

## 6. Is Small Beautiful? Potentials of Confirmation Work in Minority Situations

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### 6.1 Introduction

The characteristics of a minority can at first be defined by quantitative factors. Demographic or social indicators are constitutive for the definition. As a consequence of this attribution, disadvantage and discrimination are possible. Therefore the protection of minority rights is an important issue of international organisations. The actual agreements about minorities published by the European Union primarily refer to ethnic groups. Within these defined segments of the population in a particular country, individual rights are manifested. Every individual belonging to an ethnic minority has the right to practice his or her language, religion, culture, etc. The Conference of European Churches (CEC) recommends two main lines of reflection concerning the Minority-Majority Church Relationship. First, the dialogue between minority and majority Churches should be supported and secondly, the discourse should be conducted with reference to the human rights.

Minority situations also have to do with qualitative factors, such as political, ideological or religious aspects with their consequences for a person's or group's behavior and lifestyle. In the case of religion, a qualitative factor of a minority situation can be seen in the fact of an individual or social group (e.g., a denomination) openly dissenting from the majority's religious convictions. Church history is full of such instances; in some cases dissenting from the »mother religion« (e.g., a mainline Church) has led to the formation of a new denomination. Many reasons could be identified as motives for an individual's stance for dissenting from a dominant religious conviction. In the view of theology, a key motivation factor can be seen in the fact that religion touches the center of a person (cf. Fowler 1981).

Recent research on minority situations in social psychology has put a focus on group size, social status and power (cf. Lücken/Simon 2005). Experiments have proven that the awareness of being in a minority situation influences the individuals' thoughts and feelings. Probands belonging to a social minority were more intensively occupied cognitively with their situation compared to those who belonged to a majority. On a social level, tests indicated that, in general, members of minority groups show higher identification with other like-

minded persons. Additional research proved that this effect is not primarily due to emotions but to cognitive reflection (*loc. cit.*, 175).

## 6.2 Minority Churches in Europe – Three Examples

With regard to the quantitative factors, the members of a minority Church represent only a small percentage of the population in a country. The present study includes some countries where Lutherans, Methodists or even all Protestants are in a minority situation. This article exemplarily explores if given minority situations have specific effects on confirmation work; the examples examined are (for more details cf. the country reports in this volume):

- Lutherans and Reformed in Austria: 3.75 % of the population,
- Lutherans and Reformed in Poland: 0.2 % of the population,
- United Methodists in Germany: 0.067 % of the population.

Within the framework of the study as a whole, the Protestant Churches in Hungary which are in a minority situation as well, should also be kept in mind (cf. the report on Hungary, p. 266 ff.). Due to organisational reasons it was not possible to include the Hungarian data in the present article; further studies on the subject are suggested.

When it comes to the three minority situations indicated above as examples, the following research questions have been posed: How do the confirmands of minority Churches perceive themselves and how do they cope with the given situation? Which differences between minority- and majority-situations can be detected concerning their attitudes towards Church and faith? Do confirmands of minority Churches show specific interest in topics concerning the history and tradition of their own religious belonging?

### *Austria*

In Austria all accredited religious denominations have the same rights independent of their size. This means that the government supports their activities in Religious Education at school and their cultural contribution to society. Some decades after Reformation the influence of Counter-Reformation spread out in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Edict-of-Tolerance in 1781 allowed Protestant and Orthodox Churches to practice their religion, in 1782 followed by an Edict for the Jewish denomination. In 1912, Islam was accredited as well. At that time, the area of the Monarchy also included southern parts of Poland, another country with a Protestant minority. (cf. Lagger 2010, 74-75). A Protestant core group of about 4 % of the population remained stable after several changes in Austrian Protestantism. Migration of people from eastern European

countries as well as individuals who converted from Catholicism raised the number of Protestants. Apart from that a growing number of members have been leaving the Church especially over the past 40 years. Today, 16 denominations are accredited and the majority of Roman Catholic Christians dropped to two thirds of the population. The second largest group consists of people without any religious membership, the third largest is Islam, and the Protestants are fourth. Law specifies several rights for minorities, like special religious holidays. Most of the Austrian Protestants are proud of their church membership and categorically refuse conversion to another denomination or religion.

