It may well involve and/or lead onto The Bishop's Certificate in Discipleship and the Bishop's Certificate in Mission and Ministry).

49. There are various practical questions that this paper has not attempted to answer. Some of them are addressed in a 'Questions and Answers' document which can be found in the confirmation resources section of the Diocesan Website:

www.dioceseofcoventry.org/confirmation