



Movements toward Engagement in Confirmation: A Teacher's Lens

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Teaching confirmation at our church was not the small-group memorization and hymns experience that I had growing up in rural Nebraska. Our class consisted of 150 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students all attending with an adult mentor. Along with two pastors, it was my job to teach this class. After recently shifting from being a high-school English and journalism teacher to a youth director, I brought a teacher's lens and a half-finished doctoral degree. This rare shift midstream gave me the opportunity to complete my educational doctorate in the context of teaching Lutheran confirmation. My dissertation work led me to ask again and again, "How can this be more engaging?" and "What's going on here?"

HOW DO YOU LEARN THE FAITH?

My own confirmation experience was positive, but I remember keeping a crib sheet tucked under my Bible just in case my memorization work wasn't as solidified

Toward the goal of increased student engagement, a former teacher brings her educational lens to confirmation practice. Eighty interviews with engaged adults result in five reported themes in how adults "learned their faith": relationships, spaces for questioning and doubt, tapping experiences (encouragement toward a leadership role for which one feels unprepared), hands-on/active experiences, and unique identity of the teacher. This study follows three team teachers as they apply these themes to a large confirmation class and discover that their best teaching springs from their unique gifts for teaching.

as I hoped. I never cheated in school; I cheated in church. My research made it clear that I am not the only one who felt afraid in confirmation. Fear surrounding confirmation is an inherited cultural script¹ for many who, like me, grew up Lutheran. In its nearly five-hundred-year history, instruction of Lutheran confirmation has evolved, but rote memorization and stand-and-deliver instruction are still commonplace. In increasing numbers each year, individuals do not continue to attend church past ninth grade.² Confirmation in the Lutheran church is the time just prior to the period of sharpest decline. Luther might have us ask, What does this mean?

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Meg Interview—Age Thirty-Seven

Confirmation was a four-year deal—fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth—and you didn't take communion until you were done. It was hardcore. My mom, bless her heart, would type up every week the verses and the catechism that I had to memorize, and it would fill up the front of a sheet of paper. That paper still makes me anxious.

Mike Interview—Age Thirty-One

There was a lot of memorization. I remember one time, I was in fifth grade, and I did not have my verses memorized, and I was just to the point where I felt physically ill over it, so I went to the teacher and said, "I'm not feeling well, and I need to go home," but mom knew it was just 'cause I didn't know my stuff. She said, "You're fine. You just need to stay there and you're gonna get in trouble for not memorizing. I'm not coming to pick you up." I still remember that phone call.

CONFIRMATION BACKGROUND

Larger studies have looked at confirmation overall,³ but this work takes aim at confirmation practice. "Confirmation has been a tangled web, a maze of

¹John Willinsky, "Getting Personal and Practical with Personal Practical Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* 19, no. 3 (1989): 247–264.

²See Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B&H, 2008); "National Study of Youth and Religion," *National Study of Youth and Religion* Web 13 (August 2010); Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³Riitta Virkkunen, *Confirmation in Lutheran Churches Today* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation Department of Studies, 1986); Frank Klos, *Confirmation and First Communion: A Study Book* (Minneapolis:

confusion, a complicated practice since the beginning. Confirmation is in many ways still searching. Even though its practice has been taken seriously—perhaps too seriously—for centuries, its theology and meaning have seldom been clear.⁴ Confirmation definition, intent, and practice can seem ambiguous for even the most studied. “Confirmation is a practice seeking a theory.”⁵

MOVEMENT TOWARD ENGAGEMENT

In 1973, Richard Anderson and Gerald Faust noted that true learning can't occur when the learner passively observes. They suggested teachers seek to incorporate three levels of active response from students: (1) listening, watching, or reading; (2) covert (mental) response; and (3) overt (visible) response.⁶ This type of engaged learning shows up again and again in the literature around teaching. It is not enough to simply pour information into passive learner's heads and have them recite it back. Learners must engage with content and one another for understanding to develop.⁷ In his preface to the Small Catechism, after focusing on memorization and explanation, Luther turns to understanding: “give them a broader and richer understanding.”⁸ Luther's original intent—understanding—is a far cry from confirmation that inspires boredom or even fear.

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passive learner's heads and have them recite it back.
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Toward the goal of increased engagement, I conducted eighty interviews with engaged adults in our congregation and took notes on my teaching movements with two other teachers as we shifted from solo teaching to a team approach. When I spread out the results from my eighty interviews on the floor and coded them, they hung together around five themes.

1. People learn the faith through relationships.
2. People learn the faith when spaces are created for questioning and doubt.

Augsburg, 1968); L. Lindberg and R. Homin, “The Present Scene,” in *Confirmation and Education*, ed. W. Kent Gilbert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 17–31.

