



Emerging Trends in Confirmation and Equivalent Practices

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Confirmation ministry encourages and cultivates growth and is a source of life for youth and adults. It not only teaches the content of faith, but “incarnates and integrates” faith in “lived experience.” It takes risks and creates a community where hard questions and dealing with day-to-day and messy aspects of faith and life are possible. . . . It is a ministry where young people are not separated, but integrated into the life and mission of the whole congregations and serve the surrounding . . . community and beyond. It integrates the confirmand into a God story, a practicing faith community and lifestyle of vocation that can unfold across a lifetime.¹

Mention the word confirmation and personal experiences immediately come to mind. Confirmation, as a ministry and a rite, has a reputation, and its reputation is not always positive. As the Christian church comes to understand its new location in society and embraces its missional calling, what role does confirmation play?

¹Research notes from Lutheran congregation studied.

This is an important study of confirmation practices and goals that seeks to “reimagine” this vital ministry for the twenty-first century.

Curious about the state of confirmation today in the United States, The Confirmation Project sought to understand confirmation and equivalent practices² in five denominations with traditions of infant baptism; the five denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the United Methodist Church.³ Funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc., and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary, the project used a mixed-method research approach to understand how confirmation contributes to faith intensification and integration of young people into the body of Christ.⁴

Given the loosening of denominational loyalties and shared practice of infant baptism, studying confirmation within these denominations from a comparative perspective offers the possibility of learning both within and across denominations.

Why study confirmation? First, confirmation has been studied at various points in the church's history, and it has been decades since a national study was conducted.⁵ As significant changes are taking place in society and within the church, it seemed important to map the state of confirmation within our current context. Second, no national study comparing five denominations has ever been done. Given the loosening of denominational loyalties and shared practice of infant baptism, studying confirmation within these denominations from a comparative perspective offers the possibility of learning both within and across denominations. Third, since a study of confirmation was recently completed of eleven European countries, a US study using similar questions makes possible a comparative perspective between the religious patterns of confirmation in Europe and the United States. Finally, church leaders (academics and congregational) believe there is a need for fresh thinking about the possibilities of confirmation. Aware that congregations are experimenting with new approaches and methods, a disciplined look at current practices would shed light on confirmation today as well as offer insights for the future of faith formation.

²Recognizing confirmation has different understandings in different denominations, this study chose to use the term *confirmation and equivalent practices* to allow denominations and congregations to determine what fit into this category. Overall, the study understood confirmation and equivalent practices to be ministry that focuses on the faith intensification and integration of young people into the body of Christ. From this point on in the article, the term *confirmation* will be used to refer to this broader understanding.

³Three of the denominations, the UMC, the AME, and the Episcopal Church, expand beyond national borders. In order to more deeply understand confirmation and equivalent practices within the United States, this research project only included congregations within the United States.

⁴You can learn more about The Confirmation Project and its findings at www.theconfirmationproject.com.

⁵As one example, within Lutheran denominations, the last two studies were in 1970 and in 1993.

Two dynamics anchored this practical-theology research project. One was that the research had to have validity and a solid methodology, and the other was that the research had to be accessible to the church and provide guidance for congregations. These two dynamics, one bent toward the academy and the other bent toward the church, created a robust, ongoing conversation at every stage of the research, influencing the methodology, the research team, and how the findings were communicated. The research team embodied these dynamics with people from each denomination and from different locations and perspectives. The team of over twenty people included seminary professors, doctoral students, masters students, undergraduate students, ministers, research specialists, and web designers.

The mixed-methods research approach used an extensive survey taken by ministry leaders, parents, and youth to map the national understanding and practices of confirmation and site visits of congregations, camps, and regional gatherings to capture the on-the-ground experience of confirmation. With more than three thousand congregations from five denominations participating in the survey, the quantitative data was rich.⁶ The on-the-ground experience of confirmation provided the character of vibrant confirmation ministries as members of the research team visited ministries around the country to observe, interview, and experience confirmation within the life of the church. Using *Portraiture*, a qualitative method of inquiry that is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism, the site visits demonstrated the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life.⁷ Twenty-four ministries⁸ of different congregational sizes and contexts⁹ were studied.

⁶There were 6,777 total respondents: 3,569 were ministry leaders, 1,121 were parents, and 2,087 were youth. Looking at ministry leaders by denomination, 38 percent were UMC, 26 percent were ELCA, 18 percent were Episcopal, 14 percent were PC (USA), and 4 percent were AME. The survey was a population sample, where all congregations that had confirmation in the past two years could take the survey, distributed via email to clergy contacts from each congregation. (Clergy then distributed to other ministry leaders, parents, and youth.) Surveys were collected over two school years, beginning in the fall of 2014 and ending in the summer of 2016. As a way of measuring confirmation's impact on young people, confirmands were invited to participate in a second survey six-plus months after the first. T2 had 416 of the 1,602 students (with emails) complete it, for a response rate of 26 percent.

⁷*Portraiture* first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and has been further developed in collaboration with Jessica Hoffmann Davis. Lawrence-Lightfoot used *Portraiture* to document the culture of schools, the life stories of individuals, and the relationships among families, communities, and schools. For more on *Portraiture*, see Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

⁸Sites were visited between the summer of 2015 and the summer of 2016. Six sites were ELCA, five were UMC, PC(USA), and Episcopal, and three were AME.

⁹Eight were small congregations (50–125 worshippers), five were medium (230–350 worshippers), five were large (over 350 worshippers), and six were camps or conferences. Four were in urban contexts, four were in rural/small towns, seven were suburban, and nine were in “other” contexts. Portraits were developed for each site visited, capturing the researchers’ perspectives of confirmation, and analyzed together to discover what makes confirmation vibrant. To see the portraits, go to theconfirmationproject.com/gallery. For more on vibrant confirmation ministry, see the article “Encountering the Gospel Anew: Confirmation as Ecclesial, Personal, and Missional Practices” in this volume. To learn more about the camp data, see the article “Rethinking the Classroom” also in this volume.

