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Encountering the Gospel Anew: Confirmation as Ecclesial, Personal, and Missional Practices¹

TERRI MARTINSON ELTON

Pat² is a widow in her seventies who stays involved in her congregation by mentoring confirmation students. She started mentoring when one of her granddaughters invited her to be her mentor. Honored to do so, she stepped into the role. Now years later, she has mentored many confirmands and has a deep appreciation for the relationships she has with young people in the congregation. One story in particular captures how meaningful this practice is for her. A few years back, Naomi was in confirmation and her dad, a lifelong friend of Pat's, asked if

¹The ideas for this article emerged from conversations with Dr. Richard Osmer as we cowrote a chapter for the forthcoming book on The Confirmation Project findings, *Confirming Faith: A Practical Theology of Confirmation*, ed. Katherine Douglass and Richard Osmer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2018).

²The names in this scenario have been changed.

Given the challenges facing congregations and young people today, some church leaders are wondering if confirmation continues to have a role in discipling young people. Based on the findings from The Confirmation Project, this article asserts that confirmation is, in fact, uniquely positioned to be a vibrant ministry for young people to encounter the gospel anew when congregations integrate ecclesial, personal, and missional practices. Such an approach strengthens confirmands' understanding of faith, deepens their experience with Christian community, and equips them to discern their call to join in God's mission in the world.

she'd be Naomi's mentor. Mentoring meant coming to church for six Wednesday evenings during Lent for a meal, an intergenerational small-group discussion, and worship. Pat graciously agreed and for three years Pat and Naomi spent Wednesday evenings during Lent talking about faith and life. After three years, Naomi was confirmed with the other confirmands, and Pat, along with Naomi's dad, was there to celebrate.

Shortly after Naomi was confirmed, her dad died suddenly. A year after his death, someone at church told Pat that Naomi had not been at church for some time. Pat, quick to respond, said not to worry because "the church still connects with Naomi because *I* connect with Naomi."³ Pat knew that during this sad and sacred time in Naomi's life, she had a role to play; that role was to reach out to Naomi and let her know she was loved and the church cared about her.

Confirmation at Zion Lutheran Church in Loveland, Colorado, does not focus on how many students participate in their Affirmation of Baptism service; their focus is on drawing young people into a web of relationships that nurture faith and witness to God's love in the world. Located in a region of the country where 60 percent of the population is not religiously affiliated,⁴ Zion is committed to discovering ways for people to meaningfully engage in Christian community and translate faith into everyday life.

Congregations like Zion do not make the news or get highlighted in the religious section of the newspaper. What does make the news are statistics highlighting the aging and declining membership of mainline churches, stories of denominations struggling to traverse unknown terrain, and situations where "hot-button" issues test the ties of current church members. And while such stories are true, they do not give the full story of the church today. Massive shifts are changing the religious landscape, and congregations are discovering ways to proclaim the gospel and create meaning in the midst of these changes.

According to The Confirmation Project national survey, confirmation does not automatically contribute to nurturing faith in young people.⁵ Mapping practices and understandings of confirmation within five denominations did not unearth a magic formula or shared curriculum. What the research did find was that confirmation can be a unique opportunity for young people to strengthen their understanding of the Christian faith, deepen their experience of Christian community, and discern their call to join God's mission in the world at a time

³Pat, interview by Terri Martinson Elton, notes, March 2015.

⁴Larimer County surrounding Loveland is not religious, with 60 percent of the population claiming to be unaffiliated. The 40 percent who claim a religious affiliation are primarily Christian. Evangelical Protestant is the largest (19 percent) group, followed by Roman Catholic (12 percent) and mainline Protestants (6 percent). Non-Christian religious groups include Buddhism (largest), Bahaism, Judaism, and Hinduism. "County Membership Report: Larimer County, Colorado," ARDA, <https://tinyurl.com/y6wnrkah>.

