



## Introduction to the Confirmation Issue

God has a sense of humor. At least that's why I think I can't seem to shake my connection to confirmation. As a young person, I did not have a particularly meaningful confirmation experience. The main reason was personal: our family was new to the congregation and I had no relational connections to other students or leadership. But there were other factors. My confirmation took place in the years preceding the birth of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Because my father was an American Lutheran Church pastor (then teaching at Luther Seminary), our family had to join the Lutheran church across town, rather than the Lutheran church near our house (where my friends went). This situation made me realize that the internal issues the church is wrestling with can impact our lives.

Fast forward ten years and I was now the one leading confirmation in a situation where traditional approaches did not fit our context. In a vibrant congregation, with a growing youth ministry and permission to be innovative, I was charged with exploring new models for forming faith. For a decade, my full-time work was architecting and executing confirmation for five hundred young people and their families. During those years, our team wrote and published confirmation curricula, we equipped hundreds of leaders, and I found myself in the midst of a churchwide conversation about confirmation's place in discipling youth.

As that chapter closed, I thought my time with confirmation had come to an end. I continued to volunteer in confirmation in my congregation, and I revised our confirmation curriculum, but my attention had shifted toward understanding the missional situation of the church. Then a new opportunity surfaced, and suddenly I was part of The Confirmation Project<sup>1</sup> as the ELCA steering team member.

<sup>1</sup>The 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 information see: [www.theconfirmationproject.com](http://www.theconfirmationproject.com).

Almost forty years after my own experience, I was studying confirmation across the church.

Bring up confirmation in a congregation and stories follow. It is true not everyone has participated in confirmation, but for those who have, it seems to have left a mark—good or bad. Listening to people’s stories, we hear more than a congregation’s faith practices; we also hear about the church and the challenges it was facing in that time in history. Confirmation, therefore, is not only a lens into faith formation, it is also a lens into what the church is dealing with at any given time.

This issue of *Word & World* takes up the topic of confirmation as a window into the church and its practice of forming faith within particular locations. Confirmation has morphed over the centuries, adapting to societal realities. A historic perspective places today’s situation within a larger horizon, anchoring our current discussion of confirmation within the rituals and practices of the Christian church and reminding today’s leaders how our understandings and patterns of ministry have adapted to the specific situations. Mapping the current landscape of confirmation within five denominations in the United States offers a broad understanding and a picture of where congregations overlap and where they differ. Hearing about vibrant confirmation and reflecting on confirmation theologically provide insights into how confirmation ministry can be part of a larger ecology discipling young people and their families. And offering frameworks, models, and new approaches for thinking about confirmation, from scholars and practitioners, provides congregational leaders with handles for custom designing and contextually adapting confirmation to their young people and specific situations. Each article in this issue is designed to help church leaders wrestle with confirmation in today’s church.

There remains a foundational question: Why have an intentional, intense period of faith-formation instruction followed by a public rite for professing one’s faith? Profoundly aware of the disruptive challenges facing the church today, I believe confirmation can be reformed to speak into today’s situation. When I began leading confirmation in the late 1980s, the church’s challenge was passing on faith from one generation to another. As families’ practices lessened, people looked to the church to step in. Responding to that challenge meant expanding our “learning” (which had been primarily on the Small Catechism) to include more on the Bible and other parts of the tradition, relational components, and engaging the world. For congregations, the challenge was cultivating Christian community among people who had some familiarity with the tradition and lived in a Christian society. That challenge was the challenge of Christendom, similar to what Luther faced. While it still exists in some places, it is fading fast. Today, most congregations are facing a different challenge: forming Christian identity in a religiously pluralistic and secular world. This challenge is similar to the challenge the early Christian church faced. It involves forming Christian community, but it does not assume previous formation or knowledge of the Christian tradition. Therefore, it starts at a more fundamental place: identity. This issue does not lay out a pathway for addressing the current missional challenge, but it does offer church leaders

insights into the work that needs our attention and ideas for engaging youth and adults in meaningful practices to discover more about God, the church, and the world. So why confirmation? Because to have a Christian witness to the gospel in today's society, the church needs to be intentional about forming Christians and Christian communities. When church leaders recognize that the church is in a different location in society and adapt, confirmation can be a practice where the church joins God's ongoing work accompanying young people and congregations in discovering what it means to love God and neighbor.

—T.M.E.