With this backdrop of The Confirmation Project, this article names the emerging trends in confirmation by reviewing the findings from the survey data and the key learnings from the site visits. It will conclude by offering the emerging understanding of confirmation.

FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Given the breadth of data collected via the national survey, an in-depth report of the survey findings is beyond the scope of this article. This section focuses on the findings regarding the description, content, and purpose of confirmation. These findings do not prescribe a formula for confirmation, but they do sketch a picture of current understandings and practices and offer insights into key elements to consider in designing confirmation.

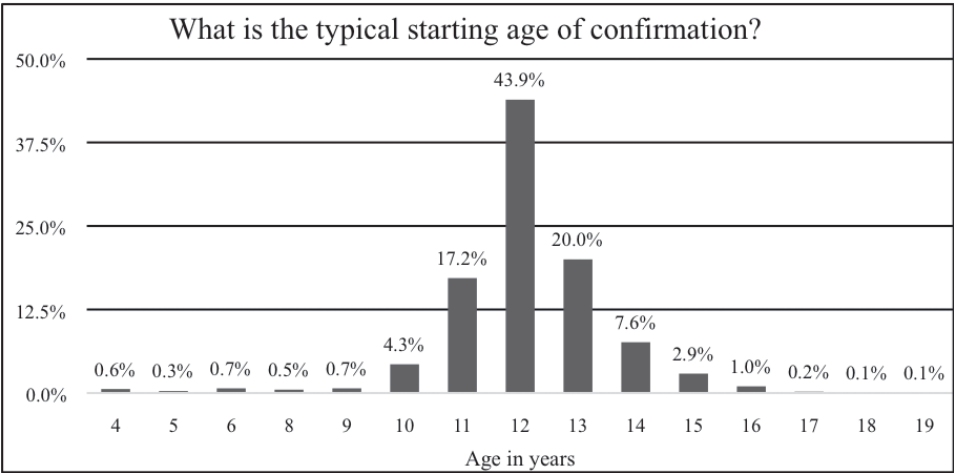
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DESCRIPTION OF CONFIRMATION

Age

National studies often confirm trends that people already have a tacit knowledge about. Because of this, it can feel like the findings are not very interesting because they simply reveal what everyone already knows. Research does provide numbers to confirm, and sometimes challenge, assumptions, but studies also provide descriptions of confirmation against which individual congregations can put themselves into dialogue. The first finding falls into that category. For the majority of congregations, confirmation takes place in early adolescence. Is it not surprising that most confirmands begin around the age of eleven, twelve, or thirteen. In fact, someone who knew very little about confirmation might guess this given their experience in the church or with other traditions (like the Jewish practices of Bar and Bat Mitzvahs taking place around the same age).

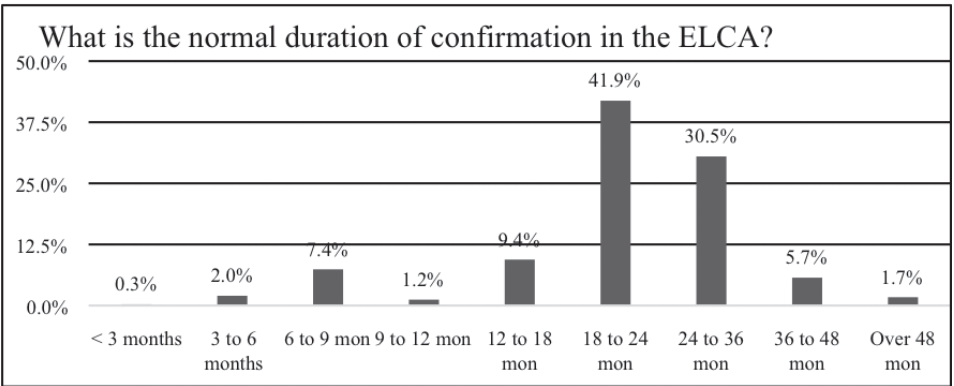
There is something about the developmental stage of early adolescence that invites over 91 percent of congregations to offer confirmation beginning between the ages of eleven and thirteen and 44 percent at age twelve. (See the chart below for more details.) Perhaps ministries aimed at faith intensification and integrating young people into the congregation in early adolescence is more than a tradition.



Duration

Another common question people ask is, “Is there a typical duration of confirmation?” Across the five denominations, the answer is no. However, there are trends. When separated by denomination, on the long end of the spectrum is the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), with 42 percent of programs being eighteen to twenty-four months and 30 percent of programs being twenty-four to thirty-six months. Within the ELCA, about half of confirmation programs being two years in length. (See the chart below.)

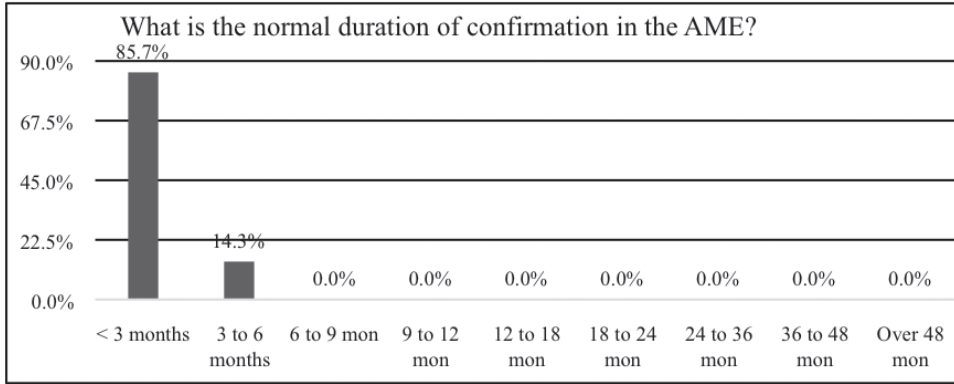
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America



