



## Let's Keep in Touch

I was one of those people who tended to like school, who usually followed the rules, cared about grades, and even enjoyed learning. But even so, I don't have a lot good to say for junior high. In the 1950s my inner-city Detroit school was already a disaster, my body was filled with hormones, and the fundamental issue for both teachers and pupils was survival. For the life of me, I don't remember really learning anything at all. Maybe things are better now, but present teachers would probably agree with mine, that the junior high years are a time of such incredible inner turmoil not much can be expected in terms of curricular content.

Sometimes I think I could have just dropped out for grades 7 and 8—except maybe for two things. One was that Miss Hack became my friend. She was my English teacher, and we corresponded through college, seminary, graduate school and early career. She sent gifts when our children were born, and (surprise!) when she died left us money in her will. Alas, she was not wealthy, but the inheritance was enough to buy our first computer, and we named it “Edna” after her.

The second thing was the friendship of John Ware. I was quite small and very white; John was quite large and very black. What I remember most was that he became my protector against the very real dangers of the Detroit streets. The dangers came in all colors, since our school had equal opportunity gangs: Caucasian, Black, and Hispanic. Regrettably I haven't seen John since 8th grade, but I am still grateful to him for literally saving my skin and for teaching me something important about race relations.

So, I'm glad I didn't drop out. I didn't learn a lot, but I learned a lot. A teacher became a friend for life, and a Black kid became a friend I've never forgotten.

And what about confirmation? Authors in this issue have a variety of opinions about it, but a couple of things are clear to me. One is that, given the nature of junior high kids, it is totally unrealistic to expect to do our major teaching of the content of the faith during this time. Old learnings can be refreshed and appetites can be whetted for ongoing investigation, but if we limit basic Christian instruction to junior high years we're going to be in trouble.

Second, given the nature of junior high kids, we need a place in the church where adults can become their friends and where they can discover the resources in one another. That happens sometimes in confirmation classes (not only in public schools), and when it does we know it has been worthwhile.

Do we need a particular form of confirmation? I don't know, but, while we're deciding, we still need a place to keep in touch with kids of this age and a place to keep reminding them what Christianity is all about.

To open this issue, a pastor and a lay person offer personal perspectives on confirmation from their own experience. It may be telling that *Leslie Svendsen*,

speaking as a pastor, seems to devote more space in his essay to the “agony” of confirmation ministry than to the “ecstasy”; yet equally telling is the fact that, despite the real problems, he has not given up on the exercise. *Charlotte Erlandson* describes the program of intergenerational learning in her own congregation. With infectious enthusiasm, she introduces a model in which confirmation instruction is one aspect of life-long Christian education. Though the program would need to be modified for congregations in other settings and with fewer resources, it can inspire new ways of thinking.

*Timothy Lull* presents theological issues which must remain central in a Lutheran discussion of confirmation. His essay will be an important and fundamental resource for congregations and church groups involved in planning and reshaping confirmation ministries.

*David Johnson*, the new chancellor of the University of Minnesota, Morris, reminisces and reflects on confirmation as a sociologist. How does it function as a rite of passage? His proposal of different levels of congregational membership will certainly find theological objection, but it seeks to take seriously the sociological aspects of religious life and might spark useful conversations.

Those seeking to understand junior high youth will admit they can use whatever help they can get. *Alice Schimpf*, a religious educator, briefly introduces the results of recent developmental research, reviews the junior high environment, and applies this information in a series of guidelines for the classroom.

*Kent Johnson* reports and analyzes the results of an original survey he conducted among pastors on what works in congregational confirmation programs. His findings should be helpful and heartening to others involved in this ministry.

*Eugene Kreider*, a long-time participant in interfaith dialogue, uses the dialogue model to explore the relation between our convictions and our practices regarding confirmation. Allowing each to inform the other, he insists, will be more productive than examining either in isolation.

Roman Catholic educator *Michael Warren* considers the secular culture and the church culture that define youth. He calls for a confirmation program that will cut through the barriers to radical Christianity in both cultures and produce a full and active participation by young people in the life of the church.

Face to Face stays with the confirmation theme. Colleagues *Gracia Grindal* and *Todd Nichol* have a friendly disagreement about its necessity. Then, in a review of recent literature on confirmation, *Carl Volz* introduces three major books by Roman Catholic authors. A historian himself, Volz clearly believes their historical approach can contribute to the contemporary discussion. He also reminds the readers of two important modern confirmation studies from a Lutheran perspective. Finally, in *Texts in Context*, *Marc Kolden* looks at the Lucan Advent texts and argues provocatively that the birth of Jesus never saved anyone. Advent, then, is not a time for sentimentality about the coming baby Jesus, but a time to preach the eschatological kingdom of God, ushered in by the cross.

My return to the editor's chair from sabbatical leave gives the opportunity to say a heartfelt thank-you to my colleague Jim Boyce for his very capable work as acting editor during the past year!

F.J.G.