

3. Changes and Trends in Church Commitment after Confirmation

KATI TERVO-NIEMELÄ, THOMAS SCHLAG AND MURIEL KOCH

3.1 Introduction

Weakening attachment to religious institutions has been regarded as one of the key challenges for the traditional churches and organisations. Especially Protestant Christianity has been increasingly losing its position in the personal lives of people in Europe. It is visible in declining membership figures and declining participation rates in many countries, but has not necessarily meant decline in believing in general. Davie refers to this phenomenon as »believing without belonging« (Davie 1994; 2000). On the other hand, the relationship to religion especially in the Nordic countries has often been referred to as »belonging without believing« or »believing in belonging« (see, e.g., Riis 1994; Bäckström 1993), which refers to an attitude where people find it important to belong to their national Churches even if they do not believe in its teachings or participate in its services. However, recent studies are highly questioning these notions among the young generation: belonging without believing is increasingly criticised by the young generation (see Niemelä 2015).

Out of the countries in our study, the church membership rates have been declining especially in the Lutheran Churches in the Nordic countries and even more in former East Germany. During the 21st century, the church membership rates have declined from 2000 until the end of 2015 the most in Sweden (from 83 % to 63 %). In the other Nordic countries, the decline has been slightly more moderate, but still faster than ever before: in Finland from 85 % to 73 %, in Iceland from 89 % to 72 %, in Norway from 86 % to 73 % and in Denmark from 85 % to 77 %. Germany has a comparable decline: the membership rate in the EKD has declined from 33 % in 2000 to 27 % in 2015; the same applies to Switzerland (33 % in 2000, 26 % in 2013). Many studies indicate that especially the younger generation is increasingly likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. They no longer belong only because they have been raised to belong, but increasingly demand personal meaningfulness in order to stay members (Niemelä 2015; Mikkola et al. 2006). With these attitudes, young adults represent a challenge for churches and religious organisations. This is visible in high church drop-out rates among this age-group in some of the countries; for example, in Finland more than one fourth of the young adults are leaving the Church between the age of 18 and 30 (see Niemelä 2015).

In the previous study on youth and confirmation work, when analysing young people in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time, the results

showed that the attachment to or identification with the Church differs notably between the countries and Churches studied. The attachment is strongest in contexts where the Church is in a minority position and lowest in countries where church membership rates are high but have recently been clearly declining. Furthermore, the results show that in most countries confirmation work strengthens confirmands' commitment to church membership, but when it comes to confirmands' willingness to have their future children baptised, confirmation time does not seem to have any influence or if it does, the share of those planning to have their children baptised tends to decline during confirmation time. The results also showed that parents' religiosity and the presence of religion at home during childhood and youth are most influential in determining the confirmands' attitude towards church membership, even at the end of confirmation time. However, how the confirmation time was perceived, was also of influence: it is important that young people get the feeling of being welcomed in the parish, the feeling that one's own questions are addressed and that they can experience fun (Niemelä et al. 2015).

Relationship and commitment to the Church can be analysed from various perspectives. Researchers have for a long time distinguished various dimensions to measure commitment to religion (see, e.g., Stark/Glock 1965). Typically, these dimensions include at least the belief aspect, the ritual aspect, the experience aspect and the community aspect (belonging) (see, e.g., McGuire 2002, 15-22; Stark/Bainbridge 1980; Finney 1978). These aspects are closely linked; for example, shared experiences and rituals create a sense of togetherness and belonging and therefore, create the sense of community. Beliefs on the other hand, give meaning to rituals (McGuire 2000, 17, 20-21).

In the previous book (Schweitzer et al. 2015a) presenting the results during confirmation time (t_1 and t_2), the question about a possible development of a (religious) identity during confirmation time was discussed and the identity patterns used were »belonging and believing«, »believing without belonging«, »belonging without believing«, »explicit life orientation« and »non-explicit life orientation«. In order to measure the frequency of each pattern among the confirmands, the items CE/KE09 (»I believe in God«) as representative for the personal faith in the sense of believing and the item CG/KG01 (»It is important for me to belong to the Church«) showing the attitude towards the institutional church in the sense of belonging were used. Already there, it was a finding that the most attractive pattern for confirmands was the »belonging and believing«, the least »belonging without believing«. During confirmation time this tendency even improved (from t_1 to t_2), but this perception was related to the question of possible development of (religious) identity. And of course the orientation during confirmation time might differ a lot from the one two years after confirmation (see Schlag et al. 2015).