On the other end of the spectrum is the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, with 86 percent of the programs being less than three months. While this may seem extremely short, especially compared to the ELCA, confirmation (and in

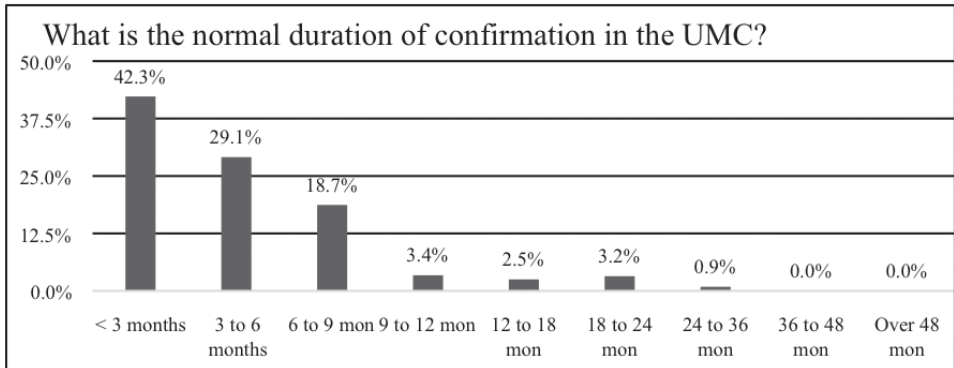
many cases equivalent practices) within the AME represents only one among many expressions of discipleship or faith-formation practices.¹⁰ (See the chart below.)

African Methodist Episcopal Church (within the USA)



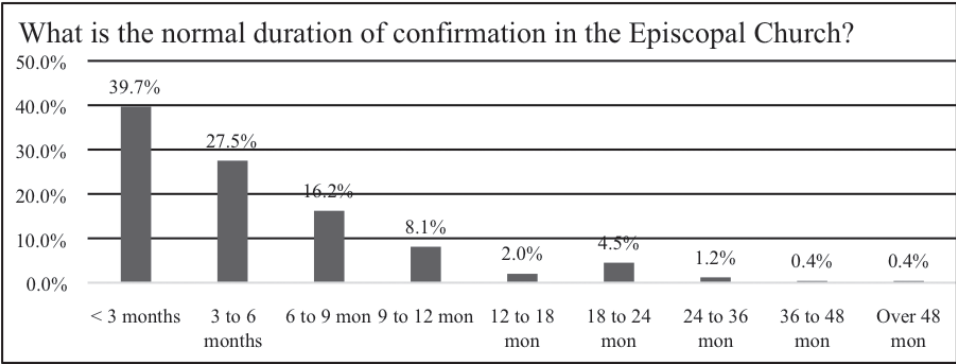
The other three denominations fall in the middle. The United Methodist Church (UMC) median is five months, with 90 percent lasting no longer than nine months and 43 percent less than three months. (See chart below.) The Episcopal Church median is also five months, with 67 percent lasting six months or less and almost 40 percent less than three months. (See chart below.) And the Presbyterian Church (USA) (PC[USA]) median is six months. Their spread is wider than the other two denominations, with 31 percent three months or less, 28 percent three to six months, and 30 percent six to nine months. (See chart below.) So, while five months is the median duration of confirmation in four denominations, the range is from three to nine months, with very few lasting more than a school year. And the ELCA's multiyear approach is clearly the outlier, with their own median and range.

United Methodist Church (within the USA)

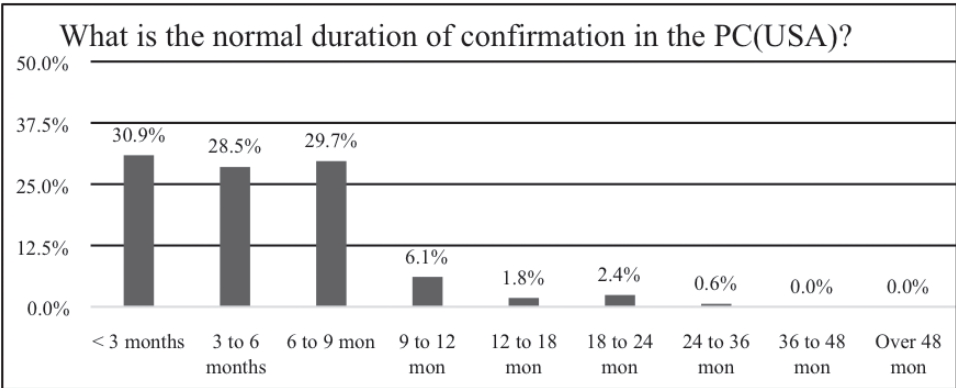


¹⁰About 80 percent of AME congregations offer Sunday school ministries and Young People's Division and 25 percent offer Christian Debutantes and Masters Commission (CDMC). Only around 10 percent of congregations offer confirmation programs or Decision Day.