⁵The Confirmation Project, directed by Richard Osmer and Katherine Douglass and generously funded by Lilly Endowment, Inc., researched confirmation and equivalent practices in five denominations: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, and African Methodist Episcopal Church. For more on the findings themselves, see "Emerging Trends in Confirmation" article in this issue. For more information see www.theconfirmationproject.com.

when young people have questions and the church's place in society is changing. For confirmation to be a vibrant discipling ministry, it must take into account the core tenants of faith and adapt to contextual realities and the lived experiences of young people. When it does, confirmands encounter the gospel in ways that impact their lives. Therefore, by putting the current challenges of young people and the church into dialogue with the findings of The Confirmation Project, this article argues that confirmation is a uniquely positioned ministry where young people can encounter the gospel anew by integrating ecclesial, personal, and missional practices of the church.

What the research did find was that confirmation can be a unique opportunity for young people to strengthen their understanding of the Christian faith, deepen their experience of Christian community, and discern their call to join God's mission in the world.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

Looking at the current challenges young people and their families are facing is one key component for shaping vibrant confirmation. Understanding the disharmonies, pain points, and emerging questions provides insights for what young people long for and clues for what church leaders need to take into account as they design life-impacting ministry. Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is a living word that meets people where they are, it makes sense to begin by listening to their situation.

Young people and their families are navigating massive challenges. While fully addressing these challenges is beyond the scope of this work, describing two of them give insights into the complexity families and young people are living in the midst of today.

Families are busy. That is not new news, but time has become a highly valued commodity. Days start early and run late, evenings are filled with homework and shuttling kids to activities, and the Sunday "Sabbath" has disappeared. Cultivating relationships, engaging hobbies, and tending to spiritual growth are squeezed into spare moments and the occasional "free weekend." Family calendars collect and merge the appointments of each member, making life full and spirits weary. The very things intended to bring meaning and joy often become distractions from being with the people and communities that matter most. Calendars, schedules, and a "planned" life are invisible but powerful currents driving families.

Looking at this lifestyle from afar, it is easy to offer quick fixes and judgmental responses. The answer seems obvious—just say no or find another way—but families know their choices have consequences. Showing up matters, be it for a paycheck or making the team. Being present is more than a transactional

exchange, it is about being part of something meaningful and making a difference in the world. Decisions are based on what is deemed important and valuable in the moment, or at least in the near future. Trying to get young people's attention is hard, and winning the calendar game is almost impossible. Simply making a case for families to give an hour or two of their week to church does not result in vibrant ministry. Church leaders must offer young people and families something more, something they cannot get elsewhere.

Within this busy lifestyle, caring for one's self, family, and a relationship with God often is left for the "in-between" spaces: in the minivan, over meals, before school or bed, or on a random Saturday off. Creating moments to pause and be feels like a luxury. Yet humans are beings that need time to be. For our own flourishing, it is important to find time and space to cease activities and reflect on life. Open space, or time without an agenda, provides opportunities for introspection, integration, questioning, and dreaming. For meaning to take place, all of us need time and space to be. Maybe open space is what young people and their families are longing for and cannot find on their own. The church has practices for cultivating such space, space where God's people step out of the demands of the world and connect with themselves, others, and God.

To say the digital age is changing everything is an understatement. The year 2007 was a turning point in history: It was the year the iPhone was invented. It was the year storage capacity changed, making "big data" and open-source platforms possible. It was the year Twitter became its own company, Facebook opened to the public,⁶ Google launched Android, Amazon released the Kindle, Airbnb was conceived, the internet crossed one billion users worldwide, and IBM started building "a cognitive computer called Watson."⁷ Thomas Friedman, author of *Thank You for Being Late*, sees 2007 as a transformational year, one that marks an era before and after. Once machines augmented human capacity, and now machines can "make better decisions than humans."⁸ This reality has changed not only the way humans interact with machines but also how they interact with each other. In this digital age, people must learn to work with machines, not run them, and this requires new capacities and a new posture.

