

Credible profession of faith and admission to the sacraments

A framework for discussion for kirk sessions

1 The congregation as a community in which faith can be explored, experienced and expressed

- 1.1 One of the joys of church life is accompanying individuals on a journey to exploring, experiencing and expressing faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord.
- 1.2 Two particular moments in which this happens are when baptism is requested and people are coming into full communicant membership for the first time. Of course, these are but two moments in an ongoing culture of congregational life which creates an environment in which we are all constantly seeking to encourage one another in the challenge of living God's way in every area of our lives.
- 1.3 There is a particular role and responsibility for ministers and ruling elders to guide and shepherd the flock and to do so in a way that is loving. This role extends to conversations about admission to the sacraments.
- 1.4 As in all areas of the life of the congregation, *'ruling elders as members of Kirk Session... work together with the minister in the oversight and government of the congregation, for the upbuilding of God's people in spiritual fruitfulness and holy concord, and for the extension of Christ's kingdom among all people'* (*The Code, paragraph 30, section 1*).

For discussion

How do we as a kirk session take responsibility together for admitting to the sacraments? What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of how you do that?

2 Guiding and preparing others in exploring what it means to come into full church membership

- 2.1 Kirk sessions helping others explore and seek to understand what it means to come into full church membership and to express a credible profession of faith has been a long standing practice in PCI.

The Code describes how, *'a minister shall encourage baptism of the children of all such as may make a credible profession of faith'*, and that, *'a minister shall not decide on admission or refusal of a person to baptism without the authority of the Kirk Session'* (*The Code, paragraph 83, sections 1&2*).

Similarly, *'the Kirk Session shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have been baptised, who make a profession of faith in the Lord, and whose character is consistent with such a profession.'* *'Persons proposing to take communion for the first time shall be carefully instructed by the minister. When the Kirk Session has satisfied itself as to their knowledge, soundness in the faith and Christian experience, their names shall be entered*

on the roll of communicants and be read to the congregation' (The Code, paragraph 40, sections 1&2).

- 2.2 The precise details of how this happens will vary from congregation to congregation and depend on the particular circumstances and personality of those involved. However, it is important that conversations do take place and instruction is provided and that this is approached in an open, encouraging, positive tone. As this happens, a space is opened up for growing personal understanding of what is involved in knowing God as our heavenly Father, trusting Christ as Saviour and Lord, along with the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth and empower us to live by it. If conducted well, real life implications of following Christ as Lord will surface in this conversation. Some will be general, but others may be very particular. Whatever time and care is taken by minister and kirk session is worth the effort, and occasionally awkwardness, if the whole congregation is to share the joy of those publically professing faith and coming to enjoy the privileges of full membership.

For discussion

What challenges do we as a kirk session face in helping others explore and express a credible profession of faith?

What might be the long-term benefits to our congregation of a kirk session adopting this approach?

3 Asking for too much? Looking for too little?

- 3.1 Helping others explore the nature of a credible profession of faith involves sensitively listening and encouraging reflection. The aim of this pastoral process is always inclusive – to enable a person to make a public profession of faith, depending on the grace of God. It is possible for our approach to ask for too much, such as proof of inner spiritual rebirth. We might also expect one who is making a profession to have attained a maturity of faith that is unrealistic. Similarly we might unwittingly look for a particular shape and language in the articulation of someone's story in how and when they came to faith. Equally, however, it is possible to be looking for too little. We shy away from our pastoral responsibility as elders if we fail to recognise that some professions might not be credible, when an area of their life seems openly and obviously at odds with the fruit of true faith in Christ and commitment to follow him as Lord.
- 3.2 The balance we strike in this task is crucial if we are not to needlessly discourage some, or carelessly encourage others, in entering into the privileges and duties of full church membership. The following material from Dr Martyn C. Cowan, Lecturer in Historical Theology at Union Theological College, helps us to consider where we

might be imbalanced in our approach to credible profession of faith. It is based on two key passages of Scripture, Jesus' Parable of the Weeds in Matthew 13:24-30 and his teaching in Matthew 18:15-20.

