

Note: The Faith Formation Committee will also submit an annual report to synod with additional recommendations and resources, which will be distributed by way of the *Agenda for Synod 2011*.

Faith Formation Committee
Irene Bakker
Peter Choi
Gerard L. Dykstra, *ex officio*
Jill Friend
Syd Hielema
Pat Nederveld
H. David Schuringa
Howard Vanderwell, secretary
John D. Witvliet, chairperson

Appendix C

Children at the Table: Toward a Guiding Principle for Biblically Faithful Celebrations of the Lord's Supper, Revised Edition

Note: Synod 2010 received this document "as a sufficient foundational basis for the adoption of the guiding principle" about children's participation at the Lord's Supper and "refer[red] it to the churches for study and feedback, with the understanding that the Faith Formation Committee [would] continue to incorporate changes and suggestions to the document." Synod also "specifically encourage[d] the Faith Formation Committee to include (1) a more detailed study of the command to 'examine oneself' as stated in 1 Corinthians 11:28 and (2) a comparison and contrast with the 'confirmation' process of other Christian traditions" (*Acts of Synod 2010*, p. 812). This revised edition incorporates these recommended changes.

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I. Report overview: Key ideas

The Lord's Supper is a gracious gift of God that sustains and nourishes our faith. In response to our mandate to study the role of children at the Lord's Supper, this document proposes the following principle:

All baptized members are welcome to the Lord's Supper for age- and ability-appropriate obedience to biblical commands about participation, under the supervision of the elders. The elders have responsibility to nurture grateful and obedient participation by providing encouragement, instruction, and accountability in the congregation. Requiring a formal public profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper is one pastoral approach to consider, but is not required by Scripture or the confessions.

This approach, which is different from both the standard case for and the standard case against welcoming young children to the table, is developed out of the following convictions:

1. All baptized persons, regardless of age, are members of the church. Church membership comes not upon profession of faith but upon baptism.
2. We are invited to the table out of sheer grace as members of God's covenant people and not because of our profession of faith or our level of comprehension.
3. When we are invited, each participant is called to age- and ability-appropriate obedience to biblical commands about participation at the Lord's Supper.
4. We must learn to see the commands about participation in the Lord's Supper as life-giving gifts, not onerous burdens.

5. First Corinthians 11:17-34 is an especially significant text for understanding faithful participation in the Lord's Supper, inhospitality, and calls for greater unity in the body of Christ. The text is not primarily concerned about children's participation but rather focuses on unrepentant or inhospitable adults. At the same time, the text has implications for all participants at the table.
6. The elders of a congregation have responsibility for cultivating both the gracious invitation to the table and obedient participation at the table.
7. At times, discussions about the Lord's Supper have slipped into one of two opposing errors: (a) focusing too much on achieving a level of cognitive understanding prior to participation, and (b) minimizing the importance of theological reflection and learning about deeper anticipation. Calling for "age- and ability-appropriate participation" addresses both problems at once, resisting the idea that children need to arrive at a certain level of comprehension before partaking and resisting the kind of unthinking participation that can set in over time for any worshiper.
8. Requiring a public profession of faith before participation in the Lord's Supper is a wise pastoral practice in some circumstances, but it is not a biblically mandated or confessionally required practice. Each church council should promote age- and ability-appropriate obedience at the table, as described in the Bible and in the Reformed confessions, and may choose to require public profession of faith if appropriate.
9. This approach commends common criteria and a complementary set of practices for welcoming children to the table. The common principle and common criteria proposed below promise to help us to resist congregationalism, even though our practices may vary according to culture and ministry context.

II. Background

A. *Pastoral concern*

This report arises out of the heartfelt questions of many CRC members about Lord's Supper practices:

- The parent who wonders, "If our young children can be baptized, why can't they participate in the Lord's Supper?"
- The *Banner* reader who can't imagine how people can even think about young children at the table, in light of 1 Corinthians 11.
- The youth leader who is frustrated about restrictions that keep some young people from participating in the Lord's Supper at an ecumenical youth rally.
- College students who love Jesus but haven't made a public profession of faith, are now quite removed from the life of their home church, and now feel drawn to participate in the Lord's Supper at a campus ministry event, but also feel guilty about doing so.
- The elders who are deeply saddened that their 10-year-old Sunday school students who deeply love Jesus are asked to pass plates of communion bread and cups on to their parents without partaking.

- The church council who must respond to a family who transfers from another congregation in which their children have participated at the table without making a public profession of faith and now asks for the same privileges.

Though the following pages are focused on biblical study and assessing theological arguments, these pastoral questions are never far from our minds. In fact, we hope that the following pages help us realize how valuable corporate biblical and theological reflections are when addressing questions of pastoral practice. This document develops a principle that we believe can be helpful in addressing each of these situations. We look forward to developing pastoral resources to these and other situations in light of synod's action on the proposed principle (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 810-11).

B. *Mandate*

The specific question of children at the Lord's Supper has been addressed in several prior studies and overtures to synod, which have reached varying conclusions. In light of this past work, Synod 2007 mandated our committee to formulate

a clear statement about the participation of baptized children at the Lord's Supper and the practice of public profession of faith for use in the churches. The statement should include, first, an explanation of 1 Corinthians 11 and other relevant Scripture texts in light of the principles of Reformed hermeneutics and, second, a discussion of the Reformed confessions with emphasis on the implications of the relationship between covenant and sacraments.

(Acts of Synod 2007, pp. 655-56)

This document is a first step in responding to this part of our mandate.

This assignment is no small matter. Arguments about this topic have already filled multiple dissertations, books, denominational reports, and websites (see attached bibliography). Taken together, these materials offer us some passages that are insightful, others that are tedious; some that are logical, others that stretch logic. Sorting out the relevant arguments has been a complex task, more complex than a brief report can possibly acknowledge. Our goal in preparing this report is not to catalog every single argument and counterargument, but rather to accurately summarize ongoing debates, and to discern what is essential for grounding a biblically faithful, confessionally Reformed, and pastorally responsive approach to the topic. It is our prayer that the following reflections will be faithful and generative.

We also note that while it is easy to be disparaging about the procession of committees and study reports that have emerged on this topic over the past 25 years, this entire discussion represents on both sides a sincere attempt to wrestle with one of the central challenges in pastoral ministry in every era of church history: the relationship of grace and obedience, faith and works. For two thousand years the church has constantly needed to test its practice so that it clearly communicates the unmerited grace of God that comes to us in Jesus and the obedient discipleship that flows from receiving this grace. With respect to the Lord's Supper, the church needs to convey that the Lord's Supper is God's gracious provision for the covenant community as well as the nature of obedient participation in which this gift should be received. Calibrating these dynamics is vitally important for faithful ministry, and each generation needs to see again the importance of both grace and obedience.

To this end, we pray that this report will be an occasion for learning and renewal.

It is important to note that this is not the final report of the Faith Formation Committee. We have been given a five-year mandate to describe and learn from local ministry challenges throughout the Christian Reformed Church related to Faith Formation, to engage in biblical and theological study of key issues, and to provide recommendations and resources to strengthen congregational practices. As we observed in our report to Synod 2008,

Our mandate includes some work that is similar to past synodical study committees, such as that of producing a written document which will help synod respond to particular issues in the life of the church [such as this report]. . . . Our mandate includes some new kinds of work for a denominational committee, particularly that of working to strengthen communication, trust, and mutual learning within the denomination. Our mandate acknowledges that synodical decisions by themselves are not sufficient to generate a shared vision, commitment, or set of practices. But synodical decisions that emerge from and shape ongoing local conversations, learning, and ministry planning do promise to deepen our work together.

When we look back on our work after five years, we not only want to be able to say that we have addressed particular issues in scripturally-sound ways. We also want to be able to say that we have worked well together as a denomination, we have wrestled with Scripture, we have honored and learned from the Reformed confessions, we have shared with each other the fruits of our local ministries, we have supported each other in prayer, and we have strengthened our ministry among children, youth, seekers and life-long Christians of all ages.
(Agenda for Synod 2008, p. 233)

This document is offered to the churches in the spirit of these observations. This document has been developed out of prayerful study of biblical and theological texts and past synodical study reports, with close attention to what we heard in discussion sessions at 31 of the 47 CRC classes, events within the settings of nine others, and in presentations at over a dozen conferences or Days of Encouragement, the past two synods, and in several hundred other written communications. We are offering a principle that promises to help us move forward together as a denomination.

In this spirit, we invite CRC congregations and classes to continue to engage this report and its recommendations by not only studying the material here but also

- praying for the growth in faith of everyone with whom our congregations minister, and for our common work on these topics.
- studying “Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith” (see Appendix A), which presents an overarching vision for the role of the sacraments in faith formation (see also the related sermon/worship suggestions).
- using the Bible study materials on 1 Corinthians 11: “A Practice of Christian Unity” provided on the Faith Formation Committee’s website for group study (see www.crcna.org/faithformation).
- communicating with us regarding your questions or observations. We have posted responses to commonly asked questions on the website.