Most of humanity is living in a state of acceleration because the current rate of change exceeds any other time in history. Without space to pause and reflect, we are left overwhelmed with uncertainty. Dov Seidman reminds us how important and unique it is to be human in this digital age. "When you press the pause button on a machine it stops. But when you press the pause button on human beings they start. You start to reflect, you start to rethink your assumptions, you start to reimagine what is possible and, most importantly, you start to reconnect with your most deeply held beliefs."⁹ People living in the twenty-first century need to

⁶At least, to those thirteen and older.

⁷Thomas Friedman, *Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist's Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2016), 20–21.

⁸Ibid., 27.

⁹Ibid., 4.

reconnect with themselves, not only because they are busy but because they are living in a constant state of acceleration.

The digital age provides many great possibilities, but there are also capacities of the pre-2007 world that are quickly disappearing. With today's families being the first to navigate this digitally connected, collaborative, and creative world, the church must learn to adapt if it is going to accompany them. What do we keep and what do we change? That is the critical question the church faces today because this is the world our children and grandchildren are growing up in. If we want young people to encounter the gospel, we must begin by listening and creating space.

With today's families being the first to navigate this digitally connected, collaborative, and creative world, the church must learn to adapt if it is going to accompany them.

Seidman offers ministry leaders an insight into what the church has to offer. He says, "Our ability to forge deep relationships—to love, to care, to hope, to trust, and to build voluntary communities based on shared values—is one of the most uniquely human capacities we have. It is the single most important thing that differentiates us from nature and machines."¹⁰ Relationships within communities of trust are vital for faith formation. And the church has the opportunity to cultivate such relationships not only between peers but also across generations. Guided by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church could step into the fray and accompany the first generation of families growing up in the digital age in discovering a Christian way of life. How? By creating relationships of trust; providing open spaces for reflecting, questioning, and dreaming; and engaging in Christian practices in which young people encounter the gospel anew.

CHALLENGES AND EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES WITHIN THE CHURCH

Dealing with the current challenges the church is facing is another key component for shaping vibrant confirmation. Understanding the disruptive shifts taking place, recognizing that congregations need new models of ministry, and naming the changing demographics of the United States tap into some of the contextual realities leaders must face.

The ground on which the church rests has shifted. Witnessed by people's decreased attachment to congregations, the change in behaviors signals a deeper change in values. Twenty-first-century Christians do not live within a society based on Christian values and the institutional church no longer holds a privileged place. Cultural Christianity, where Christianity is normative, has disappeared (either entirely or is fading fast). This reality translates into "regular members" participating less in worship, many Christians loosely affiliating with local churches, and

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

some Christians choosing not to be part of a congregation at all. This climate is forcing the church to discover new ways of living its calling.

Clues for moving forward might be nestled in “the bad news.” Studying the *donees*, or people who have been active in the church and deliberately decided to leave,¹¹ give church leaders insights as to what people who were in the church longed for and did not get. Josh Packard, author of *Church Refugees*, says the *donees* “wanted community . . . and got judgment. They wanted to affect the life of the church . . . and got bureaucracy. They wanted conversation . . . and got doctrine. They wanted meaningful engagement with the world . . . and got moral prescription.”¹² And George Barna and David Kinnaman, in their book *Churchless*, attribute the conscious departure of the *donees* to their “firsthand experiences that led them to conclude churches are ill-equipped to support the flourishing life they hope for”¹³ and that congregations “are somehow enabling many people to stall out on their journey toward deep, transformative faith.”¹⁴ These harsh words should alarm the church and challenge us to rethink our practices.