3.3 Asking for too much (Read: Matthew 13:24-30)

No one can see into the heart of another individual, and so elders should not attempt to distinguish those who are truly inwardly regenerate from those who are merely outwardly nominal. A Session can only make its decision on the basis of what it can see – it should seek neither a 'mere profession' nor an 'accredited profession,' but instead a 'credible profession'.

In practice, this means that when Kirk Sessions are judging a profession of faith they must avoid the twin errors of what we will call 'indifference and rigorism'. With rigorism the bar is set too high and with indifference the bar is set too low. There is rich Scriptural testimony warning us about either of those errors.

We begin with the danger of rigorism. Here one significant passage to turn to is our Lord's parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matthew 13. There, Jesus describes himself as the kingly-farmer who is planting seeds that grow up as Christian believers – the sons of the kingdom (v.38); these plants are the righteous who have God as their Father (v.43). The boundaries of the field are vast – Christ's kingdom is growing around the whole world (v. 38).¹ Now while the master's servants were sleeping, an intruder came at night and sowed weeds in the field of wheat before slipping off into the darkness. According to Jesus, these weeds represent the children of the evil one (v.38).

Eventually the servants saw the problem with these weeds and spoke to the master about it (v. 27). The wise farmer knew right away that this is the work of a malicious enemy, who was hell-bent on trying to destroy the kingdom (v.28).

One of the main reasons behind the servants' confusion was that the weed in question was not just any kind of weed. These were not dandelions or thorns; this particular weed was called darnel. Darnel was the bane of wheat farmers because to begin with it is almost indistinguishable from wheat; in colour and height it looked just like the real thing. It is only with time that the differences start to emerge. It is only when it develops a seed head that you realise that Darnel is actually counterfeit wheat.

According to Jesus' parable not everything that looks like wheat is wheat. This parable is teaching us that in the visible church, growing right in amongst the good wheat, there will always be weeds. It is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew 7:21: 'Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord", shall enter the kingdom of heaven.'

¹ This line of interpretation which understands the phrase 'the field is the world' (v.38) as speaking of the church spread throughout the world follows the tradition of Augustine, Calvin, and the Westminster Assembly (WCF 25.5).

That is what the Reformed tradition means when it says that the church will remain a 'mixed multitude' until the end of the age.² True and false believers grow up in the church, side-by-side. Just like dandelion and wheat, sometimes it is very difficult to tell them apart.

In the parable, the master's servants had not yet understood the implication of this. Some of them were quick to volunteer to go and deal with the weeds. They said 'we'll physically uproot them' (v. 28). Now, you can't fault them for their zeal. There is no indifference here; they want to try to put everything right immediately. Their goal was good, but their method wasn't the master's. With great wisdom Jesus says 'no, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them' [v. 29]. Our master says that we are to wait patiently until the harvest at the judgment. We must avoid the danger of rigorism. Jesus says let them exist side-by-side, as a mixed multitude, because I will not lose even one weak stalk of grain.

You see, at this stage of history, the servants cannot always distinguish between the weeds and the wheat. That means that overzealous servants who try to uproot all weeds might, inadvertently, damage the genuine crop. The danger of rigorism is that some of the wheat would needlessly be uprooted.

3.4 Looking for too little (Read: Matthew 18:1-20)

Let us now consider this second danger, indifference. With this approach, the bar is set too low: any profession is assumed to be adequate for admission to baptism or to the Lord's Table. One of the most significant passages that warns us against indifference is Matthew 18:15-20. This is found in a chapter which draws together a collection of Jesus' teaching on the church. In these verses, Jesus uses the language of 'binding' and 'loosing' in order to explain to the leaders of the church that they have been given 'the keys of the kingdom' which can lock and unlock (v. 18). There should be no room for indifference because Christ himself has granted the leaders of his church the authority to open the door and close it on his behalf (cf. Matt. 16:19).³ As servants of the King they undertake incredibly significant work, opening the door to church membership and then into the full privileges and duties of communicant membership.

As he teaches this, our Lord lays out a process for dealing with public sin. That process can eventually reach a point where the church is told about the sin (v. 17). The Reformed church has understood this to mean the matter being brought to the elders in the courts of the church. There the elders decide the matter upon good and sufficient evidence. Jesus grants the church the power to discipline those who are unrepentant. In our Lord's words, those who refuse to listen to the church are to 'be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.'

