



## Confirmation Programs in the Congregation: What Works?

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I was aware of several things when the editorial board invited me to write an article on the subject: “What is working in the area of confirmation instruction these days?” Among them was, first, that Timothy Lull’s article in this issue would suggest that confirmation is not working as well today as it has in years past. That observation was worth investigation. Second, I was aware that I was the wrong person, at least directly, to respond to the question that had been asked of me. The pastors and catechists now teaching confirmation classes are the best ones from whom to get ideas about what is working in those classes. So, I decided to ask the pastors through the means of a questionnaire. While I was at it, I took advantage of the opportunity to ask if they thought confirmation ministry and a particular course of instruction were working in the congregations they were serving. Before reporting the results of the survey, I need to make a few comments about the audience that was asked to respond.

I chose to do a random sampling of pastors who had attended continuing education events at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary between 1987 and 1989. This group represented a good cross section of pastors from all the synods in Region III of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, as well as some others. It included both men and women, as well as representatives from both urban and rural communities. I skipped the most recent two years, assuming a pastor needed to be in a parish at least two years before some judgments could be made about the effectiveness of a congregation’s confirmation program.

Of the 100 letters I sent out, 12 were returned with the notation: “Forwarding order expired.” Apparently there is some mobility in the ELCA. One came back with the note: “I’m not presently teaching confirmation classes.” There was no

response from 54 of those to whom I sent the questionnaire. I can think of many reasons for not completing one more survey, but the two I hope are not dominant here would be: not interested in confirmation ministry, or too discouraged by confirmation classes to respond. If those are the reasons, and they *could* be, the results reported in this study are not going to be properly representative.

Still, 34 pastors did respond to my request for information. Many wrote notes of greeting on their questionnaires. Others made helpful suggestions as to how the questionnaire could have been improved. Several sent me copies of their congregation’s statement on confirmation ministry. My warmest thanks to all of them—for their notes, comments, greetings, and responses. Theirs is basically an affirming word about confirmation ministry in general and confirmation instruction in particular.

## I. IS CONFIRMATION WORKING?

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of six statements to which pastors were asked to respond on a continuum from (1) strongly agree to (5) strongly disagree. The items and the responses are summarized below. Since not all pastors marked all six items, the totals don't consistently equal 34.

Item	Strongly agree (1)	(2)	Agree (3)	(4)	Strongly disagree (5)
1. Based on my experience, I think a program of confirmation instruction serves a useful purpose in Lutheran congregations.	20	9	3	1	
2. Based on my experience, I think confirmation ministry (broadly understood) serves a useful purpose in Lutheran congregations.	21	10	1		
3. Based on my understanding of what it is intended to be, I think a program of confirmation instruction serves a useful purpose in Lutheran congregations.	17	8	6	1	
4. Based on my understanding of the Rite of Affirmation, I think the rite serves a useful purpose in Lutheran congregations.	12	12	6	3	
5. Confirmation ministry is working in the congregation(s) I serve.	6	14	8	4	1
6. A program of confirmation instruction is working in the congregation(s) I serve.	7	15	7	4	

Based on these responses, several observations seem to be in order:

1. There is remarkably strong agreement that confirmation instruction has a useful purpose in Lutheran congregations.

2. A course of instruction as part of confirmation ministry received only a slightly less favorable response than the more general notion of confirmation ministry. In the tradition of Luther, these pastors obviously value a course of instruction.

3. Interestingly, there is a somewhat less positive rating of the usefulness of confirmation instruction based on a pastors' understanding of what it is intended to be, as contrasted with their

experience of it. I anticipated just the opposite response. Understandings can be a bit idealized, whereas experience often brings a measure of reality that puts one's ideals in jeopardy. Responses to this item, in my opinion, are very significant. They indicate that these pastors found the evidence for the usefulness of confirmation ministry, including instruction, in the doing of it.