We welcome your suggestions about how we can do our work better, and we look forward to discerning conversations throughout the next months about the themes of this document.

III. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Before assessing specific arguments for or against children at the Lord's Supper, we pause for an extended study of one text, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. This text is one of the few that provide specific guidance about the practice of the Lord's Supper, and it is the single most important text in discussions of children at the Lord's Supper. For this reason, Synod 2007 included a specific reference to it in the mandate of our committee.

We must note at the outset, however, that biblical teaching concerning communion is not limited to this one passage. The Old Testament anticipates the table in two ways: through the institution of the Passover (Ex. 12) and through many different metaphors that expand the richness of our partaking. For example, at the table we follow the exhortation of the psalmist who declared, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him" (Ps. 34:8). Through participation we respond to the Lord's gracious invitation given through Isaiah: "'Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa. 55:1). We come to the table as our lives are characterized by profound struggle and spiritual warfare, singing with David, "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows" (Ps. 23:5).

As the story of the New Testament unfolds the meaning of the Lord's Supper as instituted by Christ, we are struck by the beauty of the multiple images that are given to us in Scripture. Christ reminded the disciples that his sacrament was a sign of the atonement represented in the Passover feast (Mark 14:12-16) and therefore a time of assurance of God's forgiveness (Matt. 26:28). It is also a time of spiritual nourishment (John 6:35) and of participation in the oneness of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 10:17). We are to find, therefore, when we come to the Lord's Supper that we can expect Christ to manifest himself to us (Luke 24:28-31). We joyfully continue the practices of the early church, which included devoting "themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Within this larger biblical context, we now turn to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

A. *Central theme: Confronting inhospitality, promoting unity*

Though there are certainly many areas of disagreement about this text, we are grateful that there is a strong consensus among biblical scholars about its main theme: confronting inhospitality and favoritism in the Lord's Supper. We also note that this consensus view is hardly benign. It offers much to challenge, correct, and inspire us all.

One central theme of 1 Corinthians as a whole is the breakdown of community, unity, and fellowship in the Christian church, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 deals with one facet of this theme. Paul is writing to protest favoritism and inhospitality at the Lord's table, a breakdown of the Christian community along sociological lines. He is specifically concerned with those who "show contempt for the church" and "humiliate those who have nothing" (v. 22, NRSV). When Paul says, "I hear that . . . there are divisions among you" (11:18), he is tying this part of the book into the broader theme of unity that he stresses in 1:10 ("I appeal to you . . . that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought"), and in the preceding and subsequent context of chapter 11 (10:16-17 and 12:12-13).

The specific issue in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 involves Lord's Supper practices that were inhospitable and divisive. As Professor Jeffery Wiema explains:

The church in Corinth, like other congregations well into the second century, celebrated the Lord's Supper as part of a dinner or full meal. The whole church would first break bread at the beginning of the meal to remember Christ's death, then they would eat their main course, and finally at the end of the meal they would drink wine also to remember Christ's death (note 1 Cor. 11:25, "In the same way, *after supper*, he took the cup, saying . . ."). The problem was the main course that took place between these two acts of remembrance: the Corinthians were celebrating the Supper in a way that created divisions (v. 18). The guilty were the wealthy ("those who have homes"), whose conduct at these meals involved "despising the church of God and humiliating those who have nothing" (v. 22). In fact, things got so out of hand that poor church members left the worship services hungry while the rich members staggered home drunk (v. 21)! . . . Although we cannot know with certainty what led to divisions over the Lord's Supper at Corinth, it is clear that the problem involved social discrimination: the wealthy Christians celebrated the Lord's Supper in a way that despised and humiliated their poorer fellow believers.¹

In dealing with this situation, Paul outlines some principles for participation at the table that transcend the specific situation: each participant must carefully assess their relationship to others who are coming to the table, set aside all arrogance, inhospitality, and self-centeredness, and wait for, welcome, and receive one another in the celebration itself (see vs. 33).

When we generate modern-day applications of this text, one good place to begin is by asking, When do we "show contempt for the church" and "humiliate those who have nothing" (v. 22)? It is a provocative exercise to think about who may be experiencing such humiliation in various CRC congregations. In our day, as in first century Corinth, the poor come to mind immediately. They are often more welcome in soup kitchens than in worship. But others may also be treated as second class citizens in the church: adult singles, the divorced and separated, persons with disabilities, ex-offenders, shut-ins, those with dementia, those without a certain level of education, and many others. This text challenges us to make sure that none of God's children is humiliated, even subtly, in our celebrations of the Lord's Supper. We might also state the matter positively: When we assemble at the table, and elsewhere, how can we more adequately express that we are God's new people, eager to show hospitality and break down the barriers which divide us?

As the main theme of this text, the breakdown of the church as the body of Christ should be a central concern for any sermon, Bible study, or other discussion of this text. We regret that in some discussions of the Lord's Supper, including those about whether or not children should participate, this central theme recedes from view. More attention is given to the narrow question of at what age children should participate than to this prophetic call for hospitality. We urge each of us, regardless of our specific views on the matter of children at the table, to avoid this error.

B. Obedient participation at the table

As this text addresses the problem of inhospitality, it offers us additional guidance about participation at the table. This wisdom is articulated in each

¹ Jeffrey A. D. Wiema, "Children at the Lord's Supper and the Key Text of 1 Corinthians 11:17-34." *Calvin Theological Seminary Forum* (Spring 2007): 7-8.

of the action words, mostly in the imperative form, associated with the table: *take, eat, drink, remember, examine yourself, and wait for each other.*

Before looking at these imperatives, it is important to remember that the Bible's commands are not onerous obligations but rather gracious gifts. Obeying them is life-giving. They help us flourish as apprentices of Jesus. This is important to state because of the persistent tendency in many Christian churches, including Reformed ones, to unwittingly treat the Bible's commands as onerous burdens. In fact, when our committee asked Synod 2008 delegates about how their local congregations practice these life-giving commands, we received several comments like the following: "I have never thought about these as life-giving commands." Indeed, Reformed Christians have not always seen this as a text that points to joyful obedience (in direct opposition to Reformed theology's high view of the law as a guide for grateful living!). Rather, these commands have at times been a source of anxiety and legalism. In this context, we need to recover the sense that these commands are life-giving. Obeying them brings joy, integrity, and justice.

The specific actions associated with participation at the table include the following: doing this in remembrance of Jesus (vv. 24-25), eating, drinking, proclaiming the Lord's death (vv. 26-27), examining ourselves (v. 28), discerning the body (v. 29), and waiting for one another (v. 33).

Of all of these actions, discerning the body has generated the most controversy and discussion. The verb *discern* is an active verb which calls us to reflection, judgment, and correct perception. "The body" refers, most likely, to both the physical body of the Christ (as in the reference to the "body and blood" of the Lord in v. 27)² and to the church as the body of Christ (as in 1 Cor. 10 and 12). Indeed, the power and delight of the metaphor of the body is that it refers simultaneously to Jesus' literal body (on earth and now in heaven), the church, and to the bread we break.

In the context of this passage, Paul is emphasizing the significance of the church as the body of Christ. Paul is calling the Corinthians to examine their relationship to their fellow believers and to celebrate the sacrament in a manner that does not humiliate other congregational members. This communal or horizontal aspect is an essential part of this text. Thus, a significant part of "discerning the body" involves determining, perceiving, and practicing what it means to be the church—a community who embodies Jesus' presence and mission. The central application or result of this discernment action is then beautifully summed up in vs. 33: "wait for one another."³

² There is a textual critical issue in v. 29. While some translations have "the body of the Lord" (as in NIV), the NRSV has simply "the body." There is very strong scholarly consensus for not including the phrase "of the Lord" in v. 29. Still, either alternative fits well with the interpretation we are describing.

³ We caution against speaking about "a new interpretation of 1 Cor. 11." The themes we are presenting above are attested throughout the history of the Christian church. While it is true that it is new for some CRC people to think of "discerning the body" as having to do with the church as the body of Christ, this is not a new discovery! See, for example, Thomas Davis, *This is My Body: The Presence of Christ in Reformation Thought* (Baker Academic, 2008), pp. 149-68.

At the same time, this primary emphasis need not displace the fact that “body” can also refer to Jesus’ literal body on the cross.⁴ The bread we eat points us to and symbolizes our union with Jesus, whose ascended body is now in heaven. While some scholars insist that “the body” here refers exclusively to the “church as the body of the Christ,” and while others insist that it refers to the presence of Christ’s own body, we see no conclusive evidence that forces us to choose between these views.

The command to “examine” or “scrutinize” yourself (v. 28) is also an essential part of this text. This command is an invitation to introspection and self-assessment. Often such examination or testing is performed by someone else (1 Thess. 2:4; 1 Tim. 3:10), but here it clearly refers to actions performed by each participant (cf. 1 Cor. 3:13; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 6:4). This call resists participation that is casual or routine—participation that fails to live into the new vision for the body of Christ as a community of hospitality and mutual accountability. Over the centuries, commentators have varied in interpreting exactly what a person should look for when testing himself or herself. Are we primarily to test whether we are sorry for sin and love Jesus? Or—following the theme of this text—are we primarily to test whether we are living as hospitable members of the Christian community? Once again we see no conclusive evidence that forces us to choose between these views.