⁴Luther Lindberg, “Lutheran Confirmation Ministry in Historical Perspective,” in *Confirmation: Engaging Lutheran Foundations and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 49.

⁵Gerard Austin, *Anointing with the Spirit: The Rite of Confirmation; The Use of Oil and Chrism* (New York: Pueblo, 1985), 23.

⁶Richard C. Anderson and Gerald W. Faust, *Educational Psychology: The Science of Instruction and Learning* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 200–228.

⁷Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1998), 108.

⁸Martin Luther, *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1986), 246.

3. People learn the faith through “tapping” experiences, when someone encourages them toward a leadership role for which they feel unprepared.
4. People learn the faith through active experiences.
5. People learn from the unique identity of the teacher(s).

THEME 1: RELATIONSHIPS

Following my simple question, the most common theme across all data was relationships. The portions of interviews surrounding relationships were often passionate and emotional when interviewees identified a person who had made a difference in their faith development.

Kristen Interview—Age Thirty

I had a sponsor who was in the church, and her name was Lola. She owned a shop downtown, and mom would take me after school, and then I would work with her on my confirmation homework. We did daily devotionals and we would write our thoughts on that. I stayed in touch with her pretty much through high school and even college. It was just a really cool relationship that kind of developed. They still live in my hometown, and she still asks my mom about me. She came to my wedding, and that was just a really neat piece of the confirmation part of her walking alongside me.

We knew relationships were key, so the team teachers and I worked to shift the teaching movement from a top down to a relational approach. This shift made the large class feel more intimate and created a forum faith discussion that extended our short time together each week, as mentors and students continued engaging in conversation on the way home. Some weeks, we would send students home with conversation starters to help them connect and deepen a relationship in their lives that was focused on faith. Mentors were asked to lead table discussions and to write letters to their mentees. When these letters were read aloud in class, a palpable intensity grew in the room as muscular dads read their words with heads down, and some fumbled with emotional content. A few groups finished quickly, but all participated. Dave and his son Jeff, a pair of blonde look-alikes, finished early, and as they sat in the buzz of others reading letters, I couldn't help but smile as Dave reached over to ruffle Jeff's hair while both of them smiled.

In our lesson surrounding baptism, we focused less on the content and more on creating a space for parents and students to talk about baptism experiences. The Lutheran tradition often practices infant baptism, so many of the middle schoolers only knew their baptism through pictures. Parents/mentors brought baptism photos to the class, shared memories of the experience, and responded to mentee questions about their reasons for having their child baptized. One mother brought pictures of her baptism as an adult, and that added a layer of rich discussion.

THEME 2: QUESTIONING

Wendy Interview—Age Thirty-Four

After I worked at camp, [my grandma] would engage me in these so-interesting conversations about the faith, just questioning the faith. Wow, grandma you're like eighty-five-years-old, and like uber-Lutheran. . . . And she would ask these questions, and I would be like . . . it gave me permission to ask questions and to explore faith with faith.

Jan Interview—Age Fifty

I went through all those years without really understanding much at all about my faith. It was something we did. I went through the motions, but I just had so many questions that didn't get answered until later.

Every “engaged adult” interviewed identified a time of intense questioning that was key in “learning the faith.” Often a key relationship (identified from the first theme) created a space where questioning was welcomed and encouraged. The engaged adults often identified this time of questioning and exploring their doubts as a catalyst for growth of their faith.

Because we knew questioning was important, we worked to create spaces within the confirmation class that welcomed and encouraged questioning. This sounds like a good idea, and the intention was backed up by the interview results, but the reality of creating a questioning space required deft teaching. In one lesson, we intentionally created a questioning space through a weighted scale drawn on the marker board. The sides were labeled “reasons to believe” and “reasons people have to not believe.” As intended, this incited questions and high levels of engagement, but it also posed a teaching challenge as each lesson's outcome and discussion was largely unknown. The teachers, me included, reported feeling as if they were no longer in “control” of the teaching train. In another lesson where we embraced questioning, we brought in a guest speaker from a Hindu background. While this incited questioning, it was also met with a few disgruntled participants as the lesson brought about questions that the students were not previously asking.

To truly open up a lesson to questioning moves toward authentic learning, but it can also pose a challenge. Large-scale questioning in a room of 150 students and parents poses issues of management. At the end of each lesson that felt wobbly, one of the pastors or I would aim to “put us back together” and help us leave with hope and encouragement, even goading us to ask more questions. My own faith was bolstered as one of the pastor's noted, “Don't worry. God can take it.”

THEME 3: LEADERSHIP

To question faith can bring about feelings of inadequacy. Our engaged adults talked about following up this stage in their faith development with one of leadership—often leadership tapping, where they were asked to lead a group or

event that they felt inadequate for. Their identified leadership positions, their feelings of inadequacy, and their learning through it were key in helping them “learn the faith.”