4. Though a smaller number of pastors strongly agree as to the usefulness of the Rite of Affirmation, only three see it as something less than helpful, and none strongly disagreed with the statement that the rite served a useful purpose. It would appear that there is no movement among these pastors to discontinue the rite. On the contrary, 24 either strongly or rather strongly affirm its usefulness.

5. Whatever the understandings and expectations pastors have of confirmation ministry and instruction, items 5 and 6 on the survey make clear that for many the reality falls short of what they would like it to be. That's an expected response, but it need not be seen negatively. It can be a very positive response for those who have high expectations of this ministry of the church and who perceive it to be going well, but still see it as an area which sets before them a challenge. Based on their comments about what was going well for them in their confirmation classes, the majority of pastors responding to this survey had that point of view.

## II. WHAT MAKES CONFIRMATION INSTRUCTION WORK

If pastors who responded to my survey knew any gimmicks that were sure to make confirmation classes work, they didn't share them with me. What is clear from their comments is that it takes work to make instructional programs work, and that what works in one congregation may not work in another. While the responses were richly varied, there are some common categories into which most fit—though not all in the same way. Those categories are congregational outlook and support, staffing, attitudes and expectations, organizational strategies, and classroom activities and materials. For most pastors, all or many of these components used together contributed to an effective confirmation program. For purposes of examination, I have separated them in the summary and review that follows.

### *A. Congregational Outlook and Support*

Twenty-eight responses to the survey relate to this category. These responses fall into three areas.

First, several pastors wrote that their confirmation programs worked because their congregations put a high priority upon them. Funding came out of the church

budget and included support for materials, retreats, and whatever else is needed to enhance the program.

A second area involves direct parental and adult support and participation. Fifteen pastors stated that this was crucial, and without it, wrote one, you may as well "teach the chairs." Not all took the same tack in gaining that support. Almost all of the fifteen had some form of orientation for parents and teenagers at least once a year. One pastor had two day-long retreats for youth and parents which, he noted, turned out to be excellent opportunities for both youth and adult education. Another pastor met with parents quarterly. Three offered courses in which both parents and youth were involved; one more did the same with Sunday morning classes. Two

pastors asked parents to review confirmation lessons with their children, and one asked parents to be actively involved in attempts to solve any behavioral problems that developed in class. Three reported on the importance of informing parents about the progress of their children. (Though I didn't ask about those factors which hindered a sound instructional program, several pastors told me anyway. Most comments centered either on lack of parental support or a misunderstanding among parents and other adults in the congregation as to what confirmation is all about.)

Eight pastors were pleased with the mentoring dimensions of their programs, in which an adult was paired with a member of the confirmation class (Friends in Faith, Lay Study Partners). All said it helped young people deal with faith issues and identify with the mission of the church.

A third area in this category had to do with creating positive attitudes toward youth in the congregation. One pastor makes it a point to remind adults that they need youth as much as youth need them. Another wrote that the congregation was into "affirming and loving our kids a lot. It's the key to much that happens."

### *B. Staffing for Confirmation Instruction*

Seven pastors noted that staffing was an important factor in determining how well their congregation's confirmation instructional program worked. All were agreed that the pastor needed to be involved at some point—at least as much for the sake of the pastor as the youth. Six pastors worked hard at getting laity involved in the program. One reason given was that young people needed to be reminded that confirmation was not the pastor's program. Two others acknowledged the excellent support of a youth director and a Christian education director. One pastor wrote: "A knowledgeable, prepared and dedicated staff is more important than any published curriculum could possibly be."

### *C. Attitudes toward Youth and Expectations for Confirmation*

Fourteen responses fall within this general category, not all reflecting a common view as to what is to be expected from youth in a confirmation program. Some pastors are of the opinion that high and clear expectations are the keys to an effective instructional program. Others, while not disagreeing with that point of view completely, emphasize another approach. One pastor reported that the congregation she serves is committed to challenging young people in the confirmation program. They are made responsible for achieving the goals of the program, and once these are completed, candidates take their work to the church council and apply for adult membership in the congregation. Admitting that this program was

not for everyone, she noted that youth who completed it gained a great deal of satisfaction. Two other pastors were concerned that confirmation instruction not be trivialized and, for that reason, set high standards for the study of the Scriptures and catechism.