Episcopal Church



Presbyterian Church (USA)



Program Characteristics and Teaching Methods

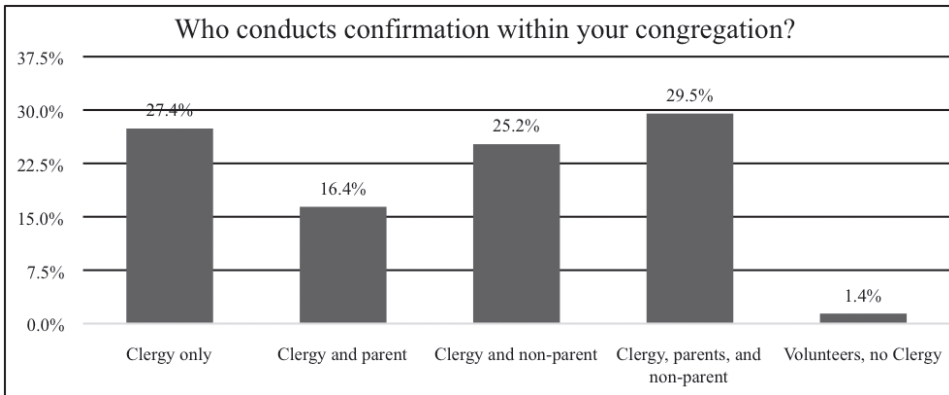
Confirmation programs vary greatly within and across denominations, but there are commonalities. Using the lenses of characteristics and teaching methods, one characteristic and one primary teaching method stand out: classroom learning is the backbone of confirmation, and clergy are the primary confirmation leaders.

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Nearly all confirmation programs (95 percent) have regularly scheduled classroom experiences as their core. The duration of that classroom time varies (from forty-five minutes to two hours), as does the total number of classroom hours (from five to ninety). So, what do these classroom experiences look like?

That also varies, but most involve multiple teaching methods. Clearly at the top is small-group discussion (96 percent) mixed with some combination of group Bible study (76 percent), lecture (67 percent), hands-on learning (64 percent), multimedia presentation (63 percent), games (60 percent), and/or inquiry-led discussion (63 percent). This variety recognizes the highly contextual nature of confirmation programs, suggesting congregations are taking into account the expectations, needs, and realities of their students and congregation. This flexibility is reiterated as congregational leaders note little denominational control or standards. The variance is also present as congregations draw on various curricula (59 percent used a denominational curriculum for at least part of their program,¹¹ with many combining it with other resources; 35 percent wrote their own curriculum).

The key confirmation leader, across denominations, is the pastor. Ninety-seven percent of congregations report pastors, or another trained professional, as the one responsible for confirmation. Yet, in most situations, pastors are not leading alone, as more than 71 percent of congregations have a team leading the confirmation program. (See chart below.) In the congregations visited, leadership included a wide range of roles that parents, mentors, volunteers, and other teachers play. This finding makes it clear that congregations (and in many cases pastor's themselves) expect pastors to be involved and oversee this ministry.



With regard to the requirements of confirmation, several elements, as either required or optional, stand out across all denominations. Three practices are found in 60 percent or more of congregations: Sunday worship attendance (77 percent required, 22 percent optional), homework (65 percent required, 24 percent optional), and writing a faith statement (59 percent required, 18 percent optional). Mission trip/service project (40 percent required, 38 percent optional), retreat (34 percent required, 23 percent optional), and presenting faith statement (32 percent required, 16 percent optional) represent a second group of practices required by about one-third of congregations. And two significant yet less-required practices

¹¹And less than 44 percent used it exclusively.

are classes for parents of confirmands (17 percent required, 27 percent optional) and camp (8 percent required, 18 percent optional).

Reading through this list, you may nod your head at some and question others. Why? Because this area has great denominational variance. For example, writing faith statements is high overall, but presenting faith statements to the church's governing body is more common in the PC(USA) (83 percent reported this practice compared with 23 percent in other denominations). Camp is not a typical requirement for confirmation, yet within the ELCA 43 percent require camp or a retreat (compared to 13 percent in other denominations) and 57 percent require camp, a retreat, or service project/trip.

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but also connecting to the historical tradition where new
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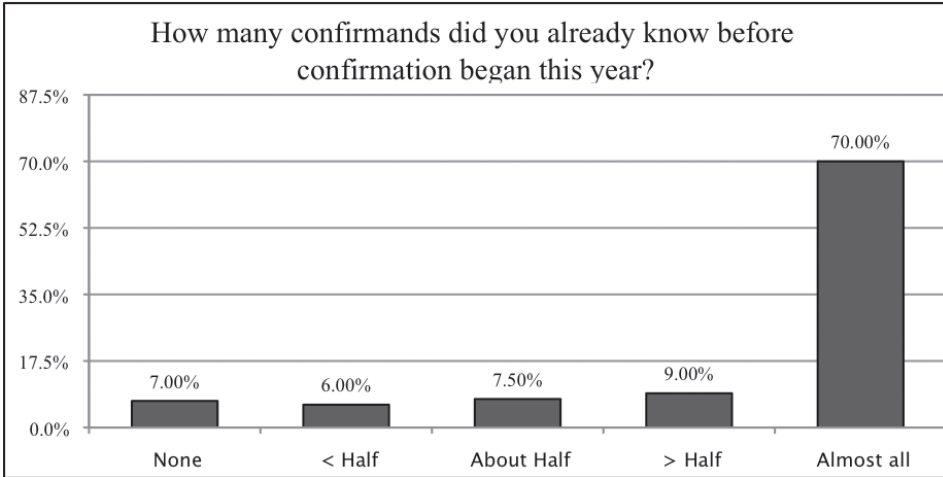
From these findings, a pattern emerged regarding the overall teaching methods. Teaching methods are distributed (almost evenly) across four areas: direct/traditional (teacher-centric), inductive/collaborative (relational teacher-to-student or peer-to-peer), situated action (student-centric with interactive learning), and balanced (integrating each of the three previous methods). While these findings do not dictate what should constitute a confirmation program, the research does show patterns: clergy are viewed as significant leaders, classroom learning continues to be a core practice, and teaching methods vary across four "general" methods.

