

# The Roles of SPONSORS & MENTORS

**Christian life is intergenerational. The Church's process of Christian initiation calls a new generation** into the vision and purpose of the Christian community. Confirmation preparation is part of mentoring a future generation of Christians, of nurturing their idealism, affirming the promise of their lives, and immersing them in the Christian vision of building a community of love and justice in the world.

Young people are the future and promise of the Christian community. Typically, early adolescents have a passion to be somebody and do something that matters for the world. They bring energy and enthusiasm where we adults sometimes bring weariness and cynicism. The parish as a community has the work of mentoring our young—of calling them into a future with us.

To bring them to the moment of deciding to be confirmed, many people have nurtured the candidates. Parents have shared their faith with their children. They have brought them to church, prayed with them at home, and included them in the works of mercy and justice they do. Those of us who teach have helped these junior-high candidates learn the scriptures and doctrines of the community over the years of their religious education.

Parishioners have taken these young people as prayer partners at first communion

and confirmation time to support them in their preparation. Parishioners who collect clothing or food for food shelves, who serve meals for the homeless, who visit shut-ins, who bring meals to families in need on big holidays have given teens a vision of what it means to be a Christian community.

Sharing the life of the parish community is a vital part of candidates' confirmation preparation. In addition, the initiation process calls for candidates to choose a mature adult to serve as an individual sponsor or mentor. *Sponsor* is the traditional name for the role of walking with a candidate in his or her preparation for confirmation.

*The Apostolic Constitution on the Sacrament of Confirmation* describes three activities for sponsors to perform. Sponsors bring candidates to receive the sacrament, present them to the minister for the anointing, and help them fulfill their baptismal promises (#5). The Church requires that sponsors be full members of the Christian community and mature persons.

The Church encourages candidates to choose godparents as their sponsors because the confirmation sponsor continues the godparents' role of helping young people fulfill their baptismal promises. A candidate can choose someone else special as a sponsor as long as the person is a baptized Catholic Christian and not one of his or her parents.

The sponsor tries to make the candidate feel welcome and important to the community. The sponsor works as a representative of the Church.

Recently, many confirmation programs have begun to ask candidates to choose an adult mentor to work with them during their preparation process. Mentoring invites adults into a more multi-faceted relationship with teens.

Mentoring may involve teaching. A teen may choose an adult mentor who can explain the bible or doctrine in a way he or she can understand and live. A mentor can be a guide who helps a young person become acquainted with people who do justice work in the parish or get linked up with the choir and parish musicians. A mentor may be someone a teen looks up to as a person he or she would like to become.

A mentor may be a counselor who listens to and supports young people in struggling with the stresses of the early teen years. A mentor may see promise in a young person that he or she doesn't see yet. Mentoring may involve any and all of these activities.

Mentoring pairs people up for one-on-one contact in hope the relationship will be a positive influence on the candidate. Young people may choose their mentors because they want to be like them or simply because the person seems approachable and easy to talk to.

A mentor has the responsibility of living the example, sharing faith, and listening to the ideas and concerns of the candidate. The mentor-candidate relationship may involve developing a real friendship.

In many programs candidates have both mentors and sponsors. Often they ask mentors to be their sponsors.

In their relationships with a young person both sponsors and mentors form a bridge into the Christian community. When a youth chooses a mentor or sponsor, this person represents the whole parish community. The community is the true mentor. Individual sponsors and mentors may move away or turn from their faith, but the faith of the community will continue to support the faith development of the young people. Ultimately, the role of either mentor or sponsor is to support the candidate in the process of becoming an active member of the Church.

The community must invite its youth to take their place among the people of God. The Vatican II *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* reminds us that God calls us not as individuals but as a people with mutual bonds, as a community in solidarity with one another and with Jesus (#32). The catechists who work with teens in confirmation must articulate the community's desire to include and nurture them.

Both mentors and sponsors must be adult Catholics who are not afraid to work with adolescents, who are not afraid to discuss their faith and, most importantly, are willing to listen. They aid confirmation candidates in the process of growing in the Catholic faith and feeling at home in that faith.