According to the motto »small is beautiful«, the Austrian confirmands and workers show a high interest in meeting each other. Making acquaintance with other Protestants enlightens the self-understanding as a member of a minority. Developing identity seems important for workers and especially the adolescents when religion and faith come to a point of increasing reflection. The interest in getting in touch with other Protestants and the involvement in common activities speak for a hopeful future for the church. The numerous voluntary workers contribute to the success of confirmation work. Due to the fact that membership is voluntary in minority Churches, there is a larger need for commitment and also a broader culture of voluntarism than in majority Churches.

### *Poland*

The Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession (Lutheran Church) in Poland is a minority Church and its history is rooted in the time of the Reformation – the idea of the Reformation reaches Gdańsk in 1518, few years later Poznań, Wrocław, Królewiec, Cieszyn. The Sandomierz Agreement in 1570 was a contract between Lutherans, Reformed and Czech Brethren on the issue of the unity of the Reformation in Poland. After success of the Counter-Reformation in 1606–1610 and persecution of Protestants, there was time for building of the so-called »Peace Churches« in »Low Silesia«, etc. The Edict of Tolerance in 1781, issued by Joseph II, made it possible to build a »house of prayer« in Cieszyn, Silesia. During the Partition of Poland the Evangelical Church of Augsburg Confession and the Evangelical Reformed Church of Poland were administered by one consistory as ordered by the Emperor. In 1917 the Synod of the Church meeting in Łódź approved the structure of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession in Poland.

Nowadays, the Lutheran Church in Poland with about 70 000 members, is still the largest Protestant Church. Poland is a country with a share of nearly 95.5 % Roman Catholics, Protestants encompass only 0.2 % of the total population. For both the Lutherans and the Reformed in Poland a Protestant education is very important and is offered at various levels by the Church, in forms like Sunday school and confirmation work, or in connection with public

schools, where Religious Education is part of the curriculum. In some Lutheran congregations confirmation takes place only once in a few years with a small group of 2 to 3 confirmands. Some other congregations have about 20 to 30 confirmands every year.

### *Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in Germany*

With a percentage of 0.067%, the Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche (United Methodist Church) covers a very low share of Germany's population, of which 62% (2012) belong to a Christian Church, predominantly one of the two large majority Churches, the Roman Catholic Church or the Protestant Church (EKD). These figures clearly indicate a quantitative minority situation. Regarding qualitative aspects of a religious minority, a brief look into history is of help. The Methodist missionaries in the mid-19th century perceived the homeland of Reformation to be a mission field (Klaiber 2011, 141–157). This, of course, led to confrontations with the established Churches and public authorities who looked at that »Anglo-Saxon growth« (Steckel/Sommer 1982, 86) with suspicion. Methodists were seen as religious non-conformists and often put into the »sect« corner. Today, the EmK can be described as a numerically small, but widely accepted denomination. Professing to be a Methodist in public may still cause knitted brows, the experience of open hostility, however, has become a rare exception. The climate between the EmK and its ecumenical partner Churches can be described as warm and trustful. Since 1987, a pulpit and altar fellowship exists between the EmK and all member Churches of the EKD. The EmK's parishioners, congregations and officials are actively engaged in all kinds of common projects and working parties on various levels, nationally and internationally (cf. Klaiber 2011). Although many Methodist Christians very actively contribute to the benefit both of Church and society, generally speaking there is very little public awareness of the EmK as a Church or knowledge of its rich theological legacy. This is particularly true among the younger generation. Which effects does this have on confirmation work within the EmK?

### 6.3 Confirmands and Workers in a Minority Situation – The Example of the Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche in Germany

Since confirmation work (*Kirchlicher Unterricht*, cf. the report, p. 280 ff.) in the EmK differs in some points from the other countries and Churches represented in this volume, an additional questionnaire for Methodist confirmands and workers was developed in order to address both groups specifically in terms of their given minority situation. Of course, the following results first of all con-

cern the EmK, nevertheless, they might also be helpful for interpreting the results regarding young people in other minority situations.