Commentators also vary significantly in the tone they bring to this command. Is this a command that should generate in us fear and sobriety? Or should this be an exercise that primarily leads us to the joyful discovery of God’s grace? Some of the discussions are unnecessarily clouded by conflating joy with informality and casual attitudes, and conflating seriousness and somberness. The text is clearly calling us to serious and meaningful accountability—the kind sufficient to help us root out our own sense of self-sufficiency and our own acts of inhospitality. But the exercise and result of this activity are joyful and upbuilding, as we discover again the astonishing joy of being a part of Christ’s body.

C. *A word of judgment*

While protesting inhospitality and describing participation at the Lord’s Supper, the text also clearly offers a word of judgment. Whoever partakes unworthily will “eat and drink judgment against themselves” (v. 29) and be “answerable for the body and blood of the Lord” (vs. 27). In Corinth, this meant that some became weak or ill, and some died (v. 30), the result of God’s disciplinary action (v. 32).

It is important for us to attend to these warnings. Many treatments of the text and of Lord’s Supper theology in general avoid these warnings like a plague. Others, including some historic Reformed treatments, dwell on them in ways that generate unnecessary fear and anxiety at the table.

One particular error to address is the notion that God’s judgment here refers exclusively to eternal judgment. Echoes of this idea lurk in many informal conversations and even in some published sermons, and this may be partly why many resist any mention of these warnings. Yet there are several

⁴ Several recent commentators have pointed out that in many Reformed and evangelical congregations the understanding of “discerning the body” has been limited to this second meaning only. This is a reductionist account that takes vv. 23-25 out of their context and ignores the main theme of the text.

problems with this view: (1) the text speaks of consequences on earth, not eternal judgment; (2) it is hard to conceive of a logic which says that one mode of partaking can somehow override divine election with respect to our eternal destiny; and (3) Paul was writing to “those sanctified in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 1:2) to call them to obedience. The idea that the judgment in question here is eternal judgment displaces any active awareness of the judgment the text does describe: the consequences of our actions that become part of God’s disciplinary program to make us holy. God’s discipline, while painful, is also redemptive and sanctifying.

Thus Paul invites us to think of the consequences of improper participation as a matter of divine discipline. Whether this discipline comes to us through natural consequences of our actions or through divine intervention in natural processes, it is clear that inhospitality and indifference to others will have consequences. Indeed, if we don’t root out arrogance and self-centeredness, we will let a cancer grow inside our churches. If we simply rehearse hypocrisy rather than resisting it, we will grow increasingly insensitive to others and cause untold harm. The more we think of judgment in these terms, the more our approach to discipline at the table is likely to become organic and ongoing. This is why a once in a lifetime public profession of faith is, by itself, an inadequate door to admission to the table, and why Reformed polity has always insisted on other practices of mutual accountability. We need regular practices of confession, repentance, forgiveness, and accountability to complement our participation at the table.

D. Three errors to avoid

In light of this analysis, we judge that there are three persistent errors with respect to this text that have harmed the church.

First, some interpretations and practices ignore the communal dimension of the text. This error includes allowing the community to recede from view in our understanding of what it means to “discern the body” and “examine ourselves.” These commands suggest for many a picture of an individual believer before the cross, reflecting on their own sin and their salvation in Christ, with little awareness or attention on the community. Gordon Fee, for example, wonders “whether our making the text deal with self-examination has not served to deflect the greater concern of the text, that we give more attention at the Lord’s Supper to our relationships with one another in the body of Christ” (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 569). The Lord’s Supper is never a private affair. And “discerning the body” and “examining ourselves” each entail not only looking within but also looking around us to cherish and deepen the communion of all of God’s people.

Second, some interpretations and practices promote unhealthy legalism and scrupulosity. In some contexts, we have allowed the imperative verbs of this text to overshadow the welcome to the table. This approach has left some unhealthy impressions in some communities, including the notion that the value of the Lord’s Supper depends on our faith and on our righteousness. In contrast, what we need is the kind of balance and logic reflected in Paul’s letters and in the Reformed confessions: we are graciously welcomed to the table, we gratefully accept Jesus’ invitation, and in gratitude we engage in the kind of self-examination and discernment that deepens our faith and promotes integrity. Our obedience is not a condition for the invitation,

but rather is the way to respond to the invitation. This distortion could well be less prominent in Reformed churches today than in past years. And it could be that in contemporary culture we will more likely face an opposite problem—the lack of any clear and sustained call for believers to practice self-examination and discernment. Nevertheless, this concern remains significant in many contexts, as attested by several communications to our committee.

Third, some interpretations and practices tend to explain away or set aside the strong imperatives in the text, and to ignore its strong words of judgment. The result is a kind of “cheap grace,” where the church is constantly rehearsing messages of inclusiveness and welcome without realizing that these warnings are also a part of God’s gracious provision for us.

What makes our work as a committee and denomination especially challenging is that these three tendencies can be simultaneously present in a given congregation, and even in the practices of any single church leader. As we listen to voices in the CRC, we hear voices that are motivated by concern for each. All of this is further complicated by the fact that resisting one of these errors can sometimes generate one of the others. We resist individualism so much that we fail to call for individual accountability. We resist legalism and end up downplaying divine commands. The matter is further complicated by our ever-changing cultural context. Indeed, each of these problems is potentially fueled by cultural considerations that can vary widely throughout a diverse denomination.

In sum, the challenge before every congregation and for all of us together as a denomination is to discern how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper faithfully in our specific cultural contexts. We are called to resist making any member of Christ’s body a second-class citizen. We are called to resist individualism while still calling for individual accountability. We are called to enhance the joyful, life-giving practices of remembering, proclaiming, examining, discerning, and waiting. There is much here to challenge and inspires us all.

E. Church practices: Pastoral care and church discipline

Throughout the history of the church, a variety of practices have been developed to resist the kind of inhospitality, division, and favoritism that this text warns against. These include the following: church visits by office-bearers from classis to each church council; the practice of mutual censure (Church Order Article 36); devotional, liturgical, and instructional practices to help congregations prepare for celebrations of the Lord’s Supper; sermons and public prayers that deal with difficult topics around inhospitality and division; intentional training, such as anti-racism training, about communal life; and prayers for healing and reconciliation, including liturgical prayers of confession. Every denomination, every congregation, and every believer is strengthened by healthy practices of accountability.

IV. Debate about children at the Lord's Supper

A. *The two basic positions*

The case for and against the presence of children at the table has been made in several recent books, articles, and synodical studies.⁵ These discussions are frequently complicated by lack of clarity about the age of children under consideration and the inconsistent use of terms (e.g., “paedo-communion”). Further, these discussions have been complicated by the fact that each argument for or against requiring public profession of faith prior to table participation draws upon a different set of arguments. We have done our best to clarify the best thinking of each point of view

Nevertheless, there are two basic positions in the CRC that can be readily identified. The following descriptions summarize these two positions:

1. Position 1: Typical arguments for welcoming children at the table before public profession of faith

Those who argue for children at the table typically develop several of the following arguments:

- a. The Bible nowhere explicitly bars children from participation at the table.
- b. Children are clearly part of the covenant community.
- c. Children participated in the Passover (Ex. 12:26), the covenant feast that was transformed by Jesus into the Lord's Supper.
- d. Evidence suggests that children participated in the Lord's Supper in the early church.

They conclude that on the basis of covenant theology, we would naturally assume that children should participate at the table, as in Passover, unless told otherwise. They suggest that the burden of proof should rest on those who want to hold children back from the table.

Some advocates of children at the table go on to argue that Reformed interpretations of the command “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16) are instructive. Unlike some Baptist interpretations that uphold this command as a universal command requiring repentance before baptism in every instance, Reformed interpreters stress that the command is directed only to those who have the capacity to do so: adults and older children, but not infants. In a similar way, advocates of children's participation in the Lord's Supper argue that the imperatives in 1 Corinthians 11 fittingly apply to all who have the capacity to obey them.

Here are some CRC voices that make this case:

- “It strikes me very odd how the arguments we use to support infant baptism (it's God's work . . . not dependent on us or the infant) seem to be turned upside-down in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (first show that you are competent, then partake).”

⁵ See the extensive bibliography at the end of this appendix and materials on the Faith Formation Committee website (www.crcna.org/faithformation). Recent contributions include overtures from Classis Holland (*Agenda for Synod 2006*) and Classis Pella (*Agenda for Synod 2007*), Cornelis P. Venema, *Children at the Lord's Table?* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2009), and *Calvin Seminary Forum* (Spring 2007).

- "It does bother me that that one text is used to deny all covenant children a place at the table, and it's not even talking about the kids!!"
- Here is a statement of this argument in the 2006 Overture from Classis Holland: "How can Paul's concerns for unity of the body at Communion be applied to exclude baptized children? The apostle's concerns actually suggest the opposite, namely, that all members of the covenant community should be included at the Table rather than having some who remain spiritually hungry" (2007 CRC Survey on Children at the Table).

