

Start-up faith: A confirmation conundrum

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 4, 2003](#) issue

At one of our church's weekly staff meetings the youth minister said he had a problem and needed his colleagues' advice. In the course of teaching the confirmation class, he had asked the young people to write their own statement of faith. The problem, he said, was that one of the students didn't believe much of anything, though he was happily involved in the confirmation process. The question our colleague posed for us was elegantly simple: "Can you be confirmed in this church if you don't believe in God?"

What ensued was a wide-ranging and good conversation. Positions ranged from "Of course not! Belief in God is basic to all the rest. You can't possibly be a confirmed church member if you don't believe" to "Of course! Why not? Jesus never asked his disciples to write a credo. He simply invited them to follow, and they did. Who knows what they believed about God?"—with all points in between. The question pushed us to think not only about the purpose of confirmation, but about the aims of youth ministry. What exactly do we hope to accomplish?

The discussion prompted me to reminisce about the youth programs I encountered growing up. My experience was probably typical of most Presbyterians of that time. There simply wasn't much for us. We went to church with our parents, attended Sunday school, and were confirmed while in junior high—in my case, by memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism and then reciting questions and answers for the Session during Holy Week. It wasn't until I attended church camp one summer that I discovered a community beyond the walls of my home congregation. (At camp I also discovered that being a young Christian did not preclude having a little fun—there were softball games, a swimming pool and girls.)

My youth experience was considerably enriched by regular attendance, with my next-door-neighbor chums, at Baptist Young People's Union on Sunday evenings, because there wasn't much happening at my own church. The Baptists had lively

music—"I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy, down in my heart!"—as well as Bible memorization competitions, food and hay rides.

Looking back, I'm glad my confirmation experience did not require me to write a personal credo. I'm sure I would have come up with something acceptable, but I doubt very much that it would have had much authenticity. I was interested in Jesus and I liked church—and that was pretty much it. My faith was at an early stage of a long, evolutionary process which continues still, and I look back with gratitude at all the experiences along the way.

I am greatly heartened that some of the church's best and brightest people are putting their intelligence and imagination to the ongoing task of being the church for and with young people. They are seeking to help youth formulate their faith—but not necessarily in verbal formulas. Several articles in this issue remind us of how challenging this work is—and how exciting and important.

By the way, we did confirm the agnostic.