### *How Do Confirmands Handle Their Minority Situation?*

At the beginning of confirmation time, the adolescents were asked for their reasons to participate. Only 18% of the adolescents ticked »because my friends did so as well« (CA01; N = 735). This is the second lowest value in Europe and indicates two things: At first, this low value has to do with the minority situation. Due to the small number of Methodist youth in Germany, most of them do not have any experience of friends or classmates taking part in confirmation work with them. One adolescent wrote: »I don't have real friends here. They are all in my class and will be confirmed in the Evangelical-Lutheran Church« (CM16). Secondly, the low share of 18% also points at the fact that the relationship to the other Churches is perceived as very good and easy. Methodist parishes do not shut themselves up but are ecumenically open.

Today, Methodist adolescents do not experience rejection by their peers. However, their experience is often that class-mates as well as adults do not know the EmK and some of them may consider it to be a sect. One adolescent therefore asked: »Why aren't we just an Evangelical Church?« (CZF40). In  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  the adolescents were confronted with the following statement: »It feels strange for me to belong to a Church that many in my environment don't know« (CZF17/KZF17). Both in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  only about one third of the adolescents agreed with that statement. So, for a vast majority of the youth it seems to be no problem that they belong to a confessional minority. However, there are adolescents who do suffer from the minority situation: 10% tick the highest value (7) in CZF17, another 11% mark value 6. One would expect that especially those adolescents would have problems with their minority situation who do not have a particularly close relationship to their Church. In order to find out whether this assumption is correct, the values of items CZF17 and CZF14 »I'm glad to be in the EmK« were compared. The result, however, shows that it is just the other way round. Young people who have a rather reserved relationship to the EmK, in  $t_1$  seem to have less problems with their minority situation (25%) than young people who already appreciate the EmK (33%). Concerning the reasons for this result, another finding is helpful: There is clearly less agreement from adolescents who did not take part in any church activities for children prior to confirmation time (CZF03), to the statement in CZF17 (21%) than from young people who took part in such activities (31%). A  $t_1$ - $t_2$ -comparison shows that the values equalise at the end of confirmation time. This indicates that adolescents who have a positive relationship to the EmK and have already attended church activities, have simply been confronted more often with the fact that they belong to a church that many people do not know. Ado-

lescents whose first close contact with the EmK was during their confirmation time, recognise just then that they attend a Church that is unknown to many. This means: Only if the young people are aware of the minority situation, this can become a problem. Confirmands who ticked value 7 in CZF17, also remarkably often (42%) chose the highest value for the statement: »It is important for me that the EmK is a worldwide Church« (CZF15). Therefore, for some of the adolescents it seems to be helpful to make use of the argument that Methodism is one of the large, worldwide Church-families, which may be small on a local, but is sizeable on a global level.

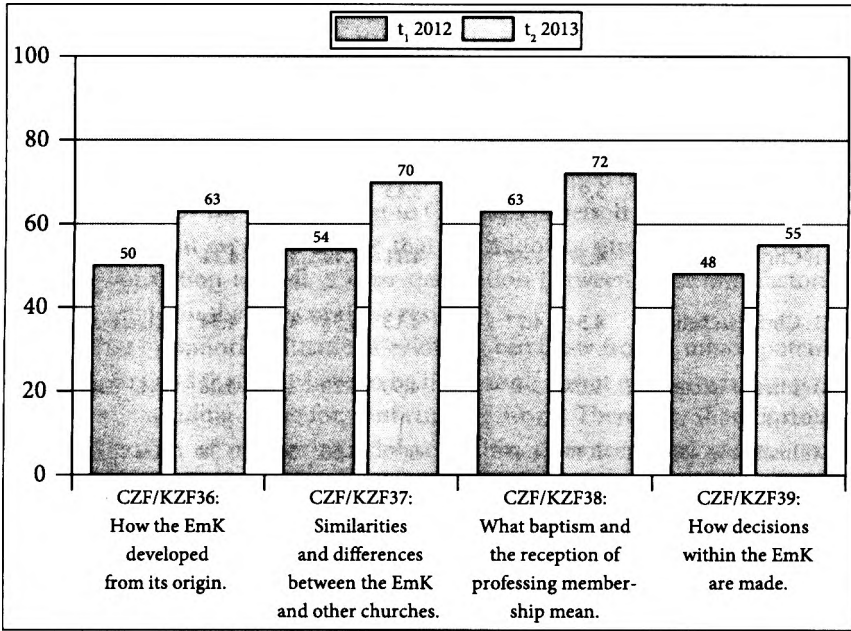
Again, this aspect could also be helpful for interpreting the results concerning confirmands in comparable minority situations in other denominations, showing them that people of their faith and religious belonging are part of the majority in other places. Thus, confirmands can be made aware of the fact that the question if one belongs to a majority or to a minority, can depend very much on the geographical and social situation. Moreover, the insight can be conveyed, that majorities are not correct just because they have a numerical superiority.