There are several things to note about the passage which speaks of the exercise of 'the keys of the kingdom.'⁴ First, Jesus deals with church discipline in a discourse which calls

² For this theme in Matthew's gospel see 7:15-20; 13:47-48; 22:11-13; 24:45-51; 25:1-3.

³ Of course, churches can err and so there is the right of appeal to a higher court of the church.

⁴ WCF 30.2,4.

us to a life of humility in which 'the little ones' are the 'greatest in the kingdom of heaven.' Therefore, following Jesus' method is not incompatible with humility [vv.1-4]. Secondly, the context in which these instructions are given is one in which Jesus warns us about our perennial temptation to treat sin as something relatively inconsequential [18:7-9]. Thirdly, we read about this process of discipline in a passage in which we are told that the Father has sent his Son to seek out those who wander away, and that restoration results in great joy [18:10-14]. We could summarise the first half of this chapter as teaching that the Church is a community divinely devised to counter our tendencies to go astray, excusing our behaviour, and not caring for those who are prone to stumble. Fourthly, having outlined a process that can, in some circumstances, result in excommunication, Jesus gives an incredible promise to his disciples. When they, or their successors, are faithfully engaged in this work as a court of the church their decisions reflect what God has already determined. Remember, the immediate context here is a matter of discipline (18:18-19). Jesus Christ stands behind the elders that he has ordained both when they are opening and closing the door. How can this possibly be? Because Christ, by his Spirit, will be present amongst the elders whenever they are gathered together in the name, constituted to do his work, according to his word [18:20]. The King and head of the Church says, 'There I am among them'. Note, this is a promise which, in its specific context, applies to situations in which the church is making those difficult decisions. Lastly, these 'hard sayings' on church discipline are immediately followed by powerful words about the church being a community of grace that forgives others as Christ as forgiven us. If an individual refuses to listen 'to the church' they are to be treated as a 'Gentile or a tax collector' – the very people to whom the gracious call of the gospel goes out (9:9-11; 11:19). When our brother or sister repents, we are to be willing to forgive seventy-seven times over (18:21-35).

The notion of a credible profession of faith is the Reformed tradition's way of seeking to avoid these opposite dangers of either rigorism or indifference. It is an approach that endeavours to hold together all that Jesus says to us about who we are to regard as members of his church. It recognises that for the church of this age, spread across the world, wheat and weeds will grow together. It also submits to Jesus' teaching about the need for discipline. Not any and every profession is to be judged as credible. In this calling we are not left alone. The Lord of the church has given us his word. When elders are gathered together in his name to make hard and difficult decisions he is there amongst them.

For discussion

In journeying with others towards exploring and expressing a credible profession of faith, does your process tend towards an 'asking for too much' or 'looking for too little' approach? How might you need to adjust what you do and how you do it to better reflect the teaching of Scripture and the church?

4 What is involved in accompanying others on their journey towards exploring and professing faith?

- 4.1 There are three key areas involved in accompanying those seeking baptism or admission to full communicant membership to explore and profess their faith:
- Their understanding of the basics of Christian faith relating to the profession of faith they will be making and the promises they will be taking
 - Their general consistency of life with that profession of faith
 - In exceptional cases, addressing any particular issues in which an area of their life seems openly and obviously at odds with Christian belief, lifestyle or values.
- 4.2 The process of admission to the sacraments is something which sits within the wider ongoing means of discipleship which happen both before and after any conversation. As this specific conversation happens, it is not an all or nothing moment, but takes place as part of the ongoing ministry of the Word and community of God's people.
- 4.3 Once the conversation opens, it is wise and respectful always to leave space for people to decide that proceeding is not for them at this moment.
- 4.4 There is no need to rush. Take time in allowing discussion of the three areas above. Explore each fully.
- 4.5 If there are particular issues in which an area of lifestyle seems openly and obviously at odds with Christian belief, lifestyle or values, explore how these can be wisely brought to a resolution allowing the profession of a credible faith. Be sensitive to individual circumstances, while at all times observing and respecting the teaching of Scripture and the standards and policies of the Church.⁵ Allow time for due consideration and ensure clarity in all that is said and done. All this should be approached with a pastoral heart, and obviously with respect for the principle of confidentiality.