Before leaving this section, it is important to note an area that is not normative but that this research took seriously—camp. Camp/retreats provide a unique learning environment for faith intensification and a growing number of congregations see it as an important element in their confirmation ministry. Camp/retreats have the ability to blend various teaching and learning approaches in a "time apart" with peers and adults living together that set this "method" apart from other teaching methods. (For more on camp, see "Rethinking the Classroom" in this volume.)

Knowing Confirmands

One wondering raised within our research team was whether confirmation is a moment for mission and evangelism or if it is simply a rite of passage for "insiders" already within the community. This seems to be an especially poignant concern for mainline denominations whose inward-looking disposition might benefit by reimagining confirmation not only as a rite of passage for those within the church but also connecting to the historical tradition where new Christians are

integrated into the body of Christ. To gain clarity around this concern, the survey asked leaders, “How many youth did you already know before confirmation began this year?” Interestingly, 70 percent knew almost all of them and 86 percent of ministry leaders knew about half or more of the confirmands. (See chart below.)



This reality, along with a comparison of the confirmands in this study and the youth in the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), led the team to discover current confirmation programs have more highly religious young people than the general population,¹² and most confirmands are either highly or moderately religious.¹³ Religious young people are those who attend worship services more than once a month, pray alone more than once a week, and believe faith in God helps them in difficult times. It is also telling that *none* fell in the lowest category,¹⁴ and only a few are in the minimal.¹⁵ From the survey data, it can be concluded that confirmation is not an evangelistic ministry. This does not mean it cannot be, and in fact some of the qualitative data offered examples, but our current mapping suggest confirmation is a ministry for religious young people.

CONTENT AND PURPOSE OF CONFIRMATION

One of the benefits of a national survey is that it sketches the landscape. This perspective is particularly telling with regard to the content and purpose of confirmation. Asking leaders, parents, and youth to rate the importance of twenty-five different topics, six consistently surfaced in the top ten across all three groups: death and resurrection, the Bible, God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), Lord’s Prayer, Apostle’s Creed, and experiences with God. Four topics surfaced consistently at

¹²54 percent compared to 34 percent from the NSYR.

¹³86 percent compared with 64 percent from the NSYR.

¹⁴None compared to 11 percent from the NSYR.

¹⁵12 percent compared to 25 percent from the NSYR.

the bottom: abortion, gay marriage, church governance, and drug abuse. And a few topics surfaced only for one of the groups: for leaders it was justice for others and for youth it was meaning of life, history of tradition, and miracles. Several topics surfaced in two of the three groups: Lord's support, baptism, Ten Commandments, and worship services.

Looking at these topics gives insights to the content of confirmation, which appears to be "very traditional," or content recognizable in confirmation decades ago. Perhaps this finding is reassuring to church leaders, for while so much is changing, confirmation's core content continues. Clustering the topics into five categories, catechism and word-and-sacrament topics¹⁶ rank highest, with social-issues and well-being-of-others topics¹⁷ ranking the lowest, and immediacy-with-God topics¹⁸ landing in the middle. Other factors impact this area, like the duration of the program and/or denomination, but this finding recognizes that when participants were asked what topics they deem important, this is what rose to the top.

An important note on the AME regarding content. The survey findings show leaders, parents, and youth from the AME ranked topics in the immediacy-with-God and social-issues-and-well-being clusters higher than the other denominations. This suggests different values or priorities. After completing the site visits, especially the regional conferences, many of these topics (like young people's personal experience with God, supporting each other, and working for justice) correspond with what were discovered as key elements of young people's Christian identity and faith formation within AME contexts.

One of the affirming, and startling, findings is a shared understanding of confirmation's purpose. This purpose centers on three common goals confirmands, parents, and leaders across denominations identified: to strengthen faith, to learn the faith, and to own the faith. This alignment suggests what distinguishes confirmation from other youth-ministry activities. All three groups believe confirmation is an appropriate time and place to ask faith questions. Yet each group has a slightly different perspective of what fulfilling those goals entails. For leaders, the emphasis is on theology and doctrinal issues. (It is probably not surprising that Protestant ministry leaders had baptism, the Lord's Prayer, and the Bible as their top three topics, emphasizing their word-and-sacrament understanding of the church.) Parents care about similar topics, but the majority (67 percent) associate strengthening the confirmand's faith with fulfilling their parental responsibility regarding the faith of their child. And young people are motivated to complete the confirmation program and did not vary much in their view of important topics, but did indicate a higher concern for relevance and meaning. This concern goes beyond the classroom and includes their experience in worship, overall relational connections, and enjoyability of confirmation.

¹⁶Topics in this cluster include baptism, Lord's Supper, worship services, and the Bible.

¹⁷Topics in this cluster include other religions, other denominations, justice and responsibility for others, drug abuse, love/sexuality, abortion, and gay marriage.

¹⁸Topics in this cluster include miracles, experiences of or encounters with God, death/resurrection, and the meaning of life.

EMERGING TRENDS

One of the research team's guiding questions was about understanding if and how youth are integrated into the body of Christ through confirmation. The classic critique of youth-ministry programs being a "one-eared Mickey Mouse," acting more like an appendage to congregational life than being part of it, does not seem to be true for confirmation programs; yet, it is clearly a danger. What we learned was that the design of confirmation, with confirmands often being "required" to attend worship, volunteer within the congregation, and/or connect with adults in the congregation, pushes against this critique and, in fact, connects young people to the congregation. Unfortunately, despite the ideals of many ministry leaders and parents, the reality of this practice can function mechanically instead of in the life-giving way it was designed or imagined. Despite this, it seems to be a congregational practice that continues to exist and even thrive in many congregations.

