



Reimagining Confirmation Ministry as a Lifelong Process

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Shuffling through family photos, I can track my family members marking one significant faith milestone event—confirmation. Traditions and fashions have changed, but amongst the photos I have pictures of myself, my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, and yes, even my great-great-grandparents standing in front of a church, many with the pastor, on the day each was confirmed. But these pictures are not the only artifacts of my family’s faith journey. As I carefully turn the pages of my grandmother’s worn Bible, I notice that she made note of Bible verses significant to her faith journey. She had verses under categories like “when someone dies,” “when looking for direction,” “when you have too much to do,” and “when a baby is born.” These verses were reminders of God’s work and presence amidst her day-to-day routine and during significant life events. They also served as a source of comfort and peace as she faced her own death from cancer. She took

In the last sixty years, our society has become more individualized and segregated into age-related silos. The church, a place that traditionally has maintained intergenerational relationships, has conformed to the culture of age segregation. As a result, there are few experiences for people within faith communities, young and old, to learn and grow with each other. Inviting congregations to embark on a significant transformation, this article explores the idea of confirmation moving from a two- to three-year learning experience for adolescents to a lifelong, intergenerational journey of learning, marking significant life events.

the promises she made at her affirmation of baptism quite seriously and lived into her identity as a baptized child of God each day.

Confirmation is a tradition near and dear to the Lutheran church. Today many church basements have walls with pictures of confirmands who have gone before, giving a historical picture of how they passed faith on from one generation to the next generation. My grandmother grew up in a time when faith and church were the center of American family life. Her small country church was a place where church picnics happened on a regular basis. Farmers and their sons gathered at the church when the crops were failing due to drought, flooding, or any other sort of casualty. Women and their daughters congregated within the church walls to make quilts for people in need. And on Sunday evenings, families sat at the kitchen table to read scripture and pray. Growing one's faith was done in intergenerational experiences where young and old came together to not only lift up their voices in worship but also to learn, pray, and support each other.

Today, my children are growing up in a world much different, and the role congregations play in faith formation has changed. Congregations are no longer a central gathering place in our communities. Though some congregations may still have a lingering trace of the past, most have seen significant changes in their role in the community as society has become more individualized. During this time, we've witnessed family members go their separate ways, with each participating in age-segregated activities. From the public education system to the popularity of retirement communities and nursing homes, families are segregated on a daily basis. Congregations are one of the few places where people of all ages are invited to come together, yet most have followed suit and divided people up by their stage of life. We often see this happen in the educational ministries of the church, but it's also in choirs, small groups, and now even in worship. It's so common that it is easy to think it has always been this way. Today the church is more segregated and divided than ever before. Yet the church could be a countercultural intergenerational community guided by God's love and grace. Might it be time we, as church leaders, stop and took a second look at our practices?

The segregation of the ages isn't the only issue congregations are facing when it comes to passing on the faith to the next generation. In the last sixty years, we've also seen a significant drop in engagement within congregations. More specifically, many congregations are seeing a drop in engagement at key life transitions—when students complete confirmation or enter high school, when young adults leave for college, when adults become empty nesters, and when people retire. How might we, church leadership, intentionally address this reality? What issues does this raise for the church? What ways are we, as the church, contributing to this decline? Might fostering and developing genuine and unique relationships between generations keep people engaged? Perhaps we, the church, are missing an opportunity. My theory is this: *the segregation of age groups within congregations has hindered the church's ability to adequately pass on the faith and nurture lifelong disciples of Jesus Christ.* Congregations have failed to help people discover what it means to live into their identity as a child of God and recognize their role as part of the body

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What if the time is right for the church to reimagine this long tradition of confirmation? Is God calling us into a new way of affirming our baptism and confirming our faith? As one of the few intergenerational communities left in society, we have the opportunity to live differently. This article will offer a rationale for congregations to become lifelong confirming communities, communities of faith where faith formation is an intergenerational journey that recognizes God's work throughout all of life and opens doors for people of all ages to learn and grow together within the support and encouragement of the entire congregation. It will begin by addressing issues around the largest populations disengaged from the church and then give a biblical and theological foundation for the idea of the lifelong confirming community. It will conclude by offering an image of what intergenerational ministry could look like in any ministry setting.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONFIRMATION

One could say that confirmation has been in a constant state of change. It has been a product of an ever-changing culture and has differed over time and across congregations. Luther Lindberg goes so far as to say, "All the histories we have examined begin by saying that confirmation has been a tangled web, a maze of confusion, a complicated and controverted practice since the beginning. Confirmation is still searching for theology and rationale. Even though its practice has been taken seriously—perhaps too seriously—for centuries, its theology and meaning have seldom if ever been clear."¹ How's that for a history? The church has been confused from the start! Perhaps it is because confirmation is not a practice commanded in scripture; in fact, confirmation is not even a term found in the Bible. Even the Lutheran church's namesake, Martin Luther, believed that the rite of confirmation was to be avoided because it had no scriptural basis. Yet confirmation has continued as a practice.

The definition of confirmation has changed within the ELCA over the years as well. In 1993, the ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a new definition for confirmation that stated: "Confirmation ministry is a pastoral and educational

¹Luther E. Lindberg, "Lutheran Confirmation Ministry in Historical Perspective," in *Confirmation: Engaging Lutheran Foundations and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 43–44.

ministry of the church that helps the baptized through Word and Sacrament to identify more deeply with the Christian community and participate more fully in its mission.”² Identified as a pastoral and educational ministry, what is most striking is that this definition lacks a specified time or age. Previous definitions defined confirmation as “a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that helps the baptized *child*.”³ This change is significant in that it expands confirmation beyond childhood, implying it is not something specific to ministry with youth but a life-long ministry. It also does not prescribe a certain set of rules or practices that a congregation must follow. Instead, it gives congregations the ability to discern what model and timeline is most fitting for their context.

One interpretation of confirmation is influential today, the idea of confirmation as a pseudo “graduation.” Lindberg notes confirmation “became a sentimental event, a time for robes, flowers, parties, gifts, and a sense that the individual was no longer under the tutelage of parents or sponsors but was able now to stand alone in matters of faith and daily life.”⁴ Does this sound familiar? Within many congregations, the rite of confirmation functions as a celebration marking the end of Christian education within the church. Given the ELCA’s definition, confirmation in the twenty-first century needs to be revisited.

THE CHURCH IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The church no longer holds a prominent role in society, so what role should the church play? And perhaps even more importantly, how might the church’s calling to pass on faith connect with the needs of society today? As our culture has become more individualized, people’s tendency is to turn in on themselves and focus on their own needs and wants. This same tendency, to turn inward, is seen within congregations. Reflect on your own ministry setting for a moment. What are your gathering patterns? What do they reflect about your community? Most congregations have become places where we interact with people who look, think, and travel the same roads we do. Rather than engaging in conversations and relationships with those different than ourselves, we resort to clustering with those like us. This approach not only flattens congregational life, it underplays the learning and rich relationships that could come from facilitating and encouraging relationships across generations.

As churches have segregated age groups, we have also seen a decline in worship attendance and congregational engagement. While there are a variety of reasons contributing to this decline, I see the lack of intergenerational ministry and the congregation’s inability to build relationships across generations as a key contributing factor. A number of recent studies show a steady decline in engaged

²*The Confirmation Ministry Task Force Report*, ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, adopted by the ELCA Assembly (September 1, 1993), 1.

³*The Report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 18.

⁴Lindberg, “Lutheran Confirmation Ministry,” 56.