In this chapter the relationship to the Church among the young people two years after confirmation and developmental trends in their commitment are analysed. The commitment to the Church is measured by concentrating on belief and belonging aspects of their commitment. The aim is to find different types of commitment among young people and to find out what kind of developmental trends can be observed among these different types. The aim is to find answers to the following questions:

1. What kind of types can be found in church commitment measured in terms of believing and belonging among young Protestants two years after confirmation? How are these types represented in different countries and church contexts?
2. How has the church commitment changed from the confirmation time among young people with a different relation to »believing and belonging« two years after confirmation?

To get a broader understanding of the commitment to the Church two years after confirmation and to see what kind of developmental patterns have been typical for young people with different kinds of commitment, the young people were classified into different groups by cluster analysis based on their belief and belonging. The aim was to categorise the young people into different groups based on their commitment to the Church two years after confirmation and to see what kind of developmental patterns there had been earlier in their life. The other option would have been to categorise the young people in the beginning of confirmation time and then see where different types of commitment lead to during the coming years. However, here the focus is on their commitment two years after confirmation and the aim is to see what was before and what kind of developmental patterns can be distinguished among each of the types from earlier in their life.

The analysis is performed by using k-means clustering, which aims to partition respondents into different clusters (church commitment types) in which each respondent belongs to the cluster with the nearest mean, serving as a prototype of the cluster – in this case the prototype of different church commitment types. The advantage of a cluster analysis is that it allows to analyse commitment from multiple perspectives compared to just looking at it based on single items. Another important advantage of a cluster analysis is that it does not have any assumptions of potential groups in advance, but creates them mathematically based on which groups emerge most distinctively among the young people.

After various trials, the following three items were used in categorisation: item QE09 »I believe in God«, representing believing, QG01 »It is important

for me to belong to the Church« and QG11 »How often do you attend church services?« representing belonging in an imaginary level and in a practical level. It is important to point out that »belonging« here does not refer to the official membership in the church – almost all of the young people studied here are registered members of a church – but it refers here to their sense of belonging and actual attending church.

After various trials the four cluster solution transpired to be the clearest and most useful.

3.2 Four Types of Church Commitment

The following four groups were distinguished among the young people:

1. *Believing and belonging*: The biggest group consists of young people with both strong belief and strong sense of belonging. They tend to believe, regard membership as important and attend church services regularly or occasionally. Almost one third (30%) of the young people belong to this group.
2. *Believing but not belonging*: The second group consists of young people with strong belief, but a low sense of belonging both on imaginary level and on practical level. They do believe, but do not regard membership as important, and attend only seldom if ever. Of all young people 21% belong to this group.
3. *Moderate belief, moderate belonging*: The third group consists of young people with some belief and some sense of belonging and who occasionally attend services. One fourth (25%) of young people belong to this group.
4. *Distanced*: The fourth group consists of young people who do not believe nor have a sense of belonging and do not participate. Of the young people, one fourth (24%) belong to this group.

Table 13 presents the standardised group centroids among each of four groups which helps to make the differences between the four groups easier to follow. The original grouping variables (QE09, QE01 and QG11) are standardised when the mean value of each item is changed into 0 and standard deviation into 1. Zero-level means that the group centroid of a group is on an average level among the young people and values over zero mean that group centroids are above the average and values below zero that they are lower than average.

The figure reveals clearly that the group centroids of the group »believing and belonging« are all clearly above the average while all the group centroids of the group »distanced« are clearly below the average. When it comes to believing in God, the group centroid of the group »believing but not belonging« is

Table 13: Four types of church commitment among young people two years after confirmation (t_3 , 2015). Cluster centers (non-weighted data used for classifying) (mean values; see the scale in the table for each variable)