Most of those who argue for inviting children to the table have in mind young children roughly ages 5-10. In many congregations the children in question are those who no longer participate in a children's worship time during the main worship service.

2. Position 2: Typical arguments against children at the table before public profession of faith

Those who respond by arguing that baptized children should not partake respond as follows:

- a. There is no biblical text that explicitly warrants the inclusion of children at the table.
- b. There is no proof that children participated in the Passover.
- c. 1 Corinthians 11 clearly requires each participant to engage in certain actions.
- d. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are two quite different sacraments, with baptism being more passive, and the Lord's Supper being more active.

Some insist that the burden of proof should require all who want to depart from traditional practice to make a conclusive case for change.

Here are some CRC voices that advance this position:

- "The Lord's Supper ought to remain a sacrament partaken of by those who have professed faith in Jesus Christ."
- "We are concerned about how baptized children of a younger age can meet the requirements for the Lord's Supper set forth in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29, and we have significant reservations about how younger children (under the middle school age category) can meet the standards set forth in Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81."
- "We ought to be concerned that people can eat and drink judgment on themselves if they don't rightly examine themselves before coming to the table as 1 Corinthians 11 instructs his church."
- "Clearly the big issue is interpreting what it means to discern the body. Clearly a child cannot do this, so it will be interesting to watch once again how a clear passage of Scripture is handled by our CRC" (2007 CRC Survey on Children at the Table).

B. *Reformed confessions*

The confessions bear upon this discussion in several ways. First, the confessions clearly convey that membership in the church is tied to baptism, not profession of faith. The Belgic Confession clearly asserts that "by baptism

we are received into God's church" (Art. 34). Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 74 clearly asserts that "infants as well as adults are in God's covenant and are his people. . . . Therefore, by baptism, the mark of the covenant, infants should be received into the Christian church." By the standard of the confessions, it is not appropriate to say to someone when they make profession of faith, "Congratulations on joining the church." Full membership in the church comes with baptism, even if a denomination distinguishes baptized and confessing members (see also 1 Cor. 12:13).

Second, the confessions clearly convey that proper participation arises out of faith. Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81 explains who may come to the table: "those who are displeased with themselves because of their sins, but who nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life." The catechism goes on to name those who may not participate: "Hypocrites and those who are unrepentant, however, eat and drink judgment on themselves." Q&A 82 goes on explain how the church must prevent the unbelieving and ungodly from participating.

The Belgic Confession explains this in a slightly different way: "We believe and confess that our Savior Jesus Christ has ordained and instituted the sacrament of the Holy Supper to nourish and sustain those who are already born again and ingrafted into his family: his church" (Art. 35). How might this passage apply to children at the Lord's Supper? The confessions clearly assert that baptized children are ingrafted into the church, a point noted by advocates of children at the table. Yet the confessions also make clear that while baptism is a sign of regeneration,⁶ it is not the cause or mechanism of regeneration, a point noted by advocates of requiring a public profession of faith prior to table participation.

In response, we take note that the confessions do not speak about public profession of faith. Requiring public profession of faith before entrance to the table certainly fits well with the confessions' claim that proper participation arises out of faith. At the same time, the confessions do not require this particular form of profession. That is, there may be any number of ways by which the church conveys that table participation is for believers and through which the church allows participants to express their faith as they come to the table.

Yet we know that many would argue along these lines: "The Belgic Confession asserts that the table is for those who are born again; and a public profession of faith is a testimony to God's regenerating work, and offers us sufficient assurance that a given person is born again. That is why we should require it." We urge particular care in both advancing and responding to this line of thought, for it brings us very close to a host of theologically and pastorally challenging topics. Our basic response to this is that we should gratefully receive all expressions of faith, including public profession of faith, as likely signs of God's regenerating work. Public profession of faith may differ from other expressions of faith in degree, but not kind. We also join a long

⁶ See Belgic Confession, Article 34: "In this way God signifies to us that just as water washes away the dirt of the body when it is poured on us and also is seen on the body of the baptized when it is sprinkled on him, so too the blood of Christ does the same thing internally, in the soul, by the Holy Spirit."

chorus of voices urging caution about making conclusive judgments about who is born again, even as we warmly invite everyone, both inside and outside the church, to accept Jesus and testify to their faith.⁷

Third, the confessions speak about the nature of participation: “No one should come to this table without examining himself carefully” (Belgic Confession, Art. 35); to “eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood . . . means to accept with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 76). Obedient participation involves self-examination and belief.

Finally, we note that when stating explicitly those who may not partake of the Lord’s Supper, the confessions only mention “hypocrites and those who are unrepentant,” “the unbelieving and ungodly” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 81-82), and “the wicked person” (Belgic Confession, Art. 35). The confessions nowhere explicitly bar covenant children from the Lord’s Supper. It can only be ascertained implicitly if one concludes that up to a certain age, children cannot be “displeased with themselves because of their sins” and “nevertheless trust that their sins are pardoned and that their continuing weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and to lead a better life” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 81). That it would not have been the authors’ intent to place covenant children in the same company as hypocrites, the unrepentant, and the ungodly, is evident when, earlier, covenant infants are said to be “in God’s covenant and are his people” and that “they, no less than adults, are promised the forgiveness of sin through Christ’s blood and the Holy Spirit who produces faith” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 74).

On this question, Ursinus’s comments concerning the children of believers are instructive. He clearly argues that “infants are not capable of coming to the Lord’s Supper, because they do not possess faith actually, but only potentially and by inclination.” He also suggests that “all the children of those that believe are included in the covenant, and church of God, *unless they exclude themselves*” (emphasis added). Further, as those “born in the church, or school of Christ,” it follows that “the Holy Spirit teaches them *in a manner adapted to their capacity and age*” (emphasis added). He states that the “benefit of the remission of sins, and of regeneration” indeed “belongs to the infants of the church.” He concludes, “Those unto whom the things signified belong, unto them the sign also belongs.” But then he defaults to excluding infants from the Lord’s Supper “because of their incapacity of shewing the Lord’s death, and proving themselves.”⁸

The original authors of the confessions, despite their high view of the spiritual state of covenant children, were not disposed to infant participation at the Lord’s Supper. But they were ambiguous regarding the age at which children could legitimately participate in faith. It must be noted that the confessions themselves only implicitly exclude covenant children if it can be

⁷ And if we do make judgments, we are advised by the Canons of Dort, as follows: “Since we must make judgments about God’s will from his Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but by virtue of the gracious covenant in which they together with their parents are included, godly parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in infancy” (1:17).

⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 366-67, 425; see also p. 429.

proven that they are unable to examine themselves or to what extent such a condition is applicable to them. Could it be argued that fencing the table with age requirements may be inconsistent with the confessions' own covenant theology? And if we take seriously Ursinus's belief that the Holy Spirit teaches children "in a manner adapted to their capacity and age," could it be that the faith of covenant children may not only be "potential" and "inclinal," but also more "actual" than usually assumed? At the very least, then, one could conclude that the confessions, according to original intent and explicit statement, suggest that covenant children should be welcomed to participate in the Lord's Supper as soon as they are able to partake in an age- and ability-appropriate manner.

C. *Inconclusive arguments*

The debate about children at the table is complicated by the use of several arguments that are, in our judgment, not conclusive. These topics can be instructive and can inform our learning together, but they do not offer conclusive evidence that would help us arrive at a settled position. We encourage all participants in this discussion to be especially cautious in pursuing these arguments.

1. Texts that do not speak with sufficient detail

Some texts speak to the general topic of children, but do not really help us make a final decision about this topic. Jesus said, "Let the children come to me." This text rules out indifference to children. But by itself, it doesn't help us decide between welcoming them to partake and welcoming them to observe expectantly. Invoking texts in this way usually serves to inflame the debate without clarifying it.

2. The analogy with Passover

Did children eat at the Passover meal? We don't really know at what age they participated and under what conditions. We know that children participated by asking about the meaning of the meal (Ex. 12:24-26). We know that Passover was celebrated within households (e.g., Ex. 12:3-4; 2 Chron. 35:4). We know that the "whole community of Israel" was called to celebrate it (Ex. 12:47), and we have descriptions of the Passover being celebrated by all the returned exiles for a period of seven days (Ezra 6:19-22), a description that implies that the entire covenant community was involved. These texts figure prominently in many discussions of children at the Lord's Supper, often leading writers to opposite conclusions that can each seem rhetorically convincing, especially to people who agree with their position (e.g., "If children asked about the meaning of Passover, then it seems as if they were participating," or, "If they had to ask about the meaning, it appears that they were not yet eating.") The committee therefore urges caution about such arguments on both sides. The Passover certainly does inform our understanding of the Lord's Supper and the nature of a covenant relationship with God. But while biblical discussions of the Passover offer suggestive evidence about the participation of children, they do not offer conclusive evidence about when children first participated or under what conditions they did so.