followers of Christ within our congregations specifically at times of life transitions. The National Study of Youth and Religion, for example, recently found that as students move through adolescence, their participation within their congregation drops significantly.⁵ And youth are not the only age group becoming disconnected. A recent Pew Research Study found that the majority of Gen X'ers, adults born between 1961 and 1981, rarely take part in worship and other faith practices,⁶ and a 2011 Barna Research study found that the baby boomer generation, adults born between 1946 and 1964, are the most unchurched generation in the United States.⁷ If faith formation is an important value not only for children but for our church, then why are adults not participating in faith-formation practices? As a church, we've done little to teach people that living the Christian faith is something we are called to do daily and that growing in faith and experiencing God's work in our lives is a lifelong process. When the Sacrament of Baptism and the rite of confirmation become ceremonies, families see them as one-time events to check off a to-do list. This view fails to call upon the giftedness of God's people and connect their gifts with the mission of the church. Such a view does not help people understand and live into the promises made at baptism, see their purpose in the body of Christ, and connect faith to their daily lives. Confirmation misses the boat when it does not help families understand that following Christ goes beyond the doors of the church building on Sunday morning and Wednesday night; following Christ is part of daily life at home, at school, and at work.

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HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH ADDRESS THIS?

A paradigm is shifting, and paradigm shifts are scary times. The ways faith was nurtured for many current church members is not the way people's faith is nurtured today. If the church truly wants to help people become followers of Christ, maybe it is time to get out of the way. Like it or not, the church is on the verge of a monumental change. In the face of this reality, we are afraid of change and relinquishing

⁵Melinda Lundquist Denton, Lisa D. Pearce, and Christian Smith, *Religion and Spirituality on the Path through Adolescence: A Research Report of the National Study of Youth and Religion, Number 8*, National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008, 18–20, <https://tinyurl.com/yam8h59w>.

⁶"Generational Cohort," Religious Landscape Study, Pew Research Center, 2014, <https://tinyurl.com/y9y2yxce>.

⁷"Barna Describes Religious Changes among Busters, Boomers, and Elders Since 1991," *Barna*, July 26, 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/yb2fl9nm>.

power. Sure we have an image to sustain, church buildings to maintain, salaries to pay, budgets to balance, and security in the way things have always been done. And sure, we are concerned that our theology might be compromised or we might say the wrong thing. It is scary to take risks and try new things, but clinging to our familiar ways of operating leaves little room for other ideas to flourish. Might it be time to open ourselves to the Spirit and discern where God is leading us? Can we commit ourselves to reimagining our call to share the gospel with people of all ages and rediscovering a place of relevancy in the lives of our families? I think, yes!

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR INTERGENERATIONAL MINISTRY

Throughout scripture, we see the intentionality Jewish people and people of the early church had in living and growing in faith together. All were present from the young to the old. The ancient Jewish prayer taken from Deut 6, the Shema, reminds us of this rich tradition and beautifully states God's command for us to pass on faith to the next generation.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut 6:4–9)

Intergenerational ministry was the norm for these ancient cultures. And in these ancient cultures, faith was integrated into all aspects of daily life. Passed down from one generation to another, God's Word was lived out from sun up to sun down. It was woven into the fabric of the day and the seasons of life. Growing in faith and being engaged in an intergenerational faith community was not compartmentalized, happening one day a week in a specific destination, or a box to check off the to-do list. It was *the* way of life and relied on intergenerational relationships.

Allen Harkness points out three key theological foundations for intergenerational ministry. His first point is that intergenerationality is an expression of the character of God. Harkness writes, "Expressions of community that reflect God's relational nature require the inclusion and valuing of all the diversity of humanity in a covenant relationship with God if they are to witness to the one who created and sustains community as an expression of his nature. And this must include age diversity."⁸ At the heart of God, we find inclusion and diversity. Therefore, the

⁸Allan G. Harkness, "Intergenerationality: Biblical and Theological Foundations," *Christian Education Journal*, 3rd ser., 9, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 126.

body of Christ requires including the diversity of gifts from all the baptized. As the body of Christ, congregations should reflect this inclusion and diversity and make it part of their inherent nature.

Harkness also states that intergenerationality is the “essence of the church.”⁹ The church is meant to be a vision of God’s kingdom on earth; therefore, it should function as such. It is through Christian community that we experience the living presence of Jesus, the movement of the Holy Spirit, and God’s creative love. God’s people are created to be in genuine relationships with one another. These relationships are not simply for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. It is in relationship that we walk alongside each other in our joys and in our burdens and struggles. And it is in community that we share God’s word and give testimony to God’s presence in our lives. We grow together, personally and communally, as we recognize and sense Christ’s presence in one another.