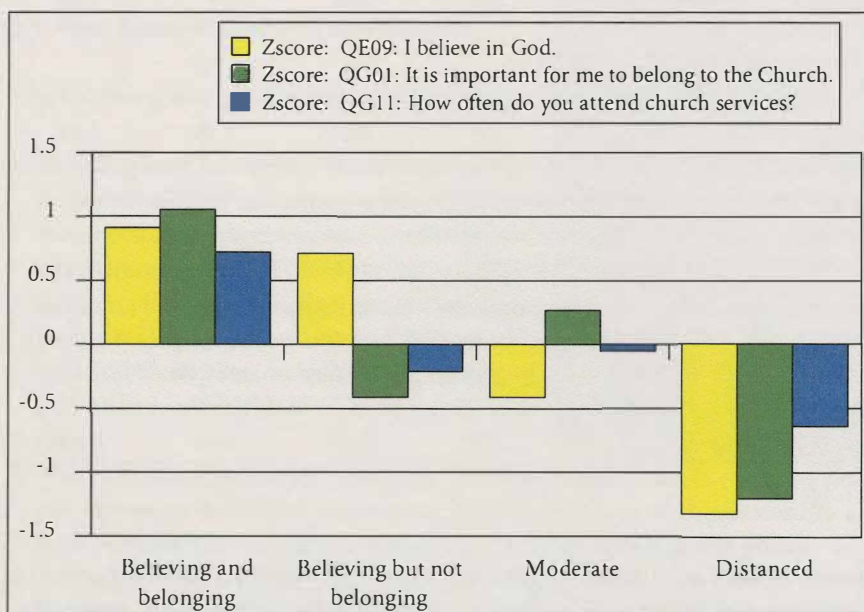
	1: Believing and belonging	2: Believing but not belonging	3: Moderate	4: Distanced
QE09: I believe in God. (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable)	6.71	6.28	3.99	2.15
QG01: It is important for me to belong to the Church. (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable)	5.96	3.29	4.47	1.82
QG11: How often do you attend church services? (1 = never, 5 = [almost] every week)	3.29	2.03	2.15	1.50
N = 3087	971	717	665	734
	Strong belief, strong belonging	Strong belief, weak belonging	Fairly strong belonging, moderate belief	Distanced
Size of the group	30%	21%	25%	24%

N = 3087.

almost as high as among those »believing and belonging«, but their sense of belonging and actual service attendance is below the average. The group centroids of the »moderate« group are closest to the average on all three measures; however, the group centroid of believing in God is slightly below the average and the group centroid of the importance of membership is slightly above the average which means that some of the respondents belonging to this group also represent an attitude of »belonging without believing«, or more precisely and more often »belonging more than believing«. Such an attitude, i.e., that a young person has a strong sense of belonging without believing is rare among the young people two years after confirmation as well as in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time (see Schlag et al. 2015). Two years after confirmation only 2.5% of the adolescents did not believe in God (answered 1-3), but still regarded membership as important (answered 5-7). The share of young people not believing but with both a strong sense of belonging and active practising is even lower – less than 1%. This implies that the group who belongs

(both on an imaginary and on a practical level) but does not believe is very small and therefore it does not make sense to analyse it as a separate group. This means that if the concept »belonging« is understood as including more than just formal membership and the sense of belonging and if actual linkage to the Church (i. e., attending) is taken into account as in the present analysis, the traditional notion of »belonging without believing« does not get much support from the data.

Figure 8: Four types of church commitment and their standardised group centroids (t_3 , 2015)

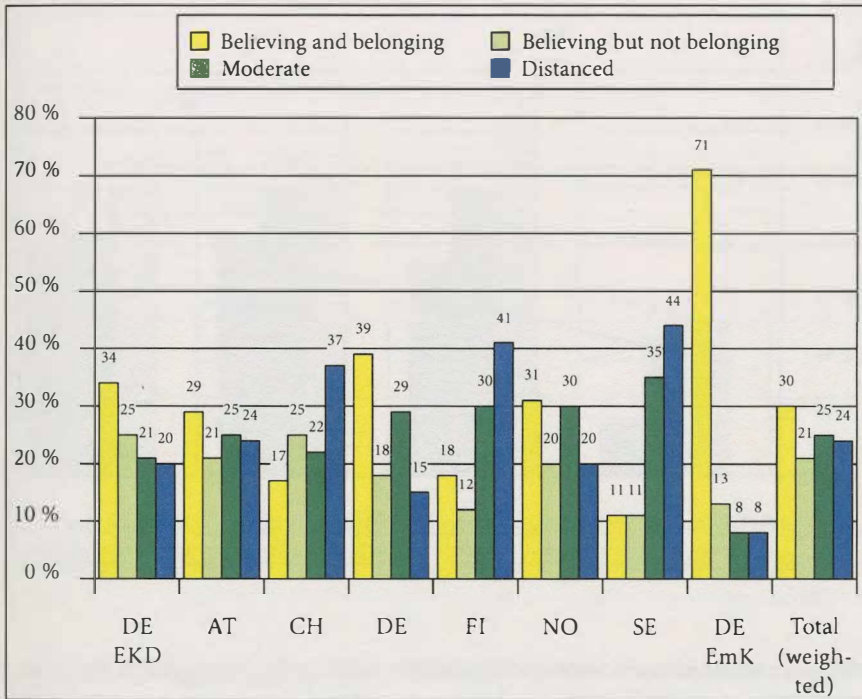


N = 3087; standardised means: a value below 0 means that the value is below the average and values above 0 mean that they are above the average.