Looking at the interest of the confirmands concerning specific Methodist topics in confirmation work, it is noticeable that the increase is considerable between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  (Figure 31).

In  $t_2$ , 70% of the confirmands consider questions concerning similarities and differences between the EmK and other denominations interesting (KZF37), 72% say this about the meaning of baptism and professing membership (KZF38) and 63% indicate interest even in Methodist Church history (KZF36). These values could suggest that young people are interested in the history and topics related to their denomination if they frequently have to explain to others to which Church they belong. One girl (13), stated in  $t_2$  which topics she would like to talk about during confirmation time: »Methodist topics; since I often have to explain that I am Methodist, but didn't know what that exactly is« (KZF42). Confirmation work in a minority situation should therefore enable the young people to get profound knowledge about their denomination. For the youth work within minority Churches, it is of great importance to help the adolescents to develop a sense of becoming »indigenous« within the denomination and to become able to communicate about it so that misunderstandings can be overcome and the specifics of their confession can be explained.

#### *How Do Leaders and Workers Handle the Minority Situation?*

In  $t_1$  leaders and workers were confronted with the following statement: »It is an important aim for me that the adolescents can cope with their minority situation (confirmation work in a small Church) in a positive way« (WZF38).

Figure 31: Interest of the confirmands in Methodist topics ( $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ) (%)

$N = 716-725$  ( $t_1$ ),  $N = 513-539$  ( $t_2$ ); the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not interested, 7 = very interested).

On the seven-point-scale, the importance of the topic was on the average ticked slightly higher by lay workers ( $M = 5.12$ ) than by ministers ( $M = 4.84$ ). These findings can be read as an indicator of the following: Ministers who have been engaged in this field for a while and furthermore are known as Methodists in their environment, consider this topic as less important than workers who probably experience more often in everyday life that people do not know the EmK. Therefore, it is important that both leaders and workers in a small denomination are aware of the fact that young people can consider it unfortunate to belong to a relatively unknown denomination. But how can they address the adolescents concerning this issue? One answer has already been shown above: to enable young people to get profound knowledge about their denomination and becoming articulate about it.

#### 6.4 Common Features and Differences between Minority Churches

Comparing different countries and Churches in the present study, are there any general indicators and factors characterising confirmation work in a minority-

situation? Table 39 displays a comparison of selected indices, showing where the results from Germany (EmK), Austria and Poland differ from other countries.

Table 39: Selected indices ( $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ) in international comparison (2012/2013) (Means)

