

Executive Presbyterian's Report February 2016

I had opportunity recently to attend the annual Association of Presbyterian Church Educator's (APCE) Conference. It is an occasion to hear the latest thinking and trends in how our Presbyterian and Reformed faith may be nurtured in all of us and delivered to future generations. It is also a chance for me to connect with some of the folks from Heartland Presbytery that are engaged in the vital work of Christian education. Our presbytery was well represented by 16 folks participating in various roles at the event. I was largely unaware of APCE and its event, until my service with the General Assembly Office of Stewardship. Interestingly the Office of Stewardship had not historically perceived a role for the Christian educator in stewardship. In spite of the fact that we produced *Stu Bear, Choices, Covenants of Stewardship* and other stewardship curriculum. It was one of those unfortunate situations in the church where the issue of "who" got in the way of why, what and how. The Office of Stewardship worked with stewardship committees, because that was who we were supposed to serve. Never mind that stewardship committees rarely chose curriculum for their congregations. I was fortunate to be there as that road block came down. I experienced the value of APCE and its work and have attended regularly since. I would commend it to all of us, teaching elders, whose very title implies that we have a primary role in education and faith development. I would likewise commend it to ruling elders, volunteers and church staff with responsibilities in Christian education. This is a vital work of our churches and those who do it should be well equipped. I fear we put too little emphasis on making sure that this work is done well and effectively across the church.

Among my observations this year is a renewed examination of what we now call confirmation. There is a growing realization that we have not really had a developed understanding of the purpose and process of confirmation. We sort of backed into confirmation when the table was opened to children 40 years ago and communicants' classes became obsolete. Traditionally it served to spur a maturity of faith, beyond the simple lesson of the primary departments of our Sunday Schools. Much of our early education is basic Bible stories without context or critical exploration. Then as our children "come of age" we deepen the teaching, explore the historical settings of stories, and apply the text to current situations. Princeton Seminary, PCUSA curriculum publishing, along with four other denominations a with Lily grant are exploring how we are attempting that shift with today's confirmation classes and whether we are effective. Much of the early investigation suggests we are not. There is an early suggestion that we lose many of our young adults, because we do not adequately move them for the simple faith of the primary department to a mature faith that addresses the issues of their young adult and adult lives. A full third of mainline confirmation classes are only 6 weeks in length and two thirds are less than 6 months. Once upon a time we attempted this transition with a year or even two years of confirmation studies. 47% of congregations surveyed to date have no Bible reading in their confirmation studies. We can hope that all of the Presbyterian congregations were in the other 53%, but I wouldn't bet on it. Another 21% said they assigned the reading of single book of the Bible. When I taught confirmation as a student pastor our congregation had a two year program, a year of Bible and a year of Church history, the creeds and confessions. The question being explored in the study is whether confirmation becomes graduation from church rather than an empowering rite of passage into fuller discipleship, because we are poorly equipping our young people for the latter.

You can learn more and take the survey on confirmation in your own setting at www.theconfirmationproject.com . They are looking at much more than the length and content of our classes. They are looking at the latest teaching in brain science and how adolescents learn. They are

exploring the social aspects of learning and the importance of relational elements of confirmation education. I am personally intrigued by the relational aspect. I have mentioned to many of you that members of my communicants class still get together, are still good friends, spiritual advisors to one another, and continue to hold each other in the church. I am not sure we would have made the same bond with one other or the church or developed the same sustaining faith and discipleship, had the program been 6 weeks or 6 months. We'll have to see what the study finds.

Confirmation was not the theme or even the main component of the event, but it was the piece that struck a chord with me. I discovered some research that I hope will soon bring guidance to our churches as to best practices for nurturing our children to a mature and enduring faith and practice of Christian life. I would encourage you to visit the website, participate in the survey and watch for the learnings, that we may serve Christ, Christ's church and the next generation of disciples well.