3. The “communal agent” approach

Some argue that children should be welcome because it is the church as a community (not only each individual) that must discern the body. This argument is hinted at, though not defended, in the report of the task force to Synod 2007:

The decision to allow baptized children to the Lord’s Supper is also based on a strong awareness of the significance of the faith of the entire community. In defending the practice of infant baptism, many Reformed theologians stress that the phrase *repent and be baptized* (Acts 2:38) is practiced by the entire faith community rather than by the infant—a communal action that is also possible for *discerning the body*. Some may even suggest that this is the *only* interpretative move needed to defend the practice of welcoming children to the Lord’s Supper in the context of a tradition that practices infant baptism, regardless of how one understands the phrase *discerning the body*.
(*Agenda for Synod 2007*, p. 51)

This communal subject approach is compelling as a response to an individualistic culture. The problem with this approach is the grammar of the text, which clearly calls for the faithful participation not only of the community but also of each individual Christian at the table (the English translation *whoever* in 1 Corinthians 11:27 is designed to emphasize this point).

4. The historical argument

Some argue for young children at the table because some ancient Christian sources suggest it was common practice. Some argue for requiring a public profession of faith prior to participation at the table because the Reformers practiced this. Significant historical work on these topics offers significant insight about the complex interplay of theological, pastoral, and historical factors in these time periods. Each period is well worth studying, and it contributes to several sections of this report. But ultimately, the history of this topic does not conclusively argue for one side or the other. The early church offers some evidence of young children and infants at communion, but it is unclear how widespread the practice was, and whether there was theological and pastoral consensus about the reasons for the practice. The Reformation period offers us testimony to the pastoral function of public profession of faith but does not provide an argument why public profession of faith is scripturally required for admission to the table. In the end, history is a source of wisdom, but not a source for a definitive position.

In addition to these inconclusive arguments, we note that the discussion of this topic is further complicated because of the conceptual links or implicit connections between various arguments and other positions which do not cohere with the confessions. Some defenses of young children at the table seem to imply baptismal regeneration (the idea that the act of baptism is the means by which God accomplishes regeneration) or other form of sacramentalism. Some defenses of requiring public profession of faith for table admission slip into language about the Lord’s Supper that sounds more like Zwingli (who stressed that the bread and cup merely represent Jesus’ body and blood, and the Lord’s Supper is primarily about our memorial of Jesus) than the Belgic Confession (which insists in Article 35 that “this banquet is a spiritual table at which Christ

communicates himself to us with all his benefits” and that the Lord’s Supper is both for our memorial and for God’s feeding and nourishment of faith). In all our discussions about the Lord’s Supper, it is important to be alert for any principle or practice that might unwittingly suggest either baptismal regeneration or Zwinglian memorialism.

D. Substantive arguments

That leaves two primary considerations: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 and covenant theology, the very two issues named in our mandate from synod.

1. 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

As we have suggested in Section III above, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is primarily addressing the breakdown of Christian community along sociological lines. The question of children at the table is *not* the central concern of this text. In other words, while the text specifically addresses the participation of unrepentant and inhospitable adults, the question is whether it also addresses the participation of children. This involves a central issue in biblical interpretation—namely, how we can most faithfully apply commands that were intended for one situation to a somewhat different situation. On this point, two basic positions emerge:

- a. First, those who support children at the table emphasize how the historical context here helps us understand the imperatives in the text. They typically argue, “A text that bars unrepentant adults should not be used to bar covenant children.” They are eager to apply the text but to focus its application to very similar situations today. This is similar to saying that the command “repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38) naturally applies to adults but not to infants, a fairly standard argument by Reformed theologians.
- b. Second, those opposed to young children at the table insist that grammatical construction of general principles in verses 27-29 establishes a timeless principle that is not limited to similar contexts. They typically argue, “When Paul says ‘examine yourselves’ and ‘discern the body,’ that is clearly intended for all participants in all circumstances.” Some who hold this view go on to say, in effect, “And this is an activity that young children are incapable of doing.”

Our committee’s judgment is that each position advances a very compelling argument. If we truly approach the commands here as life-giving gifts, then we should be eager to obey them in all possible circumstances, and we should be eager to teach them to the youngest of believers. From this point of view—which again we recognize is not the implicit approach to these commands in many contexts—there would seem to be little motivation to pursue the first view: why would we want to withhold these commands from our youngest children? At the same time, as we will explain below, we do not think that we should simply assume that young children are incapable of obeying these imperatives.

2. Covenant theology

Alongside of discussions of 1 Corinthians 11, the most significant arguments about the participation of children at the Lord’s Supper focus on the nature of the covenant that God establishes with us. God’s covenant

promises echo throughout Scripture and have been central to Reformed discussions of the sacraments. This attention is given particular urgency in Peter's sermon on Pentecost: "The promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (Acts 2:39). We worship a God who has chosen to ingraft us into a promise-based relation and a promise-shaped community. In light of this rich vein of biblical teaching,

- those who favor the participation of young children at the table simply ask: If covenant children should be baptized, what prevents them from participating at the table?
- those who favor requiring a public profession of faith respond: What about the obligations and responsibilities of covenant membership, one of which is to come to the table of the Lord after self-examination?

As we have studied these positions, we observe that while each rightly points to essential elements of biblical teaching, each position also entails some potential dangers to avoid:

- To require public profession of faith prior to table participation can unwittingly suggest that the efficacy of the Lord's Supper depends upon our faith or on the level of our understanding (and though no official document, confessional statement, or other widely accepted theological work defends this, it does surface as a common pastoral concern).
- To fail to require public profession of faith prior to table participation can unwittingly undermine the significance of the obligations we have as believers in covenant participation, and in some circumstances can create a culture of practice in which the participation in the Lord's Supper is taken quite lightly.

Communications to our committee confirm that both concerns are expressed in CRC congregations. We urge each of us to be deeply aware of these dangers. As we will continue to explain, our view is that we should seek a practice that reflects both elements of covenantal engagement: God's gracious invitation to all members of the body, and the importance of obedience to God's commands. Further, we are convinced that the potential pastoral dangers described here must be of primary concern for church councils as they shape local practice.

V. Profession of faith

For many Reformed Christians over the past 450 years, public profession of faith has been a rich and vital practice, a time of gratitude for God's work, an occasion for deepened commitment to the faith, and an occasion for recognizing the joyful and serious obligations of participation in the church. As a committee, we are eager to renew and deepen public profession of faith as a significant milestone event in the lives of believers.

A. *Profession of faith as an affirmation of baptism*

Profession of faith is a time to celebrate and affirm baptismal identity. For those baptized as infants, profession of faith is a time to affirm covenant

promises. For those baptized as adults, profession of faith accompanies baptism and affirms that our identity is found in Jesus Christ.

Public profession of faith is both an expression of and a catalyst for the missional work of the church in the world. The great commission calls the church to a public testimony of faith as it disciples nations, “baptizing them . . . teaching them to obey everything” Jesus has commanded (Matt. 28:19-20). Indeed, the church’s profession of faith, and each individual profession of faith, is an act of proclamation that reaches out to the lost and disciples the found. This reaching out toward the world that God loves happens both through explicit witness to the love of Christ and through faith-filled actions in society (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86), including caring for “the least of these” with grace-filled words and deeds (Matt. 25:40) and serving as an advocate for victims of injustice (Prov. 31:8-9; Mic. 6:8).

There are also significant developmental or psychological reasons for affirming profession of faith. For many generations, a public profession of faith has served as a rite of passage out of childhood and into adolescent or adult faith. It serves as a natural occasion for challenging youth to consider the claims of Christ, to give voice to the faith within them, and to celebrate and affirm their God-given gifts, and to join in God’s world-wide work.

At the same time, there is no single age which the church is able to mandate for public profession of faith. Indeed, in God’s sovereign grace, congregations have witnessed profound professions of faith by believers of 8 and 88 years and beyond. Professions of faith arise out of individual initiative as the Holy Spirit leads. We also note gratefully that in recent years many congregations have been more intentional about welcoming persons with intellectual disabilities to profess their faith.

Public professions of faith are a lifelong practice, rather than a once-in-a-lifetime event. Some of these professions happen at significant life moments, for example, parents who present children for baptism profess their faith, and officebearers who are ordained and installed to their offices profess their faith, each in the public assembly for worship. Additional expressions of faith happen as a recurring part of worship, as the congregation recites creeds, sings songs that testify to God’s goodness, or exclaims “Amen” or “Thanks be to God” after a scripture reading or in the middle of a sermon. Every time we participate in the Lord’s Supper, we profess our faith, “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.” Professing faith should thus be seen as an indispensable element in regular worship practices. And the formal rite of passage we call “profession of faith” can be understood as a way for each individual to join in expressing assent to the faith regularly professed by the whole congregation. Regrettably, public profession of faith has tended to be seen as a once-in-a-lifetime event, overshadowing the fact that the act of professing faith happens throughout life and in many and varied ways in the life of a congregation.