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The Christian ed. director caught me one day and said, “I see you bringing your daughter to Sunday school, and I don’t know you very well.” She wondered if I would teach seventh grade Sunday school, and I thought, for crying out loud—I’m scared of those age people. But I learned more from those kids that year. That’s what got me starting to think and question, when I got more involved.

Mike Interview—Age Thirty-One

When I was in high school, I served on a state youth board. That group, we would meet once a month—or once every other month. The planning that was involved . . . was a more in-depth Bible study that we were going through ourselves to prepare for it. . . . This wasn’t just like the other stuff. We were leading our peers, so this wasn’t going through the motions and the required steps—I needed to apply it myself. I needed to not just complete steps A, B, and C. I needed to dig in and understand what was being taught and what we were learning.

We knew leadership was important, so we focused on encouraging student leadership in the class. Our planning became intentional here. When students would raise “prayer concerns,” instead of the pastors praying, the students were asked to pray aloud themselves. Students were asked to share about their faith aloud. These “tapping” instances were always unsettling as students displayed nervousness in front of the group at the onset, but moving through this uneasiness fostered learning.

THEME 4: ACTION

Sheryl Interview—Age Thirty-Eight

I was teaching a cabin of kids and talking about confession and prayer. All of a sudden I’m going like, I’ve been doing these since I was like three years old—and they didn’t necessarily mean anything, but at camp living them out, that was when I went “aha.” It was like the words I always knew the definition of had skin on them.

The final identified theme from the engaged adults was action. Faith was learned when interviewees had to *do something*, to take a hands-on approach to their faith. In response to this theme, we worked to incorporate elements of students “doing” faith practices. When we taught about communion, participant volunteers baked the bread during class. For our last lesson of the year, Martha said she wanted to do something “really, really hands-on” for our lesson about prayer. The many stations she created required much preparation time but resulted in high levels of engagement.

Following this lesson, the room was in disarray with prayer beads strewn about, Crayola markers covering the entire mural, prayer quilt fabric unstacked, and papers scattered across the letter-writing table. Along with the mess, there was a strong quiet, the type most noticeable after a great deal of life has just passed through, and I couldn’t help wondering if this is what it feels like to be in the presence of the Spirit of God, or to be in a space after God’s Spirit has been moving among us.

THEME 5: TEACHER IDENTITY

We all felt that our best learning moments stemmed from spaces where we, as the teachers, embraced our uniqueness. In my journal, I noted repeated surprise at how each of us approached the lessons so differently. At first I resisted this individuality, thinking that we all needed to be more alike, but as we began to embrace Parker Palmer’s view that the best teaching springs from the individual personality and integrity of the teacher, the engagement increased.⁹

As the co-teachers became more and more creative in their individual approaches, the teaching of confirmation class began to bubble up in outside conversations. Planning meetings became more spontaneous both inside and outside of scheduled time. Instead of drudgery, the planning felt more like wrangling a wild animal, as we attempted to wrap our minds around the messy nature of evolving creative ideas. It was as if each lesson began to come alive. The following vignette (written from notes) was typical in the later part of the year.

David, Martha, and I run into one another at the front of the office. Although we are all on our ways to separate meetings, the ensuing conversation is alive with energy. Eyes are up. Heads nodding. Both pastors swap ideas for the upcoming confirmation class. The movement is palpable as concrete ideas seep into the discussion surrounding the next weeks’ lessons on the Ten Commandments. They insist that the three of us meet again together to ensure the same level of energy across the lessons.

⁹Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 135–137.

The zest for teaching was catching like a virus. The class and the ideas surrounding it began to have a life of its own. Jeffrey Wilhelm talks about the joy of teaching and learning as being life-giving. Maybe this type of joy can't be manufactured as much as it can be embodied when we listen, trying to embody God's creative Spirit. Wilhelm identifies the difficulty we face in our current educational climate to find the joy in teaching and learning, as it has become countercultural. "The notion of teaching as an artistic, creative, and imaginative endeavor is being lost in favor of information and skills delivery and test preparation."¹⁰ When this type of energy shows up, lesson planning and the lessons themselves come alive. Students are engaged. As public education tries to "teacher proof" materials, maybe we are inadvertently removing the joy.

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David is a natural storyteller, but he had never included this in his lessons. In one planning time, we noted how this was an individual strength and encouraged it, trying to figure out how it fit in the lesson we were designing. One day, David ran into my office with a script written for a video to use in class.

David had a clear vision of the video and how its humor could jump-start the learning for students. A week after this meeting, I found David working overtime on the Mac with earphones on. This computer station is set up for the graphic designer on the church staff, but David was planted in the chair as if he owned the place. He spent hours editing and splicing video together. Yet, on the night of the lesson, he came in hesitating, "I just wonder if I went too far on some things." I brushed off his comments and told him that it would be great. During both sessions of class that night, conversations surrounding David's video were electric.