Finally, Harkness states that “intergenerational processes are integral to personal faith development.”¹⁰ One of the ways in which people of faith learn how to integrate faith into their daily life is to have it modeled for them. Young people learn and grow in faith by watching adults, and adults learn and grow in faith by walking alongside young people. Both children and adults wonder about faith and both have difficult theological questions. Having both children and adults around a table learning about faith together offers space to share questions and can be done in a way that does not simplify the complexity of faith. Our role, as congregations and baptized children of God, is to pass on faith to the next generation, and one of the ways we do that is by journeying alongside each other. Adults have much to learn, and children have many gifts to share. As congregations engage in intergenerational community that embraces the inclusion and diversity of God, they embody the kingdom of God on earth, and individuals grow in their faith.

John Westerhoff describes the purpose each generation plays in Christian community. Elders, or the third generation, are the memory and without them “the other two generations are locked into an existential present.”¹¹ Adults, the second generation, are the present and, when combined with the first and third generations, function to confront the community with reality. And the youth, or first generation, are the generation of vision, but to have vision one needs memory, or the third generation. “True [Christian] community necessitates the presence and interaction of three generations.”¹² The future of the church *and* one’s own faith formation depends upon the interworking of three generations. We need one another to learn and to grow into what Christ is calling us to be, both as individual children of God and as God’s kingdom here on earth.

⁹Ibid., 125.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2012), 53

THE LIFELONG CONFIRMING COMMUNITY

Now is the time for the church to rethink the way in which faith is passed on, specifically thinking about the opportunity that exists with confirmation ministries. Going back to the ELCA's definition of confirmation, we are reminded that confirmation ministry wants confirmands "to identify more deeply with the Christian community and participate more fully in its mission."¹³ This definition conveys that there is a beginning (baptism), but essentially there is not an end. In this way, confirmation is a lifelong journey where confirmands are knit into a lifelong confirming community. If a congregation lives into this idea of being a lifelong confirming community, by its very nature the way in which all people grow together in faith becomes confirmation ministry. So what could the lifelong confirming community look like? What are some ways in which congregations can begin to adopt this idea of learning and growing in intergenerational community as confirmation ministry?

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IT ALL BEGINS IN BAPTISM

In baptism we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, become full members of the church, and begin a lifelong journey within the body of Christ with specific gifts to do God's work in the world. Those present at baptism, family and the congregation, make promises to form the faith of the one baptized. At all of the baptism services that I have witnessed, I have heard a unanimous "we will" from the congregation and parents when asked, "People of God, do you promise to support [name/s] and pray for them in their new life in Christ?"¹⁴ The question is, How are we fulfilling those promises? From the beginning, the lifelong confirming community requires the love and support of the entire congregation. Engaging in the life of a congregation is not about mastering content, membership, or meaningless ceremonies, it is centered on loving God and loving our neighbor. Becoming a lifelong confirming community, therefore, allows all of us, parents and congregation members, to live into these promises by providing experiences where the young and old learn and grow side by side.

¹³*The Confirmation Ministry Task Force Report*, ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries, adopted by the ELCA Assembly (September 1, 1993), 1.

¹⁴Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, *Evangelical Book of Worship*, pew ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006).

THE USE OF THE AFFIRMATION OF BAPTISM IN THE MARKING OF MILESTONES

Though baptism happens only once, the affirmation of baptism can happen many times throughout one's life. What if life transitions and milestones, the moments where people are currently disengaging from church, became moments for engaging people in intergenerational relationships and growing deeper in one's understanding of faith? In life transitions and milestones, the lifelong confirming community could not only provide opportunities for learning but also mark significant events in one's life as holy places where God's work is publicly named and affirmed. The church could uplift the idea of faith formation being a lifelong process by (1) providing intergenerational experiences and community as people embark on or conclude a life journey milestone, and (2) creating spaces for these affirmations in worship on a more regular basis throughout the year. Examples of these milestones could include what is currently done for the rite of confirmation, but may also include rites for the gift of one's first Bible, retirement, caring for an aging parent, and so on.