B. Profession of faith and the practice of confirmation in other Christian traditions

Profession of faith is both similar and different from the practice of confirmation in various Christian traditions. Like confirmation, it is a rite of passage that affirms the covenant of baptism and usually is associated with full participation in the life of the church (though most traditions take care to insist that all baptized persons are “full members” of the church). However,

while profession of faith emphasizes the affirming response of the believer to God, confirmation in many traditions places an emphasis on bestowing or conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit. Confirmation (which is sometimes called “chrismation”) is understood by Roman Catholic and Orthodox believers to be a sacrament, while the Reformed tradition affirms only baptism and the Lord’s Supper as sacraments. While the center of profession of faith is testimony, the center of confirmation is the laying on of hands *and* prayers for the gift of the Holy Spirit. In some other Protestant traditions, the term *confirmation* is used for something quite similar to some traditional aspects of profession of faith in the CRC, with an emphasis placed on learning and embracing the creeds and confessions of the church. Confirmation has its origins as a part of baptism. In the early church, bishops would affirm the legitimacy of baptisms done by local priests/pastors, using the language of 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 (“God confirms us with you in Christ and has anointed us, putting a seal on us and giving us the Spirit”—as in the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible; see also the Amplified Version and Young’s Literal Translation). Soon, this practice became associated with the laying on of hands and prayers for the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14-17; 19:1-7; Heb. 6:1-2). Reformed interpreters and theologians have long taken issue with the use of these texts in this way, arguing that they do not mandate a formal ritual of confirmation. At the same time, Reformed theology deeply embraces the promise that we “share in Christ’s anointing” (see Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 32) and are graced by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There is quite a diversity of practices across traditions with respect to the relationship of confirmation to coming to the Lord’s table. In many traditions, these are separate milestones in the journey of faith. Often a “first communion” milestone is celebrated first, with confirmation occurring later. In some cases, confirmation has been associated with a first celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

C. *Pastoral challenges*

We acknowledge that several contemporary factors have also eroded the practice of profession of faith, including the extension of adolescence as a distinct stage in one’s life cycle, the reluctance of some churches to impose any expectation of a formal profession of faith, lack of clarity about the missional character of profession of faith, and—for some—prolonged periods of formal education at a distance from a young person’s congregational home.

These factors, however, do not offer grounds for setting aside this practice, but only for becoming more intentional about it. Congregations that offer warm, personal invitations to each child and young person to explore making profession of faith by probing their doubts and questions, developing Christian practices of Bible study and prayer, and discerning their gifts for service will have served them well.

D. *The status of requiring profession of faith prior to table participation*

Since the Reformation, profession of faith has also been a requirement for participation at the table in many Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The sixteenth century Reformers in the Reformed tradition replaced medieval confirmation with profession of faith. Profession of faith was closely linked with both baptism and catechesis. Children ages 10-14 were invited and expected to testify to their faith and to recite answers to catechism questions

that explored their faith prior to participation at the Lord's table. It entailed, then, both a testimony of faith in response to God's grace and assent to the particular doctrines of the local church. In the Reformation period, this practice was an effective means of encouraging discipleship and resisting superstitious views of the Lord's Supper.⁹ Likewise, in subsequent centuries it has been a valuable pastoral approach.

However, we also observe that public profession of faith is neither biblically nor confessionally mandated. It is one pastoral strategy to promote discipleship and to provide accountability regarding table participation. And the requirement does have some disadvantages. For one, requiring profession of faith before table participation can unwittingly reinforce the perception that infants and young children are not members of the church. In these circumstances, profession of faith replaces baptism in the perception of many as the entrance requirement into the church, in opposition to the confessions (see Belgic Confession, Art. 34) For another, it can suggest that participation at the table requires not only age-appropriate obedience to the biblical commands about participation but also assent to the particular doctrinal formulations.

With these disadvantages in mind, some have called for eliminating the requirement for profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper in all circumstances, judging in effect that the Reformers were wrong in instituting it. Our committee, in contrast, judges that requiring profession of faith prior to participation at the table should be a matter of local discernment. We have heard compelling accounts from some pastors and elders who minister in areas of significant biblical illiteracy, where some would be likely to treat the Lord's Supper in a superstitious way (in other words, a situation not unlike that of John Calvin's day), in which requiring profession of faith would be a wise decision on the part of the elders. We have also heard compelling accounts from pastors and elders who sense that requiring profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper has reinforced the idea that children are not members of the church.

In sum, promoting discipleship and nurturing obedient participation at the table is the task of every congregation under the supervision of the elders. Requiring public profession of faith may be one strategy for accomplishing this.

VI. Assessment and guiding principle

A. Two positions restated

In light of Section IV, it is helpful to state again the two basic positions, purged of the inconclusive arguments, and restated in light of our study of 1 Corinthians 11 and covenant theology.

1. Those against children partaking before making a profession of faith—
The Bible nowhere explicitly mandates that children should participate. 1 Corinthians 11 mandates that *each* participant at the table should examine themselves and discern the body, actions which young children are

⁹ See, for example, Robert M. Kingdon, "Catechesis in Calvin's Geneva," in John Van Engen, ed., *Educating People of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 150-78.

incapable of engaging in. While Paul articulates these imperatives with respect to a specific situation, they do apply in all situations.

2. Those for children at the table—The Bible nowhere explicitly bars children from participating. When we “discern the body,” part of what we discern is that children should be present because they belong to the covenant. We should handle the command for each to examine themselves just like we do the command “repent and be baptized,” noting that it is appropriate for everyone who has the capacity to do so.

Each of these arguments can be stated in rhetorically powerful ways. Each is convincing to some. For this reason, the CRC has had a series of study reports, majority and minority positions; the RCA allows both practices; and several other Reformed and Presbyterian denominations have had vigorous debates about the topic. As a committee, we have listened to both positions. We have learned much from each. We are convinced that no matter what position someone holds, there is much to learn from the best arguments for the other position, provided they can be heard above the din of the weaker arguments.

Further, we also sense an underlying unity in both positions: everyone involved wants as many baptized members as possible to be sorry for their sin, to trust in Jesus as their Savior, to desire to live for Jesus, and to participate actively in the Lord’s Supper.

We also note that both positions on this topic are fraught with some problematic tendencies.

The case for welcoming children tends to downplay the significance of the imperatives in the text. The Lord’s Supper does involve tangible, faith-filled action: taking, eating, drinking, discerning, and waiting. Yet some are so eager to defend the presence of young children at the table that this active obedience tends to be downplayed.

The case for not welcoming children until profession of faith tends to treat profession of faith as the only appropriate strategy for welcoming people to the table, a lofty designation for a practice that is not mandated directly in Scripture.

B. Points of agreement and consensus

That brings us to our current assessment of this material. We offer the following two claims on the basis of this study. Further, on the basis of conversations across the CRC, we sense that these two claims could be widely embraced.

1. Baptized children are members of the church—the body of Christ who are welcomed to the table on the basis not of their comprehension or profession but on the basis of God’s gracious invitation to the covenant community.
2. Each participant in the Lord’s Supper should participate actively, in obedience to each biblical imperative.

That is, with those who support children at the table, we agree that the main application of 1 Corinthians 11 should be to call inhospitable adults to renewed practices of hospitality. Yet we see no reason why it should not also call inhospitable persons of all ages to renewed practices of hospitality.

Likewise, with those who oppose children at the table, we agree that each imperative comes as life-giving instruction to each participant, regardless of age. We agree that Scripture clearly teaches that all participants at the Lord's table are called to examine themselves and discern the body.

As we shall explain below, where we disagree with those who oppose children at the table is with the sense that very young children are incapable of self-examination and discernment in age-appropriate ways.

C. An additional consideration: Age- and ability-appropriate obedience

In addition to this brief summary, the committee wishes to add one additional but significant consideration: a simple comparison of how we approach the obedience of children to various biblical commands. Namely, should we not view the imperatives regarding participation in the Lord's Supper as we do with all the life-giving imperatives throughout Scripture, as something that all God's children should obey in an age- and ability-appropriate way? Just as we encourage very young children to begin obeying commands to pray to God and to not steal or lie, so too we invite young children to engage in age- and ability-appropriate ways of participating at the Lord's table.

This "age-appropriate and ability-appropriate" argument is already practiced by the church. We gratefully observe that congregations regularly welcome baptized persons with intellectual disabilities to the table as members of the covenant who participate according to their ability. Further, the church regularly welcomes persons with dementia to the table, long after they have experienced loss of capacities by which they once did examine themselves and discern the body. The church welcomes these members to obey in an "ability-appropriate" way. As a committee, we want to strongly affirm the practice of welcoming persons with intellectual disabilities and dementia to partake of the Lord's Supper in precisely this way—namely, by obeying all the imperatives in an "ability-appropriate" way.

This position challenges the notion that children are not capable of self-examination and discernment. Even very young children engage in the practices commended in 1 Corinthians 11, as they express with heartfelt sincerity, "I'm sorry"; "I love Jesus"; "This is God's family"; "This is God's feast." Like all professing adults who express these same sentiments, they will not understand them fully, and they may not hold to them consistently throughout their life. But, as with professing adults, we see no reason why the church should not welcome and nurture their age- and ability-appropriate participation, as well as to commit to ongoing nurture, education, and accountability.