How do congregations help young people encounter the gospel anew when the ground is shifting and current approaches are being critiqued? We do not fully know yet, but the findings of the *donees* echo the findings of The Confirmation Project: central to any approach to ministry is “community, conversation, and meaningful engagement.”¹⁵ The *donees* and young people want “a home in the truest sense of the word. A place that’s safe and supportive and refreshing and challenging. An identifiable place, embedded in a larger community where they both know and are known by those around them and where they feel they can have a meaningful impact on the world.”¹⁶ Encountering the gospel anew requires first and foremost cultivating a safe and trustworthy environment.

How do congregations help young people encounter the gospel anew when the ground is shifting and current approaches are being critiqued?

Our current models for discipleship and faith formation need to be revisited. According to The Confirmation Project, size makes a difference. Size alone does not determine vitality and sustainability, but it does impact how congregations do ministry. Changes in size explicitly or implicitly open discussions about many things, including models of ministry. Congregations need new models for forming faith.

¹¹Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope, *Church Refugees: Sociologists Reveal Why People Are Done with the Church but Not Their Faith* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2015), 28. This qualitative research sought to discover why people were “disengaging with church but not God” and “what the process of disengagement looked like” (ibid., 7).

¹²Ibid., 28.

¹³Ibid., 20.

¹⁴Ibid.

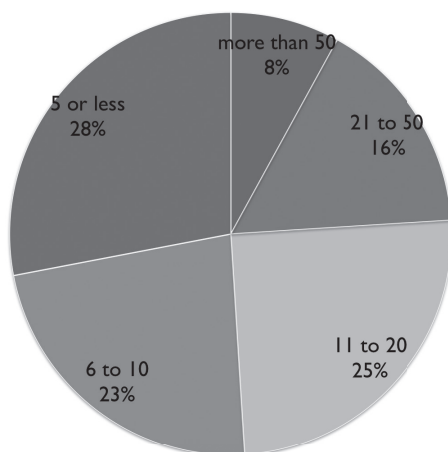
¹⁵Ibid., 29.

¹⁶Ibid.

Current faith formation models were not designed for congregations on the ends of the size spectrum—very small or very large. Using The Confirmation Project as a sample, congregations fell into three size categories (small, medium, and large), with the majority of congregations being small,¹⁷ having an average worship attendance of 150 or less. While congregational configurations vary, most small congregations are led by solo pastors (full or part-time, independently or shared with other congregations) and do not have many young people.

The most noted model of confirmation includes regular education classes (95 percent) and, for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), multiyear programming (confirmation in 75 percent of ELCA congregations is two or more years). This model is time intense and comes with many assumptions that may or may not fit small congregations. Since almost all (97 percent) confirmation ministries are led by clergy, questions around leadership, format, and duration surface as small congregations wonder about the feasibility of this model.

Looking solely at the ELCA data from The Confirmation Project, 51 percent of congregations in the survey had ten or fewer students in confirmation, and 28 percent had five or fewer. Knowing some congregations do not even have confirmation every year, it is clear the majority of ELCA congregations have few confirmands. As the number of small congregations increases, there is an opportunity to revisit the expectations and assumptions around confirmation and envision new models that fit the patterns of ministry in small congregations and draw on their assets. Releasing small congregations from thinking there is a “particular” model to follow and encouraging them to custom design ministries for their context would be a gift to the church.



1
Size of Confirmation Ministries within ELCA

¹⁷Forty-four percent of congregations in site visits and 65 percent of congregations in the survey had 150 or fewer worshippers. Broken down even further, 21 percent of congregations in the survey (none in the site visits) had 50 or fewer worshippers and 46 percent of congregations in the survey (44 percent in the site visits) had 51–150 worshippers.

Large congregations also have challenges. The Confirmation Project found a significant number of young people participating in confirmation ministries in large congregations,¹⁸ those varying from an average of 351 people in worship to membership nearing 20,000. Confirmation ministries in these congregations do not look alike, except for the fact they have formal programs with over fifty young people participating. Congregations of this size are discovering their own way, having already released themselves from existing models. While staff-driven, they incorporate others into leadership and are thoughtful about cultivating community and nurturing relationships. With diverse staff configurations and many specialty ministries, large congregations can leverage their assets and collaborate with other ministries within their congregation, but what is most striking is their focus and intentionality. Large congregations have done significant work clarifying their purpose for confirmation and creating scaffolding and training to carry it out.