Another guiding question behind the research was, Does confirmation make an impact in young people's lives? From our sample and limited longitudinal study, there is no clear evidence of growth in student's believing, belonging, or behaving regarding their faith. What can be said is that our research shows that confirmands are entering confirmation with a strong faith, and participation in confirmation shows no obvious impact. Yet, the survey did discover students report they are learning, participation in additional faith formation practices (youth programs, Vacation Bible School, Sunday worship, and summer camp) matters, mentors make a difference, and faith practices in the home do impact confirmands. This is good news.

Mentors make a difference, and faith practices in the home do impact confirmands.

Setting out to map confirmation from five denominations, the survey findings offer seven emerging trends. These trends are:

1. There is a high degree of agreement among leaders, youth, and parents that the purpose of confirmation is to strengthen young people's faith.
2. Parents, youth, and leaders expect confirmation to focus on the traditional contents of the Christian tradition, but to do so in ways that are engaging and participatory.
3. While confirmation still operates within a classroom paradigm, many programs include other activities that are significant to faith formation.
4. The creativity and passion of congregations and leaders is critical.
5. Confirmation is typically at the end of childhood and the beginning of adolescence.
6. Most young people in confirmation are already involved in their congregation.

7. Family members' attitudes toward the Christian faith are a major factor in young people's experience of confirmation.

FINDINGS FROM OUR PORTRAITS

Capturing the heart of a ministry is a difficult task, especially for people just entering the system. Yet, the research team knew vibrant confirmation ministries existed and wanted to learn more about them. Site visits highlighted the particularities of confirmation located within particular contexts. Using the research method of Portraiture challenged researchers to gain an “insider-out” perspective as they learned about confirmation and created portraits that provided ministry leaders insights into confirmation by seeing the unique richness and complexity of each site. Since one of the goals of the project was to make the research accessible to congregations, the portraits are public on The Confirmation Project website, and the research team hopes leaders find their imaginations enriched by these pictures of confirmation.¹⁹

The overall learnings from the site visits are presented first, followed by some of the details that lie below the surface. With the qualitative and quantitative research taking place simultaneously, it is interesting to hear the learnings of the site visits with the seven emerging trends from the survey findings still lingering in the background.

Confirmation is alive and well in many congregations, camps, and regional conferences. Based on the study of twenty-four vibrant ministries,²⁰ confirmation is strengthening the faith of young people as it attends to five elements: design, leadership, ecology, curriculum, and relationships. As each element is described, consider its relevance to your own congregational setting.

Design

No two confirmation programs look like, and that is their strength. Sensitive to the particular issues of young people and their congregation, confirmation impacts young people as it adapts. In designing confirmation, the ministries studied considered issues related to social class, race, ethnicity, and geographical location, as well as congregational assets, church traditions, and community assets. The process of customizing is dynamic, often ongoing. It begins where baptism begins, with an understanding that the Holy Spirit is actively forming faith, and builds upon that foundation a framework for learning and cultivating relationships. Drawing on creative approaches to teaching and learning, old practices are repurposed, new possibilities imagined, and meaningful interactions created. Existing relationships are deepened and new ones ignited. There is no “one size fits all” approach; vibrant confirmation is custom designed and contextually adapted.

¹⁹Our project website has a congregational portrait gallery where these portraits may be viewed: theconfirmationproject.com/gallery.

²⁰Eighteen were congregations and six were camps or conferences.

The process of custom designing and contextually adapting is more of an art than a science. The portraits provide glimpses of congregations that discovered their approach to confirmation by negotiating the tension between two realities: the importance of commitment to and regular participation in confirmation and the sheer busyness of young people in a cultural setting that no longer offers Sabbath on Sunday. Many are setting high expectations for participation in confirmation but do so aware of the many competing demands on young people's lives and without being rigid.²¹ Others are reducing weekly gatherings and adding "other" learning environments, creating a multifaceted approach.

A key factor in any custom-designed program is clear communication of expectations (of confirmands and their parents or accompanying adult). One Presbyterian congregation described their confirmation this way.

The confirmation program . . . only lasts four to six weeks. But it manages to engage thirteen-year-olds in serious reflection on their faith in dialogue with a Presbyterian catechism, explore questions about God's judgment, the atonement, and the salvation of Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu friends. This is serious stuff for early adolescents. It reminds us that young people can think seriously about their faith when they are taken seriously themselves and challenged by good teaching in a loving, supportive environment.²²

And confirmation from a United Methodist Church congregation highlights the importance of having the learning be in dialogue with the world.

The confirmation relationships, materials and activities have as a core focus: Scripture, the Creed, the Wesleyan Tradition and developing one's own faith expressions, practices, and vocation . . . all this is consistently brought into dialog with life together as God's people and daily life with neighbors in the world.²³

Leadership

Every confirmation ministry needs a champion or a leader who is highly invested in the success of confirmation in that setting. Often, but not always, clergy, champions believe in confirmation's power to transform lives, draw in other leaders, and lead the customization and contextualization process. Of all the gifts these champions have, the most important characteristic is their vital faith life. Seeing themselves as "disciples on the journey," they want young people to be

²¹One example is Trinity Lutheran Church in Owatonna, Minnesota, where they introduced a university model with built-in flexibility and choice.

²²Research notes from Presbyterian congregation studied.

²³Research notes from United Methodist congregation studied.

drawn into a life of faith. This grounding anchors the ministry, provides a vision, and gives confirmation its energy.

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Like the survey findings, leadership is shared. The confirmation champion recruits and inspires other adults to not only assist in the administration and implementation of the program but also share responsibilities for teaching, serve as mentors, participate in camp/retreats, and lead service opportunities. Training, equipping, and empowering adults not only impacts the confirmands, it helps the adults grow as well. There were even cases where the process of revisioning confirmation not only reimagined the goals and practices of confirmation but also renewed the congregation's commitment to learning and growing in faith.