This view resists a common analogy that we hear in discussions of this topic, the view that requiring profession of faith prior to table participation is like requiring a driver's license before driving. Aspects of this analogy are compelling: participation at the table, like driving, is a matter of great significance. But other aspects of this analogy are troubling: the implication that young children are incapable of faith or genuine obedience, and the implication that the commands of 1 Corinthians 11 are qualitatively different from other biblical commands. While we enthusiastically embrace the significance of the commands presented in 1 Corinthians 11, we see no biblical grounds for supporting this analogy.

We realize that some will still resist this approach, asking how can children even know what they are doing? We want to respond to this point with great care.

First, the committee wants to gently challenge the emphasis on cognitive understanding that may undergird this question. Our ability to reason is a great gift from God. But participation in the Lord's Supper should never be limited to thinking about what we are doing, even as we generously invite each participant to greater learning over time.

Second, we would respectfully note that none of us can comprehend the depths of the mystery of the Lord's Supper. As adult believers, it is appropriate for us to realize that the difference between a young child and a mature adult pales in significance with the depth of this mystery.

Third, an approach that advocates participation in an "ability-appropriate" way necessary entails that we challenge children to grow in their understanding. Rather than setting aside the value of learning and pursuing cognitive understanding, it actually reinforces it: calling on Christians to grow in knowledge and depth of participation throughout their lives. Indeed, this "age-appropriate" and "ability-appropriate" consideration also mitigates another pastoral challenge—the fact that some lifelong members either passively or actively resist growth in their walk with God and their participation in the table over the course of their life.

This brings us to what we judge one of the underlying but often unarticulated dynamics with the CRC discussion of this topic over the past 25 years—the fact that we have unwittingly focused our response to the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11 almost entirely on the process of welcome to the table. As we reflect on the gift of God's covenant love, many of us do find the idea of children's participation compelling. But we can't set aside the haunting sense that we would not be taking seriously enough the warnings of 1 Corinthians 11. That makes sense if our answer to the question "What does the church do to prevent unworthy participation?" is limited to "Requiring a public profession of faith prior to participation." If this is the case (and we sense that it may often be in practice, if not in theory), this is unhealthy in two ways: it does not include organic, ongoing practices of discipline around the table, and it unnecessarily sets the bar too high for initial participation. For this reason, both the Church Order changes and resources we continue to develop address both the nature of welcome to the table and ongoing discipline.

In sum, "age- and ability-appropriate participation" should be not considered merely a way of "lowering the bar" for young children, persons with dementia, or persons with intellectual disabilities. Rather, it "sets the bar" for every believer in ways that fit with their own age and capacity.

D. A guiding principle

These considerations are summarized in the following guiding principle, adopted by Synod 2010 (see *Acts of Synod 2010*, pp. 810-11):

All baptized members who come with age- and ability-appropriate faith in Jesus Christ are welcome to the Lord's table and called to obey the scriptural commands about participation (e.g., to "examine themselves," to "discern the body," to "proclaim the Lord's death," to "wait for others") in an age- and ability-appropriate way, under the supervision of the elders. The elders have

responsibility to nurture in the congregation grateful and obedient participation through encouragement, instruction, and accountability.

The following statements clarify the guiding principle above:

1. A formal public profession of faith prior to participation in the Lord's Supper is not required by Scripture or the confessions.
2. A formal public profession of faith is a vital practice for faith formation and is one pastoral approach to consider prior to participation in the Lord's Supper.
3. Professing faith regularly in and outside of corporate worship is a natural practice for lifelong faith formation which the church should encourage, enhance, and express.

Grounds:

- a. This position honors the covenant status of all who are baptized and affirms their membership in the church.
- b. This position is faithful to the instruction of 1 Corinthians 11, which calls for a response of obedience on the part of those that come to the table.
- c. This position acknowledges that, though members of the body of Christ respond to the promises of God in ways that are shaped by their age and abilities, their responses are nevertheless valid responses.
- d. This position implements the instructions of Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 81, that those who come to the table must be repentant, trusting, and desirous of growth in obedience.
- e. This position honors the polity of the CRC, in which the sacraments of the church are to be celebrated under the supervision of the elders.
- f. This position allows for diversity of local practice within a standard principle.
- g. Adopting this principle will give the Faith Formation Committee sufficient guidance to continue to carry out its mandate by proposing Church Order changes and working with church agencies to develop pastoral resources for congregations.

VII. Ministry practices that uphold this principle

A. Common criteria for evaluating practices

This principle is an important first step in our process of discerning together the nature of faithful participation at the Lord's Supper. The next step is to discern what practices best enact this principle. We suggest shaping this discussion as follows: first, to identify a set of common criteria for discerning practices; second, to describe common practices that we all can share; third, to describe complementary practices of welcome to the table that congregations may develop in response to local ministry contexts.

First, this guiding principle, in light of the preceding discussion, leads naturally to several criteria that each church council should use to evaluate their own local practices.

1. Congregations should actively resist any language that suggests baptized children or any other typically marginalized group are not part of the church.
2. Congregations should question any practices that routinely “humiliate those who have nothing” or others in the body of Christ.
3. Congregations should question their practices if they fail to challenge the unrepentant, the inhospitable, or others who “show contempt for the church of God” and routinely participate in the Lord’s Supper.
4. Congregations should prayerfully examine practices that may routinely fail to invite certain groups of baptized members to partake in an age- and ability-appropriate way, including persons with cognitive disabilities or dementia, as well as children.
5. Congregations should develop practices of training, formation, and accountability that invite baptized members into joyful obedience of each biblical command about table participation, including instruction in self-examination and discerning the body. These practices should be cultivated for each age group in age- and ability-specific ways.
6. Congregations should promote a culture of lifelong learning, in which no milestone moment is seen as a graduation from growth in the faith.
7. Congregations should resist overly casual approaches to the Lord’s Supper that minimize the important and life-giving biblical commands for participation.

It may be helpful to formulate these criteria as constructive questions:

- What can we do to actively resist language that suggests children are not part of the church?
- What can we do to ensure that no one is treated as a second-class citizen at the table?
- What can we do to challenge inhospitable or unrepentant attitudes?
- What can we do to actively encourage all members to participate in an age-appropriate way?
- What can we do to offer specific instruction on faithful participation in the Lord’s Supper, including what it means to “discern the body” and examine ourselves?
- What can we do to cultivate a culture of lifelong learning and discipleship?
- What can we do to resist overly casual attitudes toward participation in the Lord’s Supper?

B. Common practices

The committee also judges that the preceding discussion commends a wide range of practices that should be common in every CRC congregation.

1. When the Lord’s Supper is celebrated, it should be clear that all participants are, in fact, professing faith as they do so. They are “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes.”

2. Each congregation should provide clear explanations for new and inquiring Christians and for parents and guardians about who is welcome and why.
3. Each congregation should provide ongoing nurture and instruction about the Lord's Supper to people of all ages and abilities.
4. Each congregation should provide regular, constructive disciplines of accountability, such as mutual censure.

C. *Models of welcome to the table*

In the context of these common criteria and practices, each church council has important decisions to make about the specific ways that it will welcome baptized members to participate in age- and ability-appropriate ways. In what circumstances might it be wise to require public profession of faith prior to participation at the Lord's table? In what ways can the church communicate both God's gracious invitation and the joy of covenant obedience? What should happen in worship services, and what should happen outside of worship?

At this point, the context of each congregation will become particularly important. The history of local practice, the nature of common assumptions, and the particular pastoral challenges of each congregation must all be taken into account in making wise choices about practice. This is clearly a matter for church councils to decide through processes of spiritual and pastoral discernment.

However a council proceeds, it is important that the process involve the children, the parents or guardians of the children, and the church (typically, the pastor, elders, and/or church education teachers).

The committee is aware of three basic models that churches have considered in light of the preceding principle and common criteria.

One approach would be for a congregation to simply convey in the context of the Lord's Supper celebration the principle we have described. A pastor might say, "The Lord's Supper is a gracious gift that God has provided to Christ's body, the church. All members of Christ's body are invited to participate as an act of faith, and to come to the table of the Lord discerning that this bread and cup are signs and seals of God's love for us and discerning that we who participate are members of Christ and each other." This approach is simple and clear. But we have significant reservations about an approach that relies only on this invitation. First, few churches do or would take the time during a worship service to explain each of the life-giving commands about participation at the table. Without that explanation, it is far too easy to be unaware of those commands. And without understanding them, it is very easy, especially in a North American context, for participants to slip into a rather privatistic way of participating. Second, by itself this approach does not provide a milestone event for welcoming children to the table. Our conversations with congregational leaders throughout the Christian Reformed Church have repeatedly confirmed our reservations about this approach.