The ELCA data within The Confirmation Project report 8 percent of congregations in the survey had fifty or more students in confirmation (and many had over a hundred). While the percentage of congregations is low, the total amount of students impacted by these ministries is conservatively one-third more than the total number of students in the small category.¹⁹ What does this reality mean for confirmation ministry today and into the future? Since large congregations are already doing intentional and thoughtful work around the purpose and leadership of confirmation, opportunities exist to leverage their learnings, test new ideas and models, and cultivate collaboration across congregations.

Perhaps the irony in the data is that The Confirmation Project discovered what many on the ground already know: one size does not fit all, and congregational size has an impact on the way ministries engage young people in forming faith. As the church seeks to help young people encounter the gospel anew in a time when the religious landscape is shifting, discovering new models of discipleship and faith formation that take size into account is imperative.

One size does not fit all, and congregational size has an impact on the way ministries engage young people in forming faith.

Our ministry must be contextually adapted. It is easy to think of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the abstract, as a universal for all people. While there is a universal

¹⁸28 percent of congregations in the site visits and 10 percent of congregations in the survey had 351 or more worshippers.

¹⁹Using the ELCA survey data, conservative estimates would give small congregations approximately 296 total students (estimating four students in the 28 percent of congregations with five or fewer students and eight students in the 23 percent of congregations with six to ten students) compared to 410 students in large congregations (estimating only fifty-one students for the 8 percent of congregations with over fifty students). The majority of students still fall within the medium congregations: 375 total for the 25 percent of congregations with eleven to twenty students (estimating fifteen students in each class) and 480 total for the 16 percent of congregations with twenty-one to fifty students (estimating thirty students in each class).

dimension to the gospel, the gospel finds its way into the world through particularities.²⁰ Congregations live in the midst of these particularities, and context is one particularity. Learning to read and work with contextual realities is a capacity needed for vibrant confirmation ministry.

The United States is a dynamic context. In addition to the changing religious landscape, population and demographic shifts are dramatically changing the towns, states, and regions across the country. National population trends indicate that people are moving into urban areas and the southern regions of the country²¹ at the same time the United States is getting older and more “multicolored.”²² Yet, migration and immigration impact regions of the country differently. Try this exercise. Map the locations of current congregations in your synod or dioceses. Note as many demographics as you can about these congregations. Then add the current and projected population and demographic make-up.²³ What picture emerges? Within my denomination and in my region, congregations are not geographically aligned with the trends and do not have the needed assets and capacities to handle the contextual challenges coming in the years ahead. This presents a challenge and opportunity for my denomination to think about ministry in general, and faith formation in particular.

A map of the congregations in The Confirmation Project reveal the majority of congregations in the survey were in the Midwest (39 percent) and South (34 percent).²⁴ Considered the highest churching regions of the country, this is not surprising. Yet within these regions, are the locations and assets aligned with needs and trends? A faithful and strategic approach would partner judicatories with congregations in these regions to cultivate new capacities for engaging people in faith formation within the changing landscape. The Northeast (17 percent) and West (9 percent)²⁵ had significantly less representation in the survey, yet these are regions of the country with the highest percentage of population. What does this mean? If people are going to encounter the gospel, local church communities must be near where people live. Congregations in these regions will need to explore diverse forms and expressions of Christian community if they are to bear witness to the gospel.

The challenges of young people and families are changing, the religious landscape has shifted, and the way people connect and make meaning is being transformed. For the church to bear witness to the gospel and for young people

²⁰For more on the “scandal of particularity,” see Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 67.