Though not denigrating the importance of scriptural and catechetical studies with high expectations, five other pastors made a point to say that expectations should be "realistic" and not serve as a point of alienation for either teachers or students. These were convinced that the way to a successful class was to follow the questions and issues which were raised by the participants, with one allowing that this made the class more enjoyable for the teacher as well as the student. Aware, perhaps, that some would see their expectations and practice as soft, these

pastors added phrases similar to that of the one who wrote that we should “have academic expectations, but recognize the importance of relationships—especially with Jesus Christ and the church.” From their comments, no one responding to this survey would disagree with that statement, though there might be considerable disagreement as to how those relationships are to be strengthened. At least one pastor wrote that the academic image of confirmation had to be changed if instruction in the church were to become more enjoyable. While probably not disagreeing that learning can and should be enjoyable, the pastor who stresses high achievement would be at the opposite end of the continuum on how to achieve it. If both positions work, then there must be something in the teachers and their attitudes that allow for it. Several responses indicate that to be the case.

Three pastors wrote that their own positive attitudes toward teaching and youth were crucial to the effectiveness of their instructional programs. One wrote that she lectured, allowed time for discussion, and then played games that reinforced the learning. Students caught on that she “loved” teaching, and they learned. Others saw their confirmation classes as a great time for ministry, and if the opportunity weren’t already in place, it would have to be invented. One other pastor remarked that he spent a good deal of time playing with the youth of his congregation outside the classroom. This time translated into good relationships and positive experiences in the classroom.

All the responses make clear that these pastors take confirmation instruction seriously and invest themselves in it. Each has struggled a bit with what confirmation means to them and to their congregations, and how that meaning can be translated into instruction. Two final comments conclude what pastors had to say in this category. One pastor wrote that, for him, confirmation was always in a state of planning, of looking ahead, and of wondering about the direction that ministry was leading. There was no sense of “lostness” in the comment—that the pastor was confused or didn’t know what to do with confirmation. Rather, confirmation was a challenge, much like a journey which has no final destination: traveling is a good part of the excitement. Wherever that journey might lead, another pastor stated that confirmation must begin in baptism. If baptism is the beginning point, then everything needs to take it into account and find its meaning there.

#### *D. Organizational Strategies*

The fifty responses in this category indicate that pastors have given considerable attention to this dimension of confirmation instruction. I use the term as an

umbrella to describe scheduling and context concerns, as well as some overall ways in which to enhance and support the instructional program.

Four pastors in the survey are sold on the individualized instruction program. One commented that he was about to give up on confirmation when this approach came along to renew his interest. Nine pastors reported that retreats worked very well for them. One congregation had three retreats a year. While retreats were used by some congregations to replace a few regularly scheduled weekday classes, none depended on them as the sole context for teaching. Retreats were highly valued as a way to concentrate on specific subjects and as a context for creating good relationships among class members and with the pastor. Three

congregations required participation in confirmation camps. One pastor especially appreciated the modeling provided there by camp counselors.

Finding a time for classes that fits the rhythm of students, family, congregations, school, and teachers was an important concern for fifteen pastors responding to the survey. Trying to accommodate all those agendas was seen as a source of considerable frustration by many, and several were still working on it. Nevertheless, many helpful scheduling schemes were reported (the number of pastors who mentioned each is in parentheses):

- released time (4)
- classes held on a night with many other church activities (2)
- a community commitment to a “church night” (2)
- classes immediately after school (2)
- classes the hour before school (2)
- class modules for specific subjects, followed by short breaks (2)
- classes on Sunday morning (1)
- classes on Saturday morning (1)
- alternative scheduling, including two or more of the above offered during the same week (1)

