



Confirmation: Convictions and Practices

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I. A LOOK AT A LONG-STANDING RELATIONSHIP

Two images of the church provide helpful points of reference in a discussion about confirmation ministry. One is the image of a school for Christian learning. Its focus is on instruction. The other is the image of a community in which faith is learned by living it. Its focus is on socialization—the way one learns the belief systems, values, and lifestyle patterns from those who live them within the group.

These images produce metaphors that have shaped convictions about the curriculum content of confirmation and the practices of teaching it in congregational life. The first is that confirmation is an educational ministry, and the second that confirmation is a personal life-passage. Together these images and metaphors are what impel the current dedication to confirmation ministry as a necessary experience in the life of the community of faith.

This essay is an inquiry into the relationship between convictions regarding confirmation on the one hand and confirmation practices on the other. The inquiry will critique confirmation ministry in the church today and propose that a dialogical relation of conviction and practice can provide the best insights for enriching this ministry. The pastoral experience behind this inquiry is that convictions about what to teach in confirmation ministry are rather firm, but that practices in teaching are more fluid—less certain and often not as carefully examined. The common assumption about confirmation ministry is that practice grows out of convictions. The proposal here is that we need to look in the other direction also and examine the influence the practice, or the doing of confirmation ministry, can have on the convictions about what we teach. It is misleading simply to assume that one always follows the other or that both flow together naturally. These assumptions

have led to innumerable questions and problems in the earlier centuries of Lutheranism and in present-day Lutheran congregations.

For example, does confirmation derive its particularity from the sacraments to which it points or from something else? In either case, how is confirmation like or different from the church's educational ministry in general? Is its connection with the sacraments more formal, pointing toward an age-level rite of passage within the Christian life? Or is the connection more substantive, characterized by the kind of instruction one receives "in the Christian faith as confessed in the teachings of the Lutheran Church," the completion of which is recognized by the church as a sign of maturing faith and faithfulness? What convictions about the curriculum of confirmation ministry grow out of such questions? And are the goals of those convictions

realized in the practices of that ministry?

The current study and debate about confirmation ministry has a fundamental concern for clarity in regard to the convictions we hold concerning confirmation and their relation to our educational practices in ministry. This present concern, as well as a concern for what will happen in the future, is driven by the recognition that confirmation convictions and practices can sometimes be at cross-purposes. What we say and believe about the content of the confirmation experience is not always appropriately represented by what we do in confirmation ministry. And conversely, what we do in confirmation ministry to teach the faith does not always fairly support and convey what we are convinced needs to be taught and learned.

The more one examines how our convictions affect what we teach and how our practices in confirmation ministry do or do not reflect these convictions, the more evident it is that neither convictions nor practices alone can adequately shape the future of confirmation ministry; rather, what we need is an effective understanding and use of a dialogical relationship between these two.

II. THE CONTENT OF CONVICTIONS AND PRACTICES

Though instruction and socialization inform the process of confirmation ministry, what is often neglected in the exercise of this ministry is attention to how learning takes place and what, in fact, is learned from what is taught. This observation applies to any educational situation but is particularly apropos in the current discussions about confirmation.

Learning takes place in a variety of ways. Theories cover the spectrum from stage/age development to the influences of the social realities in the environment. While stage/age developmentalists emphasize the relation between the content of learning and the cognitive capacities for understanding, those who focus on social realities emphasize the way meaning is learned from human interaction within the community. It is important to recognize that these theories are related and are not exclusive. For example, John Westerhoff argues that, though a concern for stage/ age development would require one to be selective of the tradition for young learners because much of it is conceptually beyond their understanding, it is nevertheless possible to teach the tradition to such learners as the community's story of belief and faithfulness. That story will be understood in different ways by different ages. But for all, it will be the community's story.

Furthermore, most theories of education recognize that growth takes place in six areas of human development: physical, social, emotional, cognitive, moral, and

faith. Although one or another of these areas can be more dominant at different ages and different times, none is inherently more important than any other. Each affects the others so that all are interdependent. Nor do five of them come together in a cumulative way to equal the sixth. For example, one's journey in faith can be radically affected by physical or moral development, so much so that the way one images God is determined by that development. Similarly, one's image of God has a fundamental influence on what goes on in physical and moral life. Moreover, physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and moral development are important as a person's faith grows. But no combination of the five adds up to faith development.

