

# FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CONFIRMATION

Key learnings from The Confirmation Project's qualitative research

Drawing on a formation model, confirmation was about faith maturation, or faith connecting knowledge, belief, and action into one's life and identity.

Starting with the ideas youth have at least minimal familiarity with the Christian story, Christian practices, and the church's theology, this maturation happened as young people engaged in learning activities within a community of faith and concluded with a personal commitment as part of a public rite.

Underneath this understanding, four dimensions surfaced regarding the design, leadership, ecology, and curriculum of confirmation.



FIND OUT MORE AT  
[www.theconfirmationproject.com](http://www.theconfirmationproject.com)

## CONFIRMATION DIMENSION #1:

# Design

Custom-designed & contextually adaptive confirmation cultivates learning environments where Christian tradition & life experience intersect.

Starting with a belief that a life of faith makes a difference to individuals, communities of faith, & the world, confirmation ministries custom-designed learning environments meaningful for youth to explore their faith and impact their life.

These ministries recognized God's agency, appreciated church tradition, imagined new possibilities, & focused on discipling youth as they drew on available assets, addressed real challenges, & adapted to their context.

Using creative pedagogical approaches & attuned to their context, the design of confirmation was overtly attentive to theology & relationships.

## CONFIRMATION DIMENSION #2:

# Leadership

Faithful and committed leadership matters and is shared.

Valuing its place in a life of discipleship, leadership was committed to confirmation, created a vision for it, and gave their energy to it.

Each ministry had a champion spearheading the ministry, often clergy, while at the same time empowering and equipping others to contribute in big and small ways.

This created a shared approach where all leaders embodied the vision and sustained the practice.

## CONFIRMATION DIMENSION #3:

# Ecology

Confirmation is one aspect of a larger learning, discipleship, and communal whole.

Congregations where confirmation is vibrant recognize and tend to the dynamic relationship between the congregation's culture of discipleship (and in some cases denomination's culture of discipleship) and confirmation's ability to play an important role in youth discipleship.

In this way, confirmation was one intentional dimension of a larger faith formation ecosystem. This ecosystem included creating connections between confirmation and the congregation, parents and households, and the world.

This multi-dimensional ecological understanding situated confirmation as more than a program or rite.

## CONFIRMATION DIMENSION #4:

# Curriculum

Relationships are a key element of the learning environment.

Working with the content of Christian tradition as a core, relationships stood out as an important element.

It is not surprising that within a formation model that what happens between and among youth and adults is critical. In this way, relationships were more powerful than any printed curriculum.




While curriculum and classroom learning was present, the web of relationships nurtured among confirmands, between confirmands and adults, and between confirmands and the congregation as a whole provided the dynamism for confirmation and was what impacted youth most beyond the classroom.

# CONFIRMATION PROJECT FINDINGS:

## Topics

Surveyed parents, students, & leaders agreed about which confirmation topics are most & least important to learn.

### TOPICS MOST IMPORTANT TO LEARN

-  Death & resurrection
-  The Bible
-  God (Father, Son, & Holy Spirit)

### TOPICS LEAST IMPORTANT TO LEARN

-  Abortion
-  Gay marriage
-  Church governance
-  Drug abuse

  
theconfirmationproject.com

## CONFIRMATION TOPICS:

# The Lord's Prayer



Parents and youth placed more importance on the Lord's Prayer than leaders.

However, in the followup, youth reported learning more about this topic than all others except the Bible and God.

**the Confirmation**



PROJECT

[theconfirmationproject.com](http://theconfirmationproject.com)

## CONFIRMATION TOPICS:

# What Did Students Learn?



### STUDENT LEARNING CORRESPONDED WITH LEADER EXPECTATIONS

In the followup survey, students said they learned the most about topics to which leaders gave the most importance in the initial survey, such as:



Conversely, students said they learned less of topics about which they had initial high expectations, but to which leaders gave less importance, such as:



This suggests very little student influence on topic selection.

It also corroborates leader responses to the survey item, "Youth should be allowed to decide the topics together with their peers," which only 38% considered very or extremely important.



# RECURRING sub-themes IN CONFIRMATION

Under the four key dimensions  
of confirmation,

*design, leadership, ecology,  
& curriculum,*

we discovered

## 9 RECURRING CONFIRMATION SUB-THEMES

providing the threads that, when  
woven together, create the  
tapestry of confirmation in each  
location, region of the country,  
and denomination:

1. youth confirmation matters!!!
2. committed, faithful shared leadership
3. relevant & real program
4. faith-forming ecology
5. christian community
6. intentional commitment to inquiry-based learning with & across generations
7. local flavor
8. christian foundation for public life
9. public rite of faith affirmation

# CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #1:

# Youth confirmation Matters!!!

A key theme that emerged was a clear message that youth confirmation (& equivalent practices) is thriving & resilient in a wide range of settings across the church.