Five pastors noted that the length of the instructional program or the timing of the Rite of Affirmation were important considerations. Two said that holding instruction and the rite at grade ten were very positive aspects of their program. Another stressed how important the rite was for those who participated in it, but noted that potential candidates were given a clear opportunity to opt out of it. Another wrote that in his congregation the rite was portrayed as an opportunity for youth to express their faith and not a celebration of a completed activity. Two pastors reported that beginning confirmation before grade seven had been very helpful for them. Grade six, one stated, was a time for short courses on alcohol and drug abuse and human sexuality. It was also a time for building relationships which would carry over into the more structured program in the following years. Another pastor found a three-year program very helpful for building both relationships and understanding of theological concepts. A pastor serving several congregations said that joining his students into one class had enriched his teaching, while a pastor in a large congregation worked at keeping classes small as a way of making teaching and learning more effective.

Integrating confirmation instruction into the larger life and mission of the congregation was regarded as important by eleven pastors. Most of these eleven

required students to sit in on committee meetings, participate in service projects, and/or have some role in worship services (acolyte, usher, Scripture reader, communion assistant). One pastor had weekly communion services for his class. Another noted that efforts were made to make worship services meaningful for youth. Several congregations used the season of Lent to bring worship and confirmation closer together. In one, students prepared a Lenten drama. They were required to memorize lines, make costumes and sets, and spend a fair amount of time in rehearsals. More demanding than a series of typical classes, the dramas have become an important dimension of the confirmation program. In another congregation youth were yoked with elderly persons whom they were expected to visit at least once monthly.

Eight pastors found that surrounding their educational program with related activities resulted in more positive classes. Monthly fellowship suppers were found to be helpful in one congregation, while another sponsored a monthly social event. A strong youth program, beginning at grade six, was significant for two pastors, while another noted that his congregation strongly encouraged participation in “youth trips.” This same congregation credited attendance at national youth gatherings as an important influence in developing a strong community orientation among its youth. On a more immediate level, one congregation began its classes at 5:30 p.m. on a weekday with chips, pizza, and pop. The food was found to be good for building community and for reducing the rumble of youthful stomachs during the class hour. Other congregations asked members of the confirmation class to participate in puppet and musical ministries, and one enlisted the class in cleaning the church—which turned out to be a very positive experience.

#### *E. Classroom Activities and Teacher Behaviors*

Though much of what has already been reported could have been included in this category, the data received from pastors include nine additional items found to be helpful in their teaching of confirmation classes:

1. Memorizing biblical passages and sections of the catechism
2. Writing sermon notes for as many as twenty Sundays of the year
3. Attending selected dramatic presentations
4. Following a predictable class format each week
5. Evaluating student written work fairly and quickly
6. Inquiring into reasons for absences
7. Providing something each week for the class to anticipate
8. Having each student give a five-minute sermon as part of a worship service
9. Not requiring lengthy memory work or sermon notes (in contrast to 1 and 2)

Thirteen pastors commented on the relation of curriculum materials to class effectiveness. Three were using *New Journeys* and found it very good. Another three commented on the helpfulness of the *Affirm* series. Two were making use of *Free to Be*. (All three of these are published by Augsburg Fortress.) One pastor used and appreciated *Divine Drama* for his ninth grade class. One was content to use only the Bible and Luther’s Small Catechism. Several cautioned against any de-

pendence upon curriculum material to *do* the job of teaching, with many finding it necessary to write their own materials.

Interestingly, only one pastor commented on the matter of classroom management, asserting that parents hold the key to solving any problems in this area.

### III. SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As I’ve noted several times, the survey includes no easy answers or shortcuts for making a strong instructional program. Further, there don’t appear to be steps or methods that result in anything approximating perfection. Most pastors responding to this survey told of their frustrations and disappointments as well as sharing what they had found helpful in teaching confirmation classes. Responses also demonstrate that what one pastor holds in high regard,

others have found less than helpful. Yet, consistently, these thirty-four pastors say that effective confirmation instruction requires commitment—a commitment to a confirmation program that is reflected in the giving of time, energy, and creativity, and in the willingness to experiment; and a commitment to the church’s overall ministry of word and sacrament, especially as it relates to young people.