The years of early and middle adolescence are generally the time for confirmation

ministry, when youth are taught about what it means to be a Lutheran and a member of a Lutheran congregation in the human community. Scripture, Luther's catechism, and congregational life comprise a major part of the curriculum. The conviction underlying this curriculum is that this content will be an important shaping influence for youth. Moreover, judgments about how to teach these important elements of the church's belief are usually made in terms of this content. In both instances, convictions and practices come out of the church's wisdom from the side of adulthood and maturity.

But such planning and doing of confirmation ministry does not always take age-level characteristics and the developmental readiness of the learners fully into consideration. When these factors are neglected or not taken seriously—as in the frequent comment, “Teach it to them now, and they'll learn to understand it later”—the result is that convictions about content are not appropriately extended into the practices of teaching for the maximal benefit of the learner. How much better it would be to teach to the readiness of the learners so they will be able to understand what adults want them to understand at the time, and then build on that understanding as development takes place. Often the unhappy reality of confirmation ministry is that the understanding gained must be corrected later in life rather than serving as the basis of further learning. Adults' lack of clarity and confusion about matters of Christian belief and life are evidence that learning in the community of faith beyond the confirmation years requires correction more than encouragement. The important principle of education involved here is that the goal of teaching is not teaching but learning. Teachers mistakenly use the principle that “it is never too early to start.” Early starts do allow children to go fast earlier, but they don't necessarily go farther. In fact, early starts produce a structuring in which learning is experienced as receiving information without attention to understanding. If children start before they are developmentally ready, their learning is rote learning. That structure does not necessarily stimulate thinking and, when it is carried forward into life, can be counterproductive. Rote learning eventually puts children behind because they don't learn to think as they should.

At least two conclusions are possible from these observations: practices need to be adjusted to serve convictions about content for the sake of the learner, or content needs to be adjusted to serve convictions about practices for the sake of the learner.

Another matter for scrutiny is the content of confirmation ministry. The major parts of a standard confirmation curriculum are certainly foundational for denominational identity. But they come out of a history of faith and practice that is

much richer and broader, a history which can only be understood by employing all three domains of learning: thinking, feeling, and acting. By attending more intentionally and inquisitively to all three, keeping the question of content more open, teachers and learners can make the riches of the reservoir of faith more readily available. That process calls forth and encourages imagination and creativity in using the resources of the tradition in teaching and learning.

In addition, attention to learning readiness and to the variety of material in the tradition raises the matter about the nature of the material. Often it is viewed as having a historical reality and verbal integrity which allows it to stand by itself. When that view prevails, teaching aimed at evoking personal commitment in the learner can be put in jeopardy by a goal of indoctrination. If we want growing Lutherans to own and live their faith, we have to give them a way to exegete

and apply the rich tradition of Lutheranism by the way we teach and interpret that tradition. Lutherans have long been leaders in biblical exegesis. But that leadership has not been exercised with similar directness and vigor in the interpretation of the tradition of Lutheran identity in confirmation ministry. A connective might be in the direction of teaching not just what to believe but also how to believe by decoding the symbols of the historical conversation about the faith.

Although convictions and practices about what and how to teach in confirmation ministry can be at cross-purposes, they are closely interdependent. Practices depend on convictions for learning to live the faith and convictions depend on practices for living to learn the faith. Together convictions and practices are constitutive of confirmation ministry.

III. THE POTENTIAL OF DIALOGUE FOR THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH

The problems that arise in confirmation ministry are not specific either to convictions or to practices. Nor are they confined just to certain of either.