	total M	DE EKD	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	PL	DE EmK
iCB1: Faith related motives ( $t_1$ )	3.91	4.16	<b>4.11</b>	3.43	4.10	3.23	3.46	3.66	<b>6.12</b>	<b>5.19</b>
iCE1: Christian beliefs ( $t_1$ )	4.37	4.68	<b>4.78</b>	4.11	4.49	3.66	4.11	3.72	<b>6.42</b>	<b>5.95</b>
iKE1: Christian beliefs ( $t_2$ )	4.54	4.77	<b>4.83</b>	4.13	4.54	4.10	4.34	4.01	<b>6.23</b>	<b>5.94</b>
iCL1: Interest in conduct of life ( $t_1$ )	5.07	5.17	<b>5.30</b>	4.90	5.20	4.51	5.08	5.01	<b>5.46</b>	<b>5.56</b>
iKL1: Interest in conduct of life ( $t_2$ )	5.40	4.45	<b>5.76</b>	5.15	5.65	5.31	5.38	5.59	<b>5.86</b>	<b>5.83</b>
iCL2: Interest in the Christian tradition ( $t_1$ )	3.94	4.33	<b>4.40</b>	3.57	3.99	3.30	3.52	3.47	<b>5.40</b>	<b>5.25</b>
iKL2: Interest in the Christian tradition ( $t_2$ )	4.36	4.58	<b>4.66</b>	4.05	4.52	4.00	4.07	4.03	<b>5.67</b>	<b>5.33</b>
iKK3: Involvement and participation ( $t_2$ )	4.62	4.46	<b>4.87</b>	4.66	4.39	4.96	4.63	5.27	<b>4.99</b>	<b>4.85</b>
iKN3: Satisfaction with confirmation time ( $t_2$ )	5.10	5.00	<b>5.31</b>	4.97	5.01	5.33	5.20	5.72	<b>5.71</b>	<b>5.36</b>
iKS1: Positive experiences with Church services ( $t_2$ )	4.09	4.14	<b>4.32</b>	3.82	3.87	4.14	4.31	4.42	<b>5.12</b>	<b>4.76</b>
iKS2: Sense of security and well-being in the group during services ( $t_2$ )	4.91	4.89	<b>5.23</b>	4.64	4.64	5.08	5.29	5.50	<b>5.23</b>	<b>5.43</b>

N (total) = 22683-26245; N (countries) = 296-10158; mean values on a scale 1 to 7 (not applicable at all – totally applicable/not satisfied – totally satisfied/not interested – very interested).

The  $t_1$  data show noticeable differences between the countries in some indices, e. g., iCE1 (Christian beliefs), iCL1 (interest in conduct of life) and iCL2 (interest in the Christian tradition). At the end of confirmation time ( $t_2$ ), the means in general indicate more homogeneity. It is striking that Poland, the EmK in Germany and Austria – both in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  – display the highest values regarding the confirmands' assent to Christian beliefs (iCE1/iKE1), their »interest in conduct of life« (iCL1/iKL1) and their »interest in the Christian tradition« (iCL2/iKL02). These findings can be read as indicators of a given minority si-



tuation, where belonging to a non-mainstream Church does require a deliberate decision of those concerned.

Of course, when referring to iCE1 in this concern, the results can be interpreted in different ways. The data clearly indicate that confirmands who tick high values concerning Christian beliefs, are also more interested in various aspects of confirmation work compared to those with lower consent. This inevitably brings up the question which results are caused by the minority situation and which by the higher assent to Christian beliefs. It is not easy to answer this question; but even if it is true that the minority situation is affecting the religious conviction as well, a clear delineation between these two factors is hardly possible on the basis of these results.

Churches in minority situations evidently can draw from a minor potential of supporters and therefore have to be intentional about engaging in attracting volunteers, including those for confirmation work. Therefore, there is an expected intention of motivating adolescents for volunteer work. At the same time, confirmation time seems to provide promising opportunities for parishes to win young people to involve themselves and participate in church work as volunteers. This is shown by a comparison of the values of iKK3. It is striking that Sweden has the highest value in this index while the Finish YCV(»Young Confirmed Volunteer«)-concept is generally perceived as a best-practice model. It seems as if the parishes in Sweden have responded in a meaningful way to the decline of the numbers of confirmands (cf. the report, p. 93 ff.).

When it comes to the index »positive experiences with church services« (iKS1), the three countries or Churches studied in this article show high values. This might not be too surprising, since the data above indicate confirmands of minority Churches as being religiously motivated and interested. But taking into account the comparatively low values for iCE1/iKE1 in Sweden in relation to the highest value in iKS1, it seems reasonable to assume that the assent to Christian beliefs in itself does not lead towards a high satisfaction with church services. Then, which other factors may play a role here? The correlation analysis, displayed in Table 40, indicates discernable connections between three relevant factors.