At the table where I sat, one mother noted to another with a smile on her face, "My, confirmation has changed since I was in school." Another said, "Yeah, me too. Ours was strict memorization." The two joined in reciting a section of the catechism, "This is most certainly true . . . we are to fear and love God so that . . ." and laughed.

David designed the video with pauses for table discussion. At one pause, a mother at my table was adamant that she had chosen the correct commandment. One of the middle-school students asked her to consider another opinion. The student was correct! The energy was palpable as the table groups shifted back and forth from rapt attention to the video to loud discussion in between. In the next session of the video, the "boys in the back," who most often disengage and resort to throwing paper wads, were yelling out answers for the commandment depicted. "Four!" "One!" Throughout the lesson David was beaming, and at the end of both sessions, the video was met with raucous applause.

¹⁰Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Bruce Novak, *Teaching Literacy for Love and Wisdom: Being the Book and Being the Change* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 91.

During our staff retreat, Martha brought up how engaged the students were in this lesson. After some prodding, David went to his car to retrieve his laptop so that the twelve-member staff could watch it. Following the video, there was laughter and thoughtful discussion. Everyone was involved, discussing the content that originally tied directly to the lesson objective. Weeks after, a sound bite from the video, “Still love ya!” was still popping up during conversations with students and adults outside confirmation class. This is an example of the congregation as confirming community. Norma Cook Everist notes that it is the entire congregation’s job to facilitate catechesis and that the congregation should be a learning community. This instance wasn’t planned, but it’s an example of how Cook Everist’s theory can look on the ground.¹¹

The pastors’ educational approach evolved throughout the year. The stand-and-deliver method at the start was focused on right content and teacher as “sage on the stage.” Toward the end of the year, both pastors told me in their own way that they had moved toward a “guide on the side” approach.¹² David noted, “I like it how we’re okay with the kids grappling with the ideas for a while without just telling them.”

Working in a team of teachers formed community that strengthened both our confidence in teaching through our individuality and our vocation in teaching. The work often felt life-giving in both planning and teaching.¹³ At the start of the year, I thought the students would most benefit if I helped David and Martha to teach more like me, but the greater accomplishment came when we all learned to teach more like ourselves.

SO WHAT?

Julie Interview—Age Forty-Three

You just know that there are some kids who are into it [confirmation class] and some who are just totally lost. On confirmation Sunday their biggest thought is, “We’re having deli sandwiches for lunch, I’m gonna get some presents, and we’ll have a cake shaped like a cross.” My daughter is invested, but I don’t know why. I look around the room during confirmation sometimes and I think, how do you get kids to be invested at a time in their lives when, you know, BFF’s with Jesus is not the cool topic of conversation at the lunch table? You know, how do you get kids engaged in the conversation?

Martha Interview—Age Thirty-Eight

After everything this year, I think I’m ultimately more of a “doer.” This is a random example, but I’m a quilter, and I *never* would use a pattern.

¹¹Norma Cook Everist, *The Church as Learning Community: A Comprehensive Guide to Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002).

¹²Alison King, “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side,” *College Teaching* 41, no. 1 (1993): 30–35.

¹³Wilhelm and Novak, *Teaching Literacy*, 43.

I just, I look at it and say I could make that, so I start doing it, and I figure it out as I go. I don't read the directions, and I don't know if that relates, but that's how I am. I have to do stuff. That's probably just my own learning. I know it's all from my perspective, but that's why I assume that's how kids will learn it best. I have an aunt that—well I have two aunts—who ran a quilt shop. One would use a pattern with pre-chosen fabrics, and I would always be like, “You make beautiful quilts, but they're the same quilts that are in that picture.” It's not something you made. You made it, but you didn't—what's the word—you didn't dream it. I guess I don't feel like my quilts turn out better because I don't have a pattern . . . they're more me. They're more me.

Phyllis Tickle calls for us to embrace the shifting tides of our current time in history and be a different church.¹⁴ While this story of one year of confirmation is small in scope, it opens a window toward a small shift. We are all living and learning the faith in a time in history where the public education pendulum has swung so far toward standards and assessment that it feels abnormal to imbibe teaching with humanity and individuality. How can we open these conversations? Where do we start? This work attempts to show one start.

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As we began the year, we were in new territory as we moved toward team teaching, unsure of how our unique personalities would contribute to the team of teachers. The *so what* of this piece lies in all of us as we work to better understand our vocations as teachers of confirmation or otherwise. It lies in our questions, in our dialogic movements forward, and in our listening to how we can uniquely contribute to learning spaces that foster relationships, questioning, leadership, and action. ⊕

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¹⁴Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008) 20, 26–27.