The four groups were very differently represented in different countries and church contexts. The share of those belonging to the group »believing and belonging« was especially high among German Methodist youth (71 %), but very low among the Swedish adolescents (11 %). The share of those »believing but not belonging« was not high in any of the contexts, but it was notably low in Finland and Sweden as well as among German Methodists (11-13 %). The attitude with »moderate belief, moderate belonging« was more typical among young people in the Nordic countries than in the German-speaking countries. The share of »distanced« young people was especially high in Sweden (44 %),

Finland (41%) and Switzerland (37%), and low among German Methodist (8%), Danish (15%) and German EKD (20%) youth.

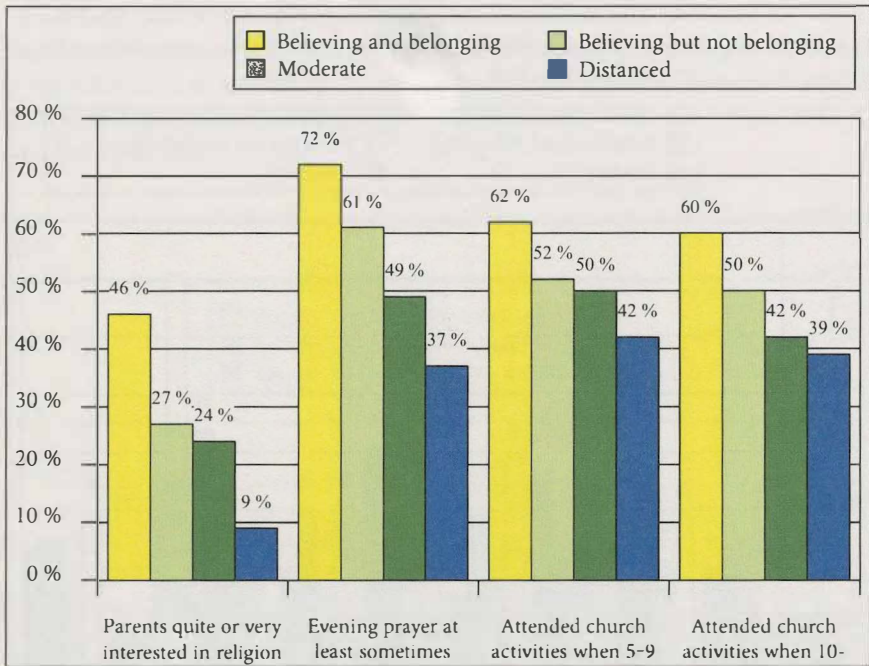
Figure 9: Four types of church commitment among young people two years after confirmation (t₃, 2015) in different countries (%)



N = 3087; (DE EKD = 1840; AT = 75; CH = 624; DE = 80; FI = 74; NO = 111; SE = 103; DE EmK = 180)

The »distanced« young people are slightly more likely to be boys, while those »believing and belonging« are slightly more likely to be girls. Young people belonging to that group also tend to have slightly more books at home than the other groups. However, both the gender differences and differences in the book-question are not very clear. Regarding religious upbringing in childhood and at home, there are clearer differences that follow the basic assumptions: those »believing and belonging« have attended church activities most often in their childhood, while those »distanced« have attended them least often (see Figure 10). Also the evening prayer has been more common among those »believing and belonging«. 40% had an evening prayer every night, while only 17% of those who were classified as »distanced« two years after confirmation time.

Figure 10: Parents' religious interest, childhood religious attendance and evening prayer among the four groups of church commitment (%) (weighted)



N = 3087.