²¹“Measuring America: Our Changing Landscape,” *United States Census Bureau*, December 8, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/yd5y9mj2>; “On the Move,” *United States Census Bureau*, March 23, 2017, <https://tinyurl.com/ybnc3d3d>.

²²Paul Taylor, “The Next America,” Pew Research Center, April 10, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/ybfltmv6>.

²³To find your region of the country go to www.census.gov.

²⁴As a point of comparison, the ELCA sample was 60 percent in the Midwest (which was higher than the denominational representation of 49 percent) and 13 percent in the South (which was lower than the denominational representation of 17 percent).

²⁵As a point of comparison, the ELCA sample was 16 percent in the Northeast (which was lower than the denominational representation of 20 percent) and 11 percent in the West (which was lower than the denominational representation of 13 percent).

to encounter the gospel, new models of ministry need to be discovered and the church must engage its dynamic context.

VIBRANT CONFIRMATION MINISTRY

So what does the ancient practice of confirmation have to offer young people and congregations today? Maybe you are skeptical about confirmation and doubt its potential for forming faith in the midst of these realities. Some members of The Confirmation Project steering team came into this project with similar concerns, yet the findings of this study changed their minds. The study of vibrant confirmation ministries²⁶ suggests confirmation is uniquely positioned in the life of young people to meaningfully impact faith formation when it is custom-designed and contextually adapted. Taking place primarily in early adolescence, confirmation is a ministry container that can be used to create learning environments where young people ask questions and explore faith in ways different than childhood, relate to peers and adults in meaningful ways, and reflect on their own identity as they connect faith and life. Adapting to the particularities of the context and customized to the realities of the confirmands, confirmation can not only disciple young people but also draw in their families, and in some cases become a catalyst for faith formation within the whole congregation. For these reasons, we encourage congregations to take another look at confirmation and see its potential.

The study of vibrant confirmation ministries suggests confirmation is uniquely positioned in the life of young people to meaningfully impact faith formation when it is custom-designed and contextually adapted.

As stated at the beginning of this article, vibrant confirmation within The Confirmation Project strengthened confirmands' understanding of faith, deepened their experience of Christian community, and equipped them to discern their call to join in God's mission to the world as they encountered the gospel anew. In other words, encountering the gospel, personally and in community, is the core of vibrant confirmation ministry. Vibrant confirmation ministry flows from encountering the gospel. This simple claim is also profound. Confirmation is not just about confirming young people, it is also about congregations living out their call to share the gospel. As congregations participate in confirmation, they bear witness to the reconciling and redemptive love of God and the covenant of grace into which all Christians are baptized. And when they do this, they change lives. This understanding shifts confirmation from focusing primarily

²⁶*Vibrant confirmation ministries* refers to the findings from the qualitative research of The Confirmation Project. For portraits of all the sites researched, see the portrait gallery at www.theconfirmationproject.com.

on teaching the beliefs of the church to seeing confirmation as a life-changing encounter with God.

This approach to confirmation begins by recognizing God as the one that gifts faith and the Holy Spirit as the one that forms and shapes it. Congregations participate with God in forming faith and honor the promises they make at baptism as they cultivate relationships within an ecology of learning environments that nurture faith. Congregations in the study did this by engaging the core teachings of the church in a way that opened space for wrestling with doubts, internalizing the beliefs of the corporate community, and discovering one's giftedness and agency as a child of God. In this way, vibrant confirmation allows confirmands to encounter the gospel anew by integrating ecclesial, personal, and missional practices of the church.

Ecclesial

Confirmation as an ecclesial practice, or practice that passes on the Christian faith and embeds confirmands in the body of Christ, is perhaps the most familiar. Ecclesial practices shape the content, leadership, and methods of confirmation, as well as connect young people to the church both local and universal.