5 The Code: The book of Constitution and Government of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland paragraph 104

- (1) The General Assembly is the supreme court of the Church, representing in one body the whole Church, including all subordinate courts and particular congregations, and acting as its supreme legislative, administrative and judicial authority, in dealing with all matters brought before it.
- (2) As such authority, the Assembly exercises the powers stated by this Code; and, in particular, it may -
 - (a) deliberate upon and superintend matters which concern the whole Church in its doctrine, worship, witness, discipline and government, and declare the mind of the Church thereupon;
 - (b) issue such directions and take such other action as it may find conducive to the welfare of the Church and the fulfilment of the Church's duties or the well-being of the community; and
 - (c) deal with any matter, whether within or concerning the Church, which may arise and for which no other provision has been made.
- (3) Decisions of the Assembly are final and binding upon the whole Church, but a member of the Assembly who dissents from a decision may require a statement of the fact of his dissent to be recorded in the minutes, although he shall not thereby free himself from obligation loyally to implement the decision so long as it stands unaltered.

- 4.6 Acknowledge that your kirk session will not always get the decision right, as only God knows the heart of another individual. However, take confidence that when elders are gathered together in his name to make hard and difficult decisions he is there among you.

For discussion

What can we as a kirk session learn from the guidance offered in the section above?

5 Further suggestions for consideration

- 5.1 Having worked through the material so far, it may be that you are challenged as a kirk session about the need to change something you do, or the way that you do it. The following suggestions are offered for the consideration of congregations arising from the practice of others and the teaching of the church.
- 5.2 Rather than the conversation about admission to the sacraments and recommendation of candidates being undertaken by the whole kirk session or the minister alone, why not involve a small group of members of Session in this work who can then report back to the whole kirk session?
- 5.3 Sometimes it may not be possible for parents to have their children baptised, because, on exploration of what is involved, they are unable to make a credible profession of faith. This need not be treated as the end of the matter. Guidelines approved by the General Assembly in 1974 addressing the area of Sacramental Discipline in the Baptism of Infants, encourage minister and kirk session to, 'watch over all such cases so that (these children) might come to baptism as soon as profession of faith may properly be made by themselves if not by their parents.' Could you keep a record of those families where children have not been baptised and find ways of prayerfully and pro-actively seeking to exercise particular pastorally sensitive evangelism in such situations?
- 5.4 The possibility of a Service of Thanksgiving (Dedication) for a Child where parents are not able to make baptismal vows is mentioned in the revised Statement on Baptismal Discipline following the 1973 debate in the Assembly, though the greatest forethought and care is urged. ('Report of Doctrine Committee', Reports to the General Assembly, 1974, pp.18, 22.) An outline for such a service is offered in the PCI Book of Public Worship page 24 which can be found on the PCI website www.presbyterianireland.org/Resources/Sacraments/Book-of-Public-Worship.aspx.

6 Suggested Prayer

Lord of the Church,

We give you thanks for your Fatherly love which tends and guides us in the life of our congregation;

We give you thanks for your redeeming love which offers salvation and life in Christ – reaching wide to embrace any, and all, who in sincerity and faith put their trust in him and acknowledge him as Lord of their lives.

We give you thanks for the Holy Spirit who opens to us the loving wisdom of the Word and helps us to walk in its grace and truth.

We thank you for your Church into which we are called, invited and find full expression of Christian faith and community.

We thank you for the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper in which we are reminded of your love and renewed in our walk with you.

We thank you for our calling as elders and our role as kirk session in the leadership of this congregation.

Help us, we pray, as we seek to accompany others in exploring and expressing a credible profession of faith as part of their journey of discipleship and church membership.

Help us to be wise, welcoming, warm and winsome in this task.

Help us to find balance in avoiding the twin pitfalls of asking for too much, or looking for too little.

Help us to help others to understand the Christian faith and embrace the Christian life, so that they, and we as a whole congregation, might share the joy of professing our faith in Christ together and so encourage one another.

Help us to be careful and prayerful in these aspects of our congregational life, to find fresh confidence in you as the one who is always among us as we gather as a kirk session to seek your will and further your work.

Lord of the Church,
hear our prayer,
for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen



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