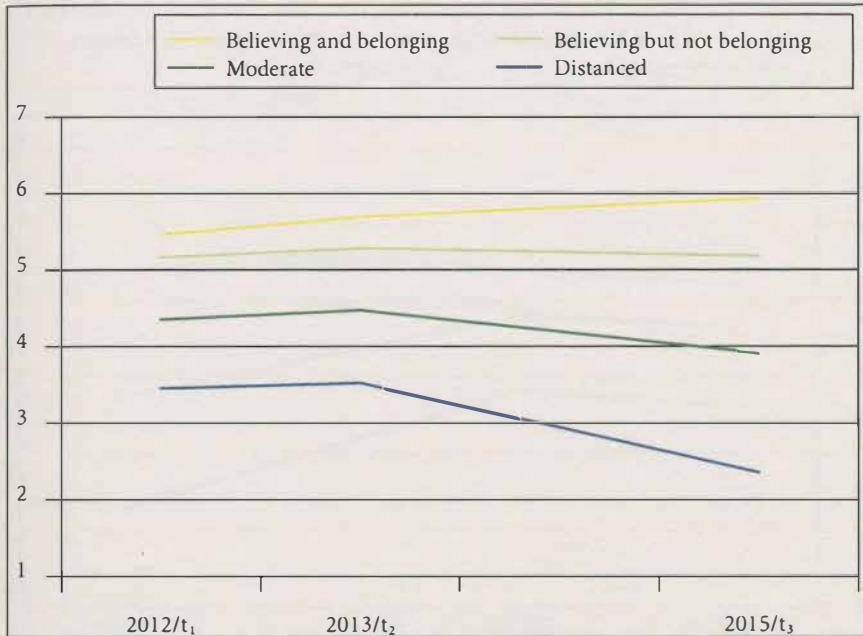
When it comes to confirmation satisfaction among the four groups, there are some differences: 87% of those »believing and belonging« were satisfied with their confirmation time (answered 5-7 on a scale 1-7), while it was 78% with the »distanced«. The two other groups were in between.

3.3 Developmental Trends in Church Commitment

The next aim is to find out what kind of developmental trends are found among these four groups of commitment when comparing their answers in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time and two years later.

When comparing the changes in commitment among these four groups in the beginning of confirmation time, in the end of confirmation time and two years later by comparing the mean values at these three measuring points interesting differences and continuities are found. Those who belong to the »believing and belonging« group have typically been strengthened both in their belief

Figure 11: Average Christian belief (index CE/KE/QE1) among the four groups of belonging and believing: t_1 (2012), t_2 (2013), t_3 (2015) [weighted]



N = 2907; mean values on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable)

and sense of belonging after confirmation. They were also typically strengthened in them during confirmation time.

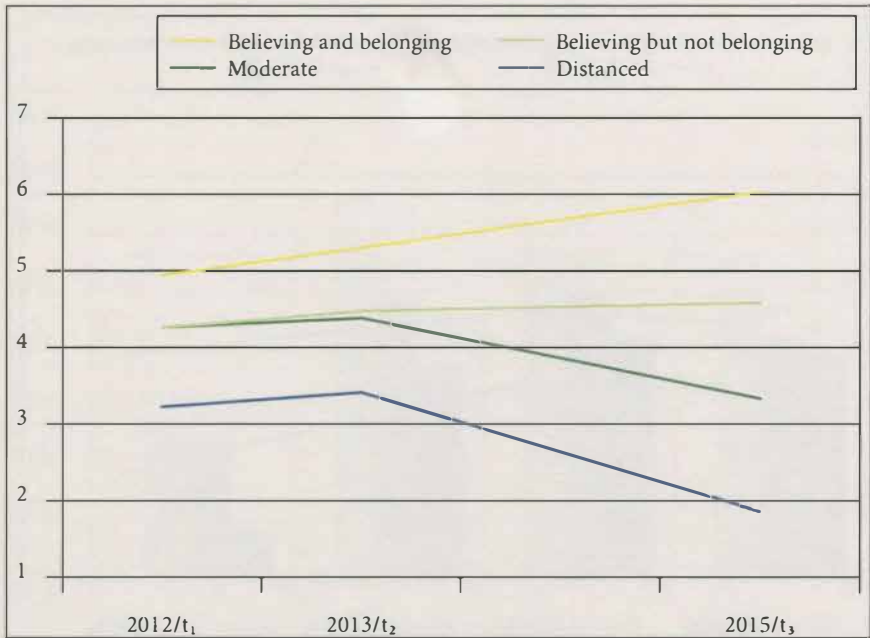
The group with »believing but not belonging« has typically neither changed their attitudes towards membership nor experienced changes in their belief during confirmation time or after it.

The moderate group has typically been strengthened slightly both in their belief and belonging during confirmation time, but the attitudes have become lower after confirmation to a level that is below the starting point.

The attitudes of the »distanced« group towards both belonging and believing were already typically fairly low in the beginning of confirmation time. After confirmation time both believing and especially the sense of belonging has become notably lower among these young people.