The church's unique calling to pass on the Christian faith weaves together learning the biblical story and teachings of the church with tending the communal nature of faith. Confirmation as an ecclesial practice grafts confirmands into the body of Christ. Practices like mentoring and worship connect confirmands with God as well as to specific people within identifiable communities where they are known and know others, as seen in the story of Pat and Naomi. Formed and shaped by shared experiences, stories, and practices, confirmands come to discover their Christian identity by participating in and leading within Christian communities. This mutual formation, where adults impact confirmands and confirmands impact adults, energizes and transforms both persons and communities.

Vibrant confirmation shares leadership. Regardless of size, confirmation provides the opportunity for confirmands to be surrounded by a variety of adults and the congregation to have shared ownership. Using multiple teaching methods, congregations create an array of opportunities for adults and youth to talk about faith and life, engage in service, study the Small Catechism, read the Bible, worship, and build relationships. Relationships, with peers and adults, impact confirmands more than the curriculum, doing something curricula cannot—bond young people to a congregation both during and after confirmation. Yet curriculum, or content, continues to be key as it provides the reason for their being together and shapes their experience.

Ecclesial practices have been part of confirmation for a long time, yet today church leaders cannot assume that by participating in a congregation young people connect with the church universal and/or for a lifetime. The vibrant confirmation ministry studied understood this and approached ecclesial practices humbly

and imaginatively. For example, most ministries did not begin with an assumption that church mattered for the confirmands and/or their family. This resulted in leadership using creative methods and language confirmands understood to explain the rituals, traditions, and beliefs.

In Scripture, the church is called to be the body of Christ witnessing to God's creative and redemptive love in the world. In baptism, we the church gather around the font and make promises to help the baptized discover a Christian way of life. These promises are part of the church universal, yet they are discovered in the realities of everyday life and in the midst of particular local congregations. Confirmation as an ecclesial practice recognizes that the people of God have a story to tell and a faith to confess. Congregations have a responsibility to share the gospel. Recognizing and refreshing the church's commitment to bear witness to the gospel by living out these promises is critical when thinking about confirmation.

Personal

Confirmation is also a personal practice, or practice that helps confirmands internalize the faith the corporate community confesses. Seeing each person as a unique child of God, confirmation invites confirmands to claim their identity in Christ and discover their own vocabulary for talking about their relationship with God, the Christian community, and the world. This practice centers on God's love, with relationships being the primary way God's love is understood.

While the personal practice is bound up in relationships, relationships are not the goal, encountering the gospel is. Think, for example, about confirmation retreats and/or camp. They are rich environments where confirmands encounter the gospel in new and meaningful ways. In such environments, the gospel is studied in Bible studies and sung about in worship, but it is also discovered as young people and adults live together, reconcile differences, celebrate joys, and unite their hearts in pray. Personal practices are not separate but woven into all aspects of confirmation.

*While the personal practice is bound up in relationships,
relationships are not the goal, encountering the gospel is.*

The beauty of personal practices is congregations of all sizes can incorporate them into their setting. Because one size does not fit all, larger congregations, like First Presbyterian in Birmingham, Michigan, can attend to this work by flipping their classroom (recording the content for students to watch on their own) so their time gathered at church is centered on young people cultivating relationships with mentors, and smaller congregations, like Kingston United Methodist in Kingston, New Jersey, can use digital tools to customize confirmation for their one student (who's family moved to Europe but wanted to complete confirmation

with her home congregation).²⁷ Looking at these ministries from afar, they seem light-years apart, but from a personal-practices perspective, they both are custom designing confirmations that are personally meaningful using the means they have available.

While claiming our identity as a child of God has always been hard, today's youth face unique challenges. Socialized to see themselves as memes in virtual networks and objects in a consumer culture, young people have a hard time hearing and understanding that God's promises are for them. Countering society's messages with a peer and intergenerational community that showers them with love and repeats the refrain "You are a child of God" opens young people to the possibility of another way of life. Placing confirmation within early adolescence naturally aligns with their developmental questions and emerging agency, as it also invites young people to lean into the mystery and vastness of God and the life-giving dimensions of a life of faith. Intentional time to pause and reflect, question and wonder can be a lifeline for twenty-first-century young people growing up in a digital age.