Alongside the Christian beliefs (iCE1/iKE1), a »sense of security and well-being in the group during services« (iKS2) seems to be a key factor for satisfaction (Table 40). In the context of worship services, the confirmands touch base with other parishioners. Churches in minority situations often have a family-similar structure and celebrate their worship services in small units. The church settings often allow a kind of a living-room-feeling, which can be perceived as a safe and welcoming atmosphere. Another critical, possibly underestimated factor in this concern is the feeling of adolescents that they could play an active role in the parish (Table 40). Because parishes in a minority situation should

Table 40: Correlation of selected indices ( $t_2$ )

	r with iKE1: Christian beliefs	r with iKK3: In- volvement and participation	r with iKS2: Sense of security & well-being in the group during services
iKS1: Positive experiences with church services	0.50**	0.67**	0.67**

N (total) = 27060-27224; N (countries) = 288-8001; r = Pearson Coefficient.

and could invest more in this matter, the satisfaction with church services could increase.

Which factors play a key role regarding the identification of adolescents with their Church and the Christian faith in general? Comparing the confirmands' attitudes towards »the Christian faith« (CF01) and »our Church« in general (CF02) an invigorating effect becomes evident, as Table 41 displays.

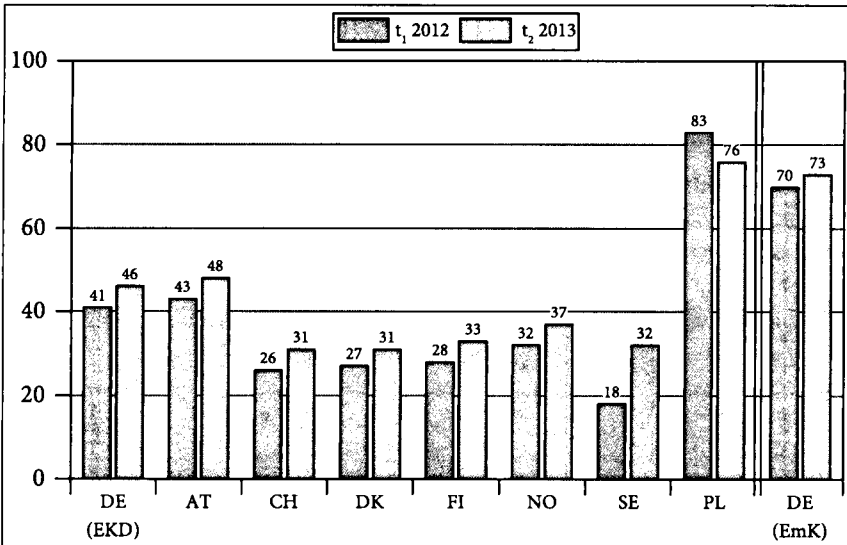
Table 41: Identification with the Christian faith and the own Church ( $t_1$ ) in international comparison (Means)

	Total M	DE EKD	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	PL	DE EmK
CF01: How would you describe your current at- titude towards the Chris- tian faith in general?	3.65	3.79	<b>3.86</b>	3.62	3.67	3.28	3.44	3.35	<b>4.04</b>	<b>4.21</b>
CF02: How would you describe your current at- titude towards our Church in general?	3.70	3.89	<b>4.24</b>	3.59	3.50	3.26	3.46	3.57	<b>4.17</b>	<b>4.27</b>

N = 288-8001; mean values on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = very negative; 7 = very positive).

At first sight, both items show comparable values. But in half of the participating countries (Germany [both EKD and EmK], Austria, Sweden, Poland) the item focusing on »our Church« finds a higher assent. Alongside the minority Churches exemplified in this chapter, the Swedish and German EKD confirmands indicate their affinity towards »their« Church. Those Churches mentioned should discern the prioritised identification of the confirmands with their religious belonging as a promising »social capital«.