While this is particularly good news for the five Protestant denominations represented in this study, it was not assumed at the onset.

Where confirmation practices are thriving, we observed a pattern of intentional, developmentally appropriate, contextual faith intensification leading to a public profession of that faith.

As congregations navigate the contemporary reality of declining religious affiliation in the United States, it is important to note that confirmation can be a critical component in discipling young people.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #2:

# Committed, Faithful Shared Leadership

The most striking consistency across ministry sites with active, healthy confirmation ministries was the presence of strong, committed adult leaders.

In the majority of cases, the central advocate for youth confirmation (and equivalent practices) was a clergy person, and often the senior or solo pastor, but there were several examples in which it was a trusted lay leader.

This leader, along with a core group of staff, volunteers, and/or parents, shared a vision for intentional confirmation preparation that contributed to the formation of mature Christian disciples.

These leaders embodied the vision and sustained the practice. Their own Christian faith was palpable, not only in their language but also in their manner of life. They were clear about their own Christian identity and the importance of creating welcoming, safe environments in which young people could experience and examine Christian life.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #3:

# Relevant & Real Program

Attentive to modeling healthy relationships with God, Christian communities, & one's neighbor, the confirmation ministries studied had clear program goals aimed at helping young people mature in their faith.

Leadership knew the hopes & fears of their confirmands, understood the worlds in which the youth lived & into which they were living their faith, & had high expectations of themselves, their congregations, & their young people.

The ministries were responsive, contextual, & personal; evaluation & assessment for the purpose of continuous adaptation & improvement was a priority.

Of particular importance was the focus on *positive identity formation* for confirmation (& equivalent practices) among the AME programs & several urban programs in other denominations. These programs focused on building the confidence, self-esteem, & social consciousness of young people within a theological framework, as they blended teaching about racial & religious heritage, "bringing theology from the heavens to the ground." In these settings confirmation had a deeper sense of urgency & sought to offer students a hopeful future.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #4:

# Faith-forming Ecology

Confirmation was not an afterthought nor habit in the settings we studied. Instead, confirmation was *one* intentional dimension of a well-established faith formation ecosystem in congregations known for welcoming people of all ages and cultivating learning among and across generations.

Many of the young people interviewed referred to their congregation as “family,” feeling intimately known and having a meaningful role to play in this community.

This genuine sense of belonging to a congregation provided the stability many students needed to make sense of being a Christian in a religiously pluralistic world that is competing for their loyalties.

Some extended the faith-forming ecology by deliberately engaging parents and households, widening the contexts for faith-forming practices beyond the congregation to the spaces of everyday life.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #4: FAITH-FORMING ECOLOGY

# The Special Role of Camps & Regional Programs in Faith-forming Ecology



Camps and regional programs were included in this study. These residential, immersive experiences in Christian living, with a particular focus on preparing teenagers to reaffirm their faith, were identified as natural incubators of creativity, re-imagination, testing new discipleship methods, and igniting religious passion.

Camps, with their emphasis on outdoor education, provided a deep well for thirsty souls—youth confirmands and adult leaders—to (re)discover the wonder of creation, the importance of play, and various forms of worship.

Regional programs emphasized collaboration (at times ecumenical), extended the reach of congregational ministries, and provided avenues for innovation.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #5:



# Christian community

Explicitly and implicitly, the confirmation ministries studied emphasized the importance of building and sustaining healthy Christian community.

Authentic engagement with peers, adults, and the world permeated these ministries and created an invisible, yet powerful force.

Rooted in baptismal theology, the ministries studied assumed each person was beloved, worthy, and gifted in the eyes of God. Such a climate of mutual regard provided the foundation for program accountability and high expectations of the confirmands.

These dynamic communities of faith and learning tended to internal relationships while also intentionally focusing outward, empowering others, and listening to their neighbor in order to build a better and just world.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #6:

# Intentional Commitment to Inquiry-based Learning With & Across Generations



Vital confirmation (and equivalent practices) were inquiry-based, honoring the agency of young people to commit themselves to purposeful learning and faithful action.

This theme presented itself in different ways but learning was highly participatory, engaging confirmands in a variety of activities that provided substance for theological reflection.

As a community that learn together, the majority of the programs offered a mix of formal instruction and informal learning, opportunities for ministry in the congregation, community service projects, family activities, conversations with mentors, and/or immersive experiences at camp or on retreat.

Learning took place both within peer groups and with others older and younger. With such a range of opportunities teenagers are given more responsibility and freedom to participate in ways that best suit their learning styles and life situation.

Programs such as these can be readily individualized for special needs, including developmental differences, diversity in experiences within the Christian church, and challenges presented when families move away.



## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #7:



# Local Flavor

Each of the confirmation ministries visited were distinct, having been built on the unique strengths and character of its host congregation/institution, the gifts of the core leadership, and the identified discipleship needs of the young people.

The local leadership set the tone for youth discipleship formation, articulate the goals, and blend a variety of resources and processes—formal and informal pedagogies—to meet young people where they are and engage the wider congregation.

Learning matters in these programs and the tools to accomplish it are many; learning takes place in traditional classroom instruction, uses digital media, includes immersion experiences, mentors, face-to-face sessions, and synchronous and asynchronous online instruction.

Programs are more fluid than fixed with many congregations re-imagining confirmation from the ground up and continually adapting the changing needs of their situation.

It is notable that we heard very little about curriculum because none of the sites depended solely on a purchased curriculum.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #8:

# Christian Foundation for Public Life



Delivered in various ways, thriving confirmation emphasized the foundations of Christian faith and each denomination's tradition—Bible, theology, prayer—while also offering young people opportunities to connect the church's teaching with their everyday lives.

In most programs, full participation in the church is intentionally linked to participating in God's mission to bring about God's kingdom of mercy and justice through the faithful transformation of culture and society.

Some ministries put faith into action through service, while others considered injustice and preparing young people to be part of God's unfolding reconciling work in the world.

## CONFIRMATION SUBTHEME #9:

# Public Rite of Faith Affirmation



All of the confirmation ministries (and equivalent practices) built toward a culminating rite. For most this rite was the service of confirmation itself, for others it was a series of significant public events in anticipation of that ritual.

In some cases young people are expected to make their profession of faith by articulating their creed in front of the congregation and/or the congregation's elected leadership.

In some cases young people were examined on the catechism by a/the pastor. In other cases, young people made a statement of faith in front of family, friends, and mentors.

No matter the format, the expectation was clear: young people being presented for confirmation should have a language of faith and be able to articulate and claim their beliefs, even to the extent that they have questions about particular doctrine.

(One of the consistent strengths of the programs we observed is a tolerance for doubt and honoring of each individual's unique and lifelong journey as a disciple of Jesus.)

# CHARACTERISTICS OF **confirmation class**



We surveyed leaders to determine key confirmation program characteristics. Here's what we found!

- 1 Control & standards are decentralized**
- 2 Programs are clergy-centered**
- 3 Settings resemble a school classroom model**
- 4 Classes are discussion-based**
- 5 Programs are contextual**
- 6 There's no standard for number of classroom hours**
- 7 There's no standard for out-of-classroom activity**
- 8 There's inconsistency on enforcement of requirements**

# CHARACTERISTICS OF confirmation class



1

## Control & standards are decentralized

### What does it mean?

While in some cases there is substantial oversight at the regional level (synod, presbytery, or diocese), confirmation programs typically indicate very little overall denominational control or standards. Programs are tailored to the unique needs of the individual congregations.