Discovering what it means to be a child of God is a lifelong pursuit. Confirmation is but one moment in this journey where people of faith pause, learn, ask questions, be in community, and acknowledge for the first or thousandth time that they are loved by the creator of the universe and there is a community who will accompany them.

Missional

Confirmation as a missional practice, or practice where confirmands discover ways to join God's ongoing mission in the world, might be the least familiar. Intentional about placing faith and society into robust dialogue, this practice explicitly addresses life scattered in the world. Confirmation with a missional bend has young people share questions from their lived experience, as it also explores what it means to love the neighbor. Believing God is active in the world, as well as in Christian community, missional practices recognize that God's people live apart more than gathered. Learning to see God's activity in the world and hear Jesus' words in various settings helps confirmands encounter the gospel in unexpected places. In the faces of strangers, walking with others in dark times, being part of God's reconciliation in the world, and loving neighbors known and unknown, people of faith encounter the gospel anew. Over time, missional practices help young people discover the freedom that comes from claiming their identity in Christ rather than living in bondage to the world.

Because missional practices take place within society, worldly experiences naturally spark conversations about justice and peace, healing and hope, love and hate. From these conversations, leaders craft learning where the teaching of the

²⁷Full portraits of both of these congregations are found at theconfirmationproject.com/gallery.

church and understandings of God are placed in the midst of lived experiences that force confirmands to wrestle with the complexity of faith. Missional practices help confirmands see the world as God sees it and provide opportunities to exercise their agency in the world as they feed the hungry, fight injustice, tend the sick, and befriend the lonely. Called to love God and neighbor, confirmation as a missional practice invites confirmands to join God's creative and redemptive mission and discover their own place within it.

As the United States becomes more "multicolored" and pluralistic, twenty-first-century young people need tools for and experiences with encountering their neighbor if they are going to live God's call to love them. The gospel mandate placed in the midst of today's realities provides expected and unexpected moments for discerning, in community, what faithfulness and justice look like. Showered with God's grace and mercy, Christians can live in the midst of cultural shifts, acceleration, and uncertainty anchored in their God-given identity and curiosity about the world God created.

The best way to illustrate how these three come together is by sharing a story about a congregation in New Jersey. At Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, confirmation takes place two Saturday evenings a month, with many of the sessions outside their traditional church building. The week they study the exile, they visit the nearby juvenile detention center and talk about what it is like living away from one's home. As the pastor engages the Old Testament texts with young people—half of whom are first- or second-generation immigrants—heartfelt questions about faith and life naturally surface. Pastor Solano loves these young people and knows the stress they encounter in their lives. Her hope for confirmation is to awaken their faith and provide them with a compass to guide them no matter where they are in the future. One way she does this is by having students make their own wooden stool and learn contemplative prayer practices. She believes developing their own prayer practice and being able to create quiet space to be with God is something that will enrich them throughout their life.

The highlight of confirmation is going to camp. Taking urban kids out of the city to the rustic, rolling hills of New Jersey is a life-changing experience. Separate from the familiar, students join confirmands from across the state and become part of God's unfolding story. Led by a team of pastors, parents, and camp counselors, confirmands create unexpected friendships, discover the church beyond the walls of their congregation, integrate faith into everyday life, and encounter the living Christ.

The twenty-first-century church needs new faith formation models that cultivate space for young people to connect with themselves, others, and God. People, young and old, long to experience God in all of God's fullness and mystery and discover a Christian way of life in the midst of current realities. Faith communities that tap into these longings make a difference. Congregations have a call to pass on faith, and young people have a need to encounter the gospel. As society lives in an accelerated state and today's families become the first to navigate this digital

world, might the church step into the chaos and reimagine confirmation in a way that addresses challenges and offers young people an alternative way? I certainly hope so. ⊕

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