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Just as the time before the rite of confirmation includes a time of instruction, experiences in Christian community, and building relationships, so too would these respective life milestones. As people seek to connect faith with their current life experience, they would approach each opportunity with their particular questions, which would help them process and discover meaning for their lives in that stage of life. Exploring this way of learning, congregations must be creative in their approach and consider different ways in which people learn and grow. This type of learning moves beyond a traditional understanding of education to a broad understanding of experiences in which people come to know God for themselves, through those around them, and in the world. James White defines intergenerational religious education as "two or more different age groups of people in a religious community together learning/growing/living in faith through in-common-experiences, parallel-learning, contributive-occasions, and interactive-sharing."¹⁵ His definition and understanding of "experiences" richly describe what an intergenerational, lifelong confirming ministry should be. It's not exclusive to a "teacher/student" model in a formal classroom but is a holistic approach to learning involving all of our experiences and including all generations.

¹⁵James W. White, *Intergenerational Religious Education: Models, Theory and Prescription for Intergenerational Life and Learning in the Faith Community* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988), 18.

Experiential opportunities allow for people of all ages to come together and experience God's work in the world and our call as followers of Christ through service opportunities, retreats, family camp, and mission trips. Experiences and follow-up faith conversations create a learning environment focused less on "units" of learning and instead on helping each other grow in understanding how faith is woven into all areas of life. For years, the children and youth ministries of the church have offered "away" experiences where children spend a week at camp or on a mission trip and return from these experiences full of life and excited about their faith. In making these experiences intentionally intergenerational, the door is opened for so much more growth to happen. Such shared experiences make way for people from different walks of life to interpret experiences through their unique lens and share their understanding with others. Such exchanges enhance the faith formation experience and allow participants to see a larger picture of the world and how God works in it.

Intergenerational learning is the new paradigm for passing on the faith. And it does not need to center only on young people. For example, a learning experience for those nearing retirement could include people of all ages. Young people can be invited into this experience, cheering on those nearing a new stage in life, sharing their hopes and perspectives for this stage of their journey. The blessings of such an approach mean congregations can begin with whomever they have within their congregation.

The rite of confirmation is a significant moment when the baptized stand in front of the church surrounded by a congregation, proclaim God's good work in their life, and commit themselves to continuing in a Christian way of life. But life is filled with many significant moments and milestones and wouldn't it be wonderful if the faith community surrounded people in those times as well? Shouldn't we, as followers of Christ, recognize God present and active in our life in each milestone event, just as we recognize it at the affirmation of our baptism? Yes! There is significance in marking milestones, both for individuals and congregations. Think about how meaningful it would be if congregations made room for the marking of these milestones in worship with prayer and the support of the people who said yes to the promises made in baptism.

CONCLUSION

I long for my children to have a rich faith in which the life and stories of those who have gone before them inspire and guide them in living out their faith daily. My prayer is that my children grow to understand how God is present in all places and that following Jesus is a lifelong journey. I will try to teach this on my own, but how much more vibrant would their faith be if they had shared experiences with those in other walks of life? God has created us to be in community. It is in relationship that we learn and grow into an understanding of what it means to be a child of God. Through the stories of others and shared learning experiences, an intergenerational faith community opens the doors for faith formation in an

organic and holistic way. The early church was founded on intergenerational ministry that invited the young and old into God's presence together. This approach requires a different mindset, one that is willing to imagine ways where people from different generations can come alongside each other with their very different perspectives and worldviews in an environment with mutual respect and discover belonging and value. It will take a lot of work to live into this new paradigm, but living into this mindset might help the church imagine new ways of living its calling to pass on the faith and, as it does, rediscover a meaningful role in society.

Becoming a lifelong confirming community places intergenerational ministry at the heart of congregational ministry. And intergenerational experiences are not an isolated program, separate from other ministries, but essentially the way congregations live out their mission. Such an understanding engages the baptized in communal faith formation throughout life and continually connects faith and daily life, as it also recognizes the Christian call to love and serve the neighbor. ☩

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