In another approach, some congregations may judge that requiring a formal, public profession of faith before participation in the Lord's Supper remains the best pastoral way to encourage faith-filled, age-appropriate

participation. This may be especially apt in pastoral settings where biblical literacy is low or where the Lord's Supper would otherwise be treated in a rather casual or flippant way. In this regard, we are grateful for the testimony of a pastor in a largely unchurched area who spoke eloquently to us about how requiring profession of faith before entrance to the table is crucial for helping the youth of the church take it seriously. We also note that the resources provided by Synod 1995 can assist churches who would continue to require a public profession of faith prior to table participation in welcoming younger children to profess their faith.

A third model involves a process whereby the church invites young, baptized members of the church to learn about the Lord's Supper, to express their desire to participate in faith in an age-appropriate way, and then to celebrate the milestone of their first participation. As with profession of faith, this may be done with a group of children or by individual children. The process may involve a Sunday school teacher, an elder, parents, and pastors in appropriate ways. It could be as simple as a conversation between the child and the pastor, or it may be more complex, including several Sunday school lessons.

This model is ideal in many ways: it offers an intentional time for nurturing full, active, and conscious participation; it celebrates the work of God in the lives of members of the body; and it clearly conveys that the Lord's Supper is a church matter, not merely an act of personal devotion.

This model may be appropriate in many settings. It is especially appropriate in contexts in which there are several baptized members who love Jesus but don't participate in the Lord's Supper because profession of faith seems intimidating—a fairly common concern we have heard from congregations in our work. It is also especially appropriate in settings where many have come to think of profession of faith rather than baptism as the entrance into church membership.

We encourage churches who adopt this model to retain the term "profession of faith" for the public act of professing faith and indicating agreement with the Reformed creeds and confessions, and to refer to this process as a "welcome to the table" process.

D. Sustaining and deepening table participation

With each model, however, our discussion makes clear that the welcome to the table is just the beginning. Every church needs to deepen and sustain faithful participation over time. If a child begins to participate in the Lord's Supper at age 8, we should be able to ask that individual five or ten years later, "What has your church done to deepen your understanding and participation at the Lord's Supper?" and receive a satisfying answer. Likewise, if a church requires public profession of faith for table participation and a person makes profession of faith at 18 or 28 or 58, we should be able to ask that person the same question five or ten years later and receive a satisfying answer. We have some concern that the significant attention we've given to the welcome to the table over the past generation has unwittingly detracted from healthy practices that sustain and deepen table participation over time.

E. Renewing profession of faith

Our committee continues to be very enthusiastic about the practice of public profession of faith. Note the following affirmation in “Affirming Baptism and Forming Faith” (Part 3.1):

Public profession of faith, though not a specific biblically mandated practice, is nevertheless an especially important milestone by which persons affirm their baptism, express personal trust in Jesus Christ, and indicate their pledge to follow Christ. Reformed Christians have practiced public profession of faith with good benefit for theological, pastoral, and historic reasons. It marks a time in which a believer is ready for new responsibilities and roles in the life of the church. It offers the Christian community rich opportunities to express gratitude for the work of God in the lives of his children. The opportunity for public profession of faith is a gift, then, both for individuals and for the church.

We call on each other to highlight the way that public profession of faith is an affirmation of baptism and to celebrate public professions of faith with joyful gratitude.

Shepherding people through the process of making a public profession of faith is an important pastoral opportunity that requires both patient attentiveness to the spiritual journey of each individual and gentle, proactive encouragement. We are eager to highlight the many voices we have heard throughout the denomination that urge each church to actively and warmly encourage each young person and each spiritual seeker to take the step of making a public profession of faith, and to celebrate this affirmation of baptism meaningfully in contextually appropriate ways.

F. Every congregation on a trajectory of growth

We have some concern that our work and this discussion will result to two equally problematic situations: (1) it may lead some congregations to make radical changes hastily, without a healthy approach to change, and (2) it may lead some congregations to conclude that their present approach is good enough and that they don’t need to take up the topic. In contrast, our vision—confirmed by dozens of conversations across the CRC—is that each congregation will study this topic and look for ways to hone practices that deepen discipleship. Our vision is that every congregation would be on a healthy trajectory of growth.

G. Responses to common questions

As we continue to think through this matter, we have received several helpful questions. The following paragraphs attempt to address these questions based on the themes of this report.

1. Won’t this approach simply further congregationalism?

We are certainly aware of the risks of congregationalism. Should we really promote a culture in which some churches require profession of faith and some do not? It is our prayer that this proposed approach will not in fact fan congregationalism, but rather will strengthen the unity we share by articulating a common principle, a set of common criteria to evaluate practices, and a network of communication to share resources that

fit well with this principle and common criteria. These common starting points are, indeed, significant common ground—far greater than many denominations share, including many Reformed denominations. In an age of astonishing diversity in congregational life, we dare to dream that this will deepen, not erode, our sense of unity across the denomination.

2. What about cases in which young children participate, but then go through a period of time in which they rebel against the church? Isn't it risky to involve them at such a young age?

This is a difficult challenge that requires great spiritual discernment and pastoral wisdom. But it is also important to see that this is not really different from welcoming a sullen, stubborn 39-year-old who cheats on his or her taxes despite the fact that this person has been participating since having made public profession of faith at the age of 20. In both cases, the church should pray for such members and call them to a life of faithful discipleship. And the church has the authority to also either (a) suggest or (b) require that they not participate in communion for a time. Wise church leaders might themselves choose to abstain from communion at a given time until they can reconcile with a neighbor.

3. If we adopt this, will we finally be doing something to prevent so many young people from leaving the church?

The reasons for the phenomenon of young people leaving the church are complex, and no one change in church practice is, by itself, likely to address this problem. Still, if we deeply internalize the vision represented here—in which children are seen as full members of the body, and they are invited to and are held accountable to full, active, conscious participation in body life, including at the table—that could, by the Spirit's power, make an enormous difference in the faith formation of children and youth. That is why we are eagerly working on this topic together.

4. What about the issue of transferring from church to church and having various practices—must churches who make different decisions on the three models accept transfers from churches that have done it differently and allow them to follow their ways—for example, if a church requires profession of faith for participation, does that apply to the children in a family transferring from a church that does not require it?

This is a challenging issue, and one that many congregations already face. This issue is significant no matter what direction the CRC takes on it, given the number of transfers that occur from many other denominations into the CRC. Church councils here have two options: one is to explain current practice and ask everyone to abide by it, the other is to grant exceptions to children who have already participated. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses. Yet we sense that the principle we are recommending offers the best possible position from which to decide. The question to ask for any given child or family is "How can we invite baptized members of the church to participate most deeply in an age-appropriate way?" In many instances, this would entail a pastoral conversation with the family about the Lord's Supper and the nature of obedient participation at the table and granting permission for children to participate. In some instances, perhaps in instances in which a family's

prior congregation approached the Lord's Supper in a rather superstitious or casual way, a church may ask the children not to participate for a time until further instruction or conversations are possible.

5. Is there an age that is too young for "age-appropriate participation"?

We do not think there are scriptural grounds for making a specific determination about this. We judge that naming a specific age in the Church Order would be too arbitrary. The cultural context of a congregation also makes a difference in shaping perceptions around young children and their capacity for participation. We sense that many congregations will approach this by welcoming children beginning somewhere around ages 5-8, though some may choose to invite 3- or 4-year-olds. It would seem natural to wait for children to answer in the affirmative questions like these: *Do you love Jesus? Are you sorry for your sin? Is this God's family? Is this God's meal? Do you want to participate?* We realize that local church councils will need to offer specific advice about this question for parents. As our committee develops resources for church councils, we will do so in response to synod's action on our recommendation.

6. Is it possible for baptized infants to practice "age-appropriate participation"?

At present the committee is not aware of a strong desire in the CRC to practice infant communion. But we do hear people asking this theological question. Some raise the question in light of the intriguing words of the psalmist: "You brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you even at my mother's breast" (Ps. 22:9) and "From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you" (Ps. 71:6). Others point to recent discoveries in developmental psychology that demonstrate the significant ways in which infants respond to their environment.

As this report explores, celebrations should highlight the life-giving significance of active participation, avoid implying that either baptism or the Lord's Supper imparts grace magically, and avoid reinforcing a kind of "cheap grace" view that is prevalent in contemporary culture. For this reason, we judge that infant communion would not be a wise pastoral practice.

At the same time, we do not believe we can determine a particular age when infants or children can appropriately participate, especially given many diverse ways in which various cultures understand the capacities of young children. That is why our recommendation notes that communion take place "under the supervision of the elders," and we entrust this particular decision to them.

7. How do the recommendations of this report differ from those adopted by Synod 1995?

The primary change that occurred in 1995 involved finding pastorally helpful ways to lower the age for making profession of faith. This report commends the importance of public profession of faith as a significant faith milestone, but it also proposes that a public profession of faith not be required for table participation in all congregations. Instead, this report

recommends that participation at the table be understood in terms of age- and ability-appropriate obedience.

8. How do the recommendations of this report differ from those adopted by Synod 2006?

Synod 2006 simply declared that all baptized members of the CRCNA were welcome to come to the table. It did not provide analysis of 1 Corinthians 11, and it did not lay out specific principles or guidelines for participation or accountability.

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