Convictions and practices of confirmation ministry stand in a mutually dependent relation that is not just a one-way movement from one to the other. That relation calls for a dialogical process that goes beyond simply attending to each one to discover its meaning and significance. The mutuality of dialogue involves looking at convictions and practices together to discover the meaning and significance of confirmation ministry. Dialogue is a form of human interaction and exploration in which all elements in the discussion learn from each other without compromising the integrity of any. What we have experienced in the practice of confirmation ministry can have a shaping influence on our convictions in the same way that our convictions have shaped our practices in the first place. Dialogue calls into question any habit of mind that claims finality or dismisses out of hand suggestions coming from one side or partner in the dialogue. And yet, dialogue is not simply the attempt to drive toward consensus or to foster a multiplicity of options and programmatic procedures. Dialogue works toward an expanding perspective on the meaning and significance of the common task.

Thus, it is not only the practices of confirmation ministry that need scrutiny and change as we work to improve and strengthen this ministry. We need to look again at our convictions to see if they fully take into consideration not only our faith claims but also the realities of the human experience. Learning from the strengths and weaknesses of our practices can help us further comprehend and

articulate the faith. Such growth in comprehension and articulation can then find expression in new practices. Together, the analysis of programmatic and convictional components can give direction for a more holistic restructuring of the ministry of confirmation in congregational life.

In this way, dialogue can suggest correctives for both convictions and practices. This is especially true when one recognizes that truth claims and structures of belief arise out of the experiences of communities of faith as they give witness to the truth in their time and place. The reality of such witness finds expression par excellence in a people's piety. Piety is holistic in that it gathers up the convictions and beliefs of the faithful in a way of life to be lived in the world. Piety also has a parochial side that tends to focus on and find strength in the faith and life common to a given human context. Interaction of conviction and practice helps to push at the boundaries that define any piety in the interest of the community's life together in the world.

Thus, dialogue comes of the integrity of convictions and practices. But it also drives toward a broad base of human understanding and growth. The aim of the dialogical process is the recovery of conversation involving convictions and practices in such a way that both can be scrutinized and provide the potential for encouraging growth in each other.

Dialogue is constitutive of human community. As such, it touches more than the language of convictions and practices. It helps to get at the layers of meaning embodied in the symbol systems of language that are not always apparent in the words themselves or in the syntax that gives structured meaning to the words. Terminological congruence, for example, can embody wide semantic divergence, and vice versa. Dialogue can help one gain fresh insight into the use of language for teaching and learning the faith.

When dialogue is understood this way, it is an intentional human activity aiming at the recovery of conversation over beliefs, thereby offering individuals and groups an understanding of religious commitment as affirmation of identity within a multiple faith experience. Furthermore, such affirmation of identity is never just one option among others but a faith claim tested in the interaction of different experiences. This affirmation comes out of qualitative growth that broadens one's perspective in the journey in faith.

When we examine confirmation ministry in terms of the mutuality of convictions and practices, several things become apparent and necessary.

First, any dialogical relationship involves commitment. In the case of confirmation ministry, it is the commitment to look beyond the structures of convictions and practices to discover the potential each has for enriching the other. That commitment grows out of a recognition that those structures are never exhaustive but always tentative in respect to growth and development, and that making a claim for the absolutes of faith is far different from making absolute claims for either convictions or practices in the life of faith. That commitment stands against the tendency of language to build into our intellectual postures certain confessional conclusions which can become *a priori* premises that inhibit the growth of learning and the witness to the faith.

Second, dialogue involves risk. The commitment that draws one into the process of dialogue puts at risk former confidences in the formulation of convic-

tions and the theories of practice. Such a risk involves one's piety and, overall, may mean adjustments in the way long-standing attitudes toward faith have determined patterns of life. Specifically in respect to confirmation ministry, dialogue means risking such adjustments because of what is learned from looking closely at the influence convictions and practices have on each other. The risk can have a very positive result in fostering and establishing new confidences and new expressions of piety.

Third, accompanying commitment and risk is the opportunity, in dialogue, to enrich and make more vigorous one's own claims of faith by the way the perspectives of others are valued as sources for learning. Valuing other perspectives in dialogue makes it possible not just to add to knowledge quantitatively but to reconstruct knowledge qualitatively, and in so doing to discover something new and different in the journey in faith.

Fourth, the dialogue of convictions and practices in confirmation ministry calls for a disposition toward change, a habit of the mind that seeks growth in understanding one's belief

and in confessing it to the world. That disposition affords renewed zeal, individually and communally, for practicing obedience to the truth in one's journey in faith.