2

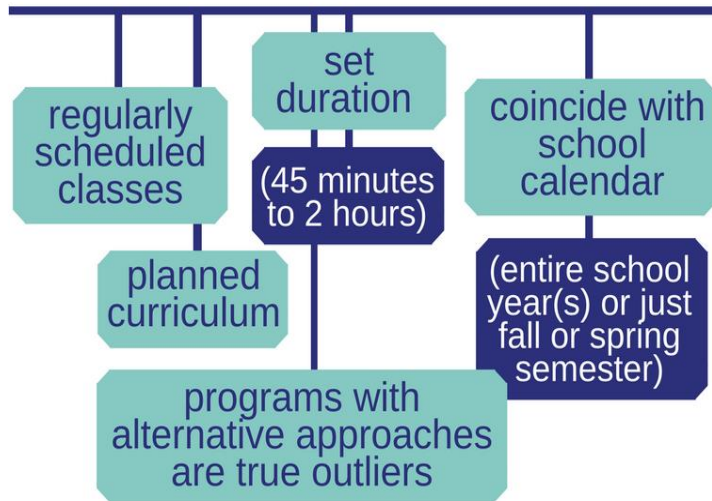
## Programs are clergy- centered

### What does it mean?

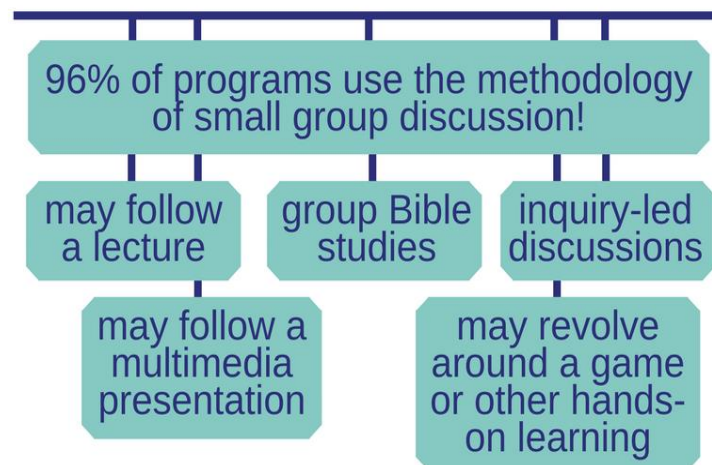
Clergy members (or other professional ministers) almost always directly supervise and participate in their congregation's confirmation programs (97% of all programs). In 1/4 of all programs, clergy members lead with no other adult involvement.

# CHARACTERISTICS OF confirmation class

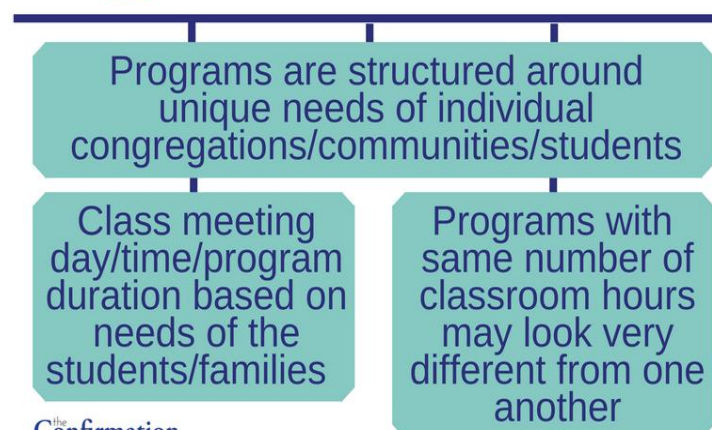
## 3 Settings resemble a school classroom model



## 4 Classes are discussion-based

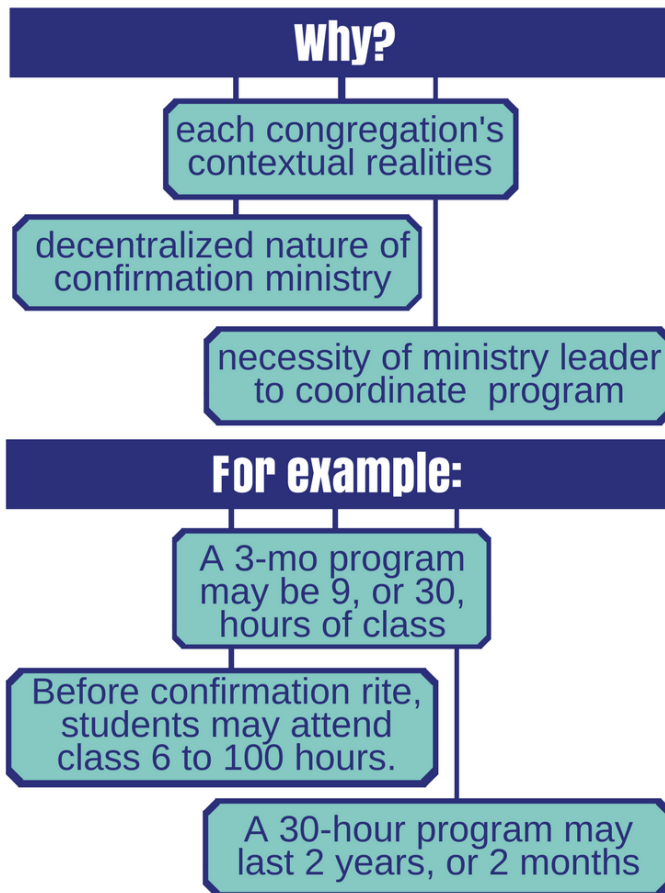


## 5 Classes are contextual

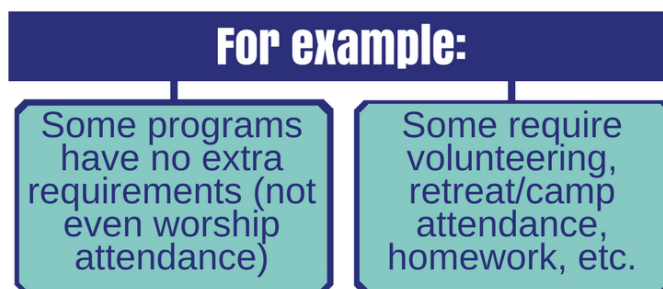


## CHARACTERISTICS OF confirmation class

### 6 No standard for classroom hours--lots of variability!



### 7 out-of-classroom learning expectations also vary



### 8 Inconsistency on enforcement of requirements