Figure 32: Importance of church belonging in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time (CG01/KG01: It is important for me to belong to the Church) (%)

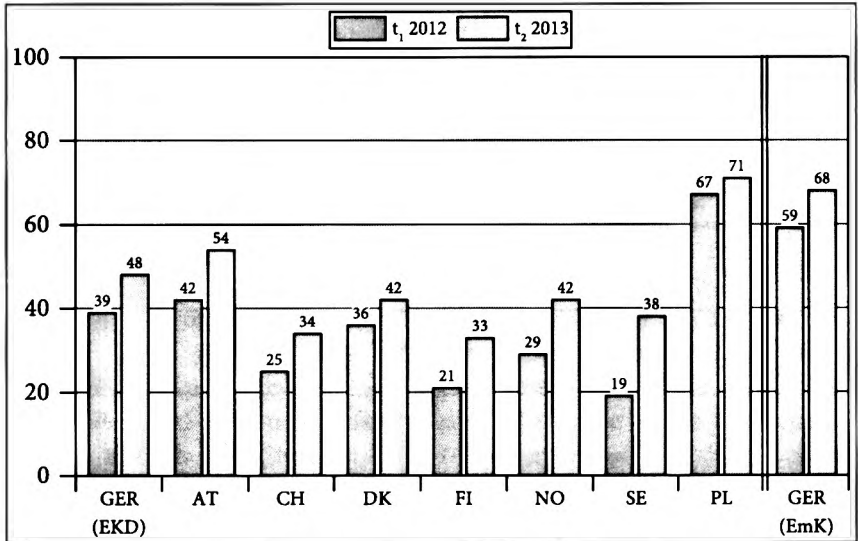


N (total) = 26067 (t<sub>1</sub>), 22614 (t<sub>2</sub>); N (countries) = 314-10074; the share of those with positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

In most of all of the countries, the figures concerning the importance of the confirmands »to belong to the Church« (CG01/KG01) increase in t<sub>2</sub>. This means that confirmation time has a positive effect in strengthening the confirmands' sense of belonging to the Church. Only in Poland does a negative turn emerge. One reason for this change might be found in the remarkably high expectations in t<sub>1</sub>, while the reduced values in t<sub>2</sub> may correspond with the fact that now the confirmands know more about the Church's reality. In Sweden, a country with a Lutheran majority, but minor participation-rate in confirmation work, there is a remarkable change, indicated by low values in t<sub>1</sub> and an increasing attractiveness of the Church according to t<sub>2</sub>.

A comparison of the values also reveal that the confirmands in minority situations are more interested in belonging to their local parish (CL04/KL04) compared to those in majority contexts. In explaining this finding, arguing just with a more prominent religious conviction (iCE01/iK01) seems to be too short-sighted. Belonging to a minority Church often requires from the young people to be informed and articulate about their religious belonging, including the main similarities and differences concerning other denominations. Confirmation work can equip them to be able to argue for the advantage of their specific Church and speak out for diversity and plurality in talking to others.

Figure 33: Interest in the topic »own parish« in the beginning and in the end of confirmation period (CL04/KL04) (%)



N (total) = 25799 (t<sub>1</sub>) – 22598 (t<sub>2</sub>), N (countries) = 304-10010; scale 1-7; the share of those with positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not interested, 7 = very interested)

For Austrian and Polish confirmands, a distinct challenge lies in the obvious majority of the Roman-Catholic Church, while the Methodist confirmands in Germany find themselves in a situation of belonging to a marginal Church within the Protestant spectrum, in which the EKD represents the vast majority.

## 6.5 Conclusion

A general observation within this chapter is that confirmation work has the capacity to increase the confirmands' sense of belonging to the Church (CG01/KG01). This encouraging finding is relevant, both for Churches in majority and minority situations. Studying confirmation work in three exemplary minority situations also has verified that belonging to a marginal Church encompasses a (more) thorough reflection on faith-related issues and a conscious decision about church membership. Protestants in minority situations have to explain their peculiarities and distinct Church traditions more frequently than those in majority situations. This explains, for instance, the remarkable interest of Germany's Methodist confirmands in their religious heritage (see above, 3.). These findings suggest being transferable on other Churches in minority situa-

tions, as well. Generally speaking, it appears to be an important task for confirmation work to help the confirmands to become conscious and articulate about their religious belonging. Further chances and challenges of confirmation work in minority Churches are:

- In the familiar atmosphere of a small Church, the confirmands experience personal contact, friendly reception and are encouraged to proceed in their individual development, including faith.
- In smaller units the need for individual acceptance, participation and involvement can be realized more easily.
- The attitudes towards the home parish and the church services are influenced distinctly.
- The intensive engagement in believing and belonging often leads to a stronger identification with the Church and faith.