One powerful example of leadership being shared and having a ripple effect comes from within the Episcopal Church. Within this denomination, bishops lead the rite of confirmation service. While the investment of Episcopal bishops varies greatly across the church, a few bishops view confirmation as a significant ministry and invest time and resources. One bishop even told his staff

it was time to re-imagine the practice of diocesan confirmation services (for all ages) and challenged his team to develop confirmation liturgies (and other rites of re-affirmation) to provide a rich context for candidates to make a mature public affirmation of faith while also experiencing authentic spiritual transformation in the midst of the celebration itself.²⁴

And an example of shared leadership from within an AME church highlights the role of the whole congregation:

There is an expectation that, while it is the youth's demonstrated commitment to the process that ultimately ensures their successful completion, parents/guardians, the pastor and church membership . . . assist [youth] in attaining spiritual principles that influence making the right moral decisions as a result of attending to the confirmation process.²⁵

Ecology

In different ways, congregations are cognizant of the fact that parents and young people often view confirmation as a kind of graduation from Christian

²⁴Research notes from Episcopal congregation studied.

²⁵Research notes from AME congregation studied.

education. To counter this force, they explicitly seek ways to make confirmation deeply meaningful to young people at the same time they find ways of keeping young people connected to the congregation after confirmation is over. Connecting youth with mentors, inviting youth to participate in various ministries within the congregation, and welcoming youth as leaders within the worship service are some of the specific ways congregations integrate youth into the congregation during confirmation. But there are less explicit ways as well.

Congregations with vibrant confirmation programs have, or are developing, cultures of discipleship for all ages. Some congregations draw on the discipleship culture or practices of their denomination, other congregations developed such cultures on their own working with their own assets and traditions. Some, like Reid Temple AME, begin this work with children; others, like Zion Lutheran and River of Hope Lutheran, do this through intergenerational learning environments; and others, like Good Shepherd Lutheran and Foundation for Christian Formation in the UMC, partner with ministries across the denomination. The key learning here is vibrant confirmation must be tied to other ministries. Cultivating connections between confirmands and adults, the congregation, and the larger church is critical.

Here are two ways congregations describe their view of confirmation within the larger ecology of the church:

Confirmation is a ministry where young people are not separated, but integrated into the life and mission of the whole congregation.²⁶

The purpose of confirmation very much reflects that of the whole congregation and encapsulates the vision of faith formation as well: “to build a Christian community where nonreligious and nominally religious students and their families are becoming deeply committed Christians.” Confirmation within this congregation is “best described as robust. Students’ minds and bodies are engaged through worship, service, and prayer. Confirmands are encouraged to struggle through real issues and to grasp their faith more deeply.”²⁷

Curriculum

Without a standard template for portraits, it was interesting that the content of confirmation was hardly named. Given this reality, the first round of key learnings did not include curriculum. Yet, as the team processed the data in light of their personal experience, curriculum, or more specifically the content of the curriculum, became an important element for each ministry. As discovered in the survey data, there was an operating understanding of confirmation that wove throughout the sites; it was to accompany young people in maturing in their faith (or connecting knowledge, belief, and action of faith into one’s life and identity).

²⁶Research notes from Lutheran congregation studied.

²⁷Research notes from United Methodist congregation studied.

And congregations and camps/conferences did this using many of the same practices (like classroom learning, prayer, worship, studying scripture, and cultivating key adult/youth relationships) and addressing similar content. In general, content wove together three things: scripture, Christian tradition, and everyday life issues. For more detail on topics, we had to go to the survey data.

Another dimension of curriculum is that confirmation assumes some familiarity with the Christian story, Christian practices, and the church's theology. In this way, the content of confirmation aims to deepen confirmands' understanding and practices of faith (like going beyond the Sunday-school version of Bible stories) and/or provides a framework for understanding current practices (like learning more about the Lord's Prayer or discovering the meaning behind aspects of worship). This period of learning culminates in a public rite, with both the learning and the rite having significant roles to play. In this way, the content of confirmation provides the skeleton for the learning period that leads to confirmands making a public affirmation. The customization and contextual adaption are all efforts to help students internalize the corporate faith or become fluent in the language of faith, making it their own.

The following two descriptions of confirmation highlight the role content plays, especially in today's religiously fluid world:

Students are not only learning the content of the faith, the stories and language of their faith, they are experiencing the substance of that content in the community of faith and wrestling with their own sense of ethics and morals not only as a worldview but also as it applies to their identities, decisions, and actions.²⁸

One student said she "appreciated that there was space for questioning and doubt . . . a place to learn what it means to be Christian . . . in the midst of a culture that wants them to be something else."²⁹

Relationships

Perhaps the least-surprising learning is the most important one, a primary aspect of confirmation is relationships. Good youth leaders have long known the importance of cultivating relationships within an environment that is trustworthy, enjoyable, and spiritually enriching, and the congregations studied did this work well. They attend to relationships not only between the youth themselves but also between the youth and adults. Yet again, no two congregations cultivate relationships in the same way. Attention to relationships is a part of the classroom experience, but it is also part of the off-site learning, congregational engagement, parent/confirmand learning, and camp/retreats. Tending to the relational dimension of

²⁸Research notes from Lutheran congregation studied.

²⁹Research notes from Presbyterian congregation studied.

confirmation creates a web of relationships in which the rest of confirmation is situated. Relationships are often invisible, yet nurtured and developed they become a powerful force in vibrant confirmation.

Good youth leaders have long known the importance of cultivating relationships within an environment that is trustworthy, enjoyable, and spiritually enriching.

So often, confirmation is viewed primarily through an educational lens, yet this study raises an important issue that challenges that singular focus approach. Learning focuses on knowledge and understanding. And even when it is done in a robust way, its goal is different than connecting youth to a community. In other words, learning about faith is not the same as being integrated into a faith community. Faith is about believing, belonging, and behaving, a framework that the survey data used to highlight the multifaceted nature of being Christian. If the desired outcome is for confirmands to discover a Christian way of life—engaged with a community of faith and in their everyday life—then cultivating significant relationships is key for vibrant confirmation. This learning lifts up the power of relationships and brings us back to the beginning. In designing confirmation, youth-to-youth, youth-to-adult, and youth-to-congregation relationships must be given attention.

Two congregations highlight the significance of relationships, one from within a mixed socioeconomic urban setting and another pointing out young people's ability to translate faith into their own lived experience.

An urban congregation talked about confirmation as “grounded in relationships and focused on getting to know each other's stories in the midst of digging deeper into the Christian narrative.” For them, bimonthly learning experiences at church were combined with confirmation camp, because add “faith to the disruption camp brings to our lives and camp makes it possible to authentically engage in questions of meaning, purpose, community, and personhood in ways that staying at home often never gets to.”³⁰

The process of transforming “stale” church language to talk about God and faith, passed down from one generation to another, to discovering a personal vernacular for talking about God in a living community opens students to seeing Christian practices through new eyes and with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning about God and faith in their everyday life.³¹

³⁰Research notes from Lutheran congregation studied.

³¹Research notes from Episcopal camp studied.

Below the Surface

The project of creating portraits for ministries in each of the denominations was invigorating and complex. The research team intentionally did not create rigid standards, allowing each denominational team to identify ministries they discerned most fitting for this project. Yet the team wanted ministries from various regions of the country and different settings. In the end, twenty-four sites presented many types of ministries and setting.³²

The texture comes not from the numbers but from the stories and ministries themselves. Learning how Trinity Lutheran in Owatonna, Minnesota, or First Presbyterian in Birmingham, Michigan, reimagined confirmation while it was “still going well” might help confirmation leaders risk changing current practices. Hearing about the powerful foot washing at the Korean Presbyterian Church of Westchester, New Rochelle, New York, or how Mount Olympus Presbyterian Church, Salt Lake City, Utah, engages confirmands within a primarily Mormon culture might introduce congregations to new practices or perspectives. Seeing a picture of young-adult confirmation that fuses confirmation with creating bento boxes of personal spiritual practices at Union Coffee United Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas, could invite ministries to repeatable practice offered in times other than adolescence. And reading about how parents and youth learn together from Zion Lutheran, Loveland, Colorado, or how Kingston UMC, Kingston, New Jersey, designed confirmation for one student might help congregations break out of their current models.

Underneath it all, it is not the practices but the purpose that unites these ministries. As has been stated already, the understanding of confirmation is maturing in faith or faith connecting knowledge, belief, and action with the confirmand's identity. The theological understanding and practices of each denomination shape how this understanding takes shape within the ministry. For example, focused on making a commitment to being a lifelong follower of Jesus, confirmation within UMC congregations is relational, experiential, and values drawing young people into a community of practice. For the UMC, the rite of confirmation is a discipleship milestone in which confirmands publicly commit to a Christian way of life after coming to their own decision around faith. Within PC(USA) congregations the focus is more on becoming a member of a congregation and shaping the young

³²Some lenses for understanding the diversity of the eighteen congregations and six camps/conferences visited: *by denomination*: six were ELCA, five were UMC, PC(USA), and Episcopal, and three were AME; *by geography*: they were distributed across seventeen states with four urban, four rural/small town, seven suburban or within a metropolitan area and not urban, and nine “other”; *by congregational size*: eight were small (fewer than 125 worshippers), five were medium (126–350 worshippers), and five were large (between 900 and 20,000 worshippers); *by ethnicity*: eleven congregations were primarily white/Caucasian, three congregations were primarily African American, two congregations were a mix of Hispanic and white/Caucasian, one congregation was primarily Korean, and one congregation was a mix of African American and white/Caucasian; and *by pedagogy*: nine congregations were considered innovative, eight congregations were traditional (or adapted traditional), and one congregation was individualized. Twelve congregations used mentors, nine congregations used retreats, nine congregations had choices, nine congregations involved parents, nine congregations involved service, four congregations had camp, two congregations and one camp used technology, and two congregations had field trips.

person's identity. For these congregations, knowledge and reflection is critical, as is personal meaning-making. Within this denomination, congregations are balancing the personal aspect with the church system.

CONCLUSION

As the two streams of data merge into one, there emerges a significant finding. Among churches that practice infant baptism, confirmation can provide an opportunity for young people to encounter the gospel anew. In today's world, this is an important claim. And confirmation can do so in ways that strengthen young people's understanding of faith, deepen their experience with Christian community, and equip them to discern their calling to join in God's mission in the world. This is a worthy outcome for confirmands. But confirmation can be more than focused on individual youth. Through confirmation, congregations bear witness to the reconciling and redemptive love of God and the covenant of grace into which all Christians are baptized. In this way, confirmation is a ministry of the whole congregation.

In the end, The Confirmation Project found that having a period of time designated as "confirmation" gives parents, ministry leaders, and youth the opportunity to intentionally go deeper in faith formation. This period of time is different than young ministry (in general) in that it focused on the intensification of the faith and integration of youth into the body of Christ. To intensify faith, leaders create an ecology of learning environments as a way of accompanying youth in internalizing the corporate beliefs of the faith community, and design ways to connect them into the body of Christ, the local congregation, and church at large. Confirmation is intentional about building relationships—in both formal and informal ways—and this learning process is marked by a public rite in which confirmands say yes to God, to their deeper understanding of faith, to being part of the church, and to living their faith in daily life.

Can confirmation play a role in the Christian church today as it embraces its missional calling? Yes. ☩

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