Regarding young people's view whether the Church does a lot of good things for people, there are only small differences between the groups both in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time as well as two years later. These high figures after confirmation time as well as the relatively stable figures in most countries show that the Church is here seen as an important societal and

Figure 12: Average importance of church membership (CG/KG/QG01) among the four groups of belonging and believing: t_1 (2012), t_2 (2013), t_3 (2015) [weighted]

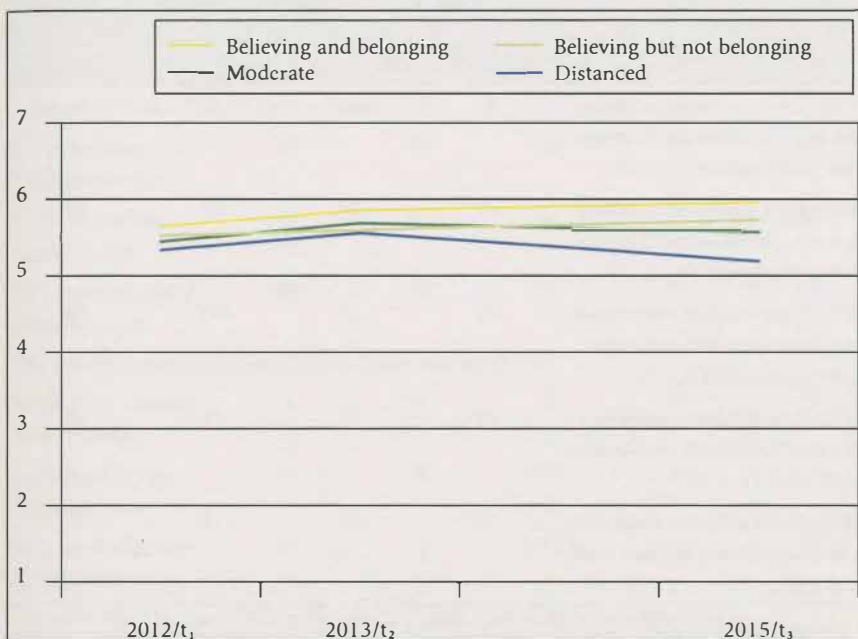


N = 2907; mean values on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

institutional force even when young people have distanced themselves from it on a more personal level.

Changes in both believing and belonging reveal a similar trend: the differences between the groups are strengthened after confirmation. However, it is interesting to see that the same does not apply to a more general perception of the church; that tends to remain the same among all four groups. On the other hand, especially the differences in the importance of church membership have grown: especially the attitudes of those »believing and belonging« have become increasingly different from the attitudes of those who are »distanced«. This hints at the importance of community for creating a sense of belonging; those who have been attending have been strengthened in their sense of belonging while those not attending have been increasingly losing that sense of belonging. Those »believing and belonging« have also often been active as volunteers in the church after confirmation. Almost half of those »believing and belonging« (46%) are or have been active as a volunteer in church or Christian youth work, the share of volunteers equals the share of those planning to attend church youth work after confirmation (47%). Among the other three groups, the share

Figure 13: Average responses to »The Church does a lot of good things for the people« (CG/KG/QG05) among the four groups of belonging and believing: t_1 (2012), t_2 (2013), t_3 (2015) [weighted]



N = 2830; mean values on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

is notably lower (13-20%). Also the interest in taking part in a Christian youth group was already notably higher among those »believing and belonging« in the beginning of confirmation time (41%) than among the other groups (8-19%). In all groups the share of those interested in attending a youth group increased about the same amount during confirmation time (+6-7 percent points). However, it is noteworthy that among all the other groups except those »believing and belonging« about half of those who started a voluntary activity did not continue it any longer when they answered the questionnaire two years after confirmation. Among those »believing and belonging«, only one fourth of those who started a voluntary activity no longer continue it.

Table 15 shows the percentage of those who believe and do not believe in God and the share of those who regard church membership as important in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time, and two years after it. It shows that the share of those who believe in God has increased after confirmation both among those »believing and belonging« and »believing but not belonging«, while the importance of church membership has increased only among those »believing and belonging«. At the same time, non-believing as

Table 14: Interest in church youth work before and after confirmation and voluntary activity after confirmation among the four groups of believing and belonging (%)

	1: Believing and belonging	2: Believing but not belonging	3: Moderate	4: Distanced
CG08: I am interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation (t ₁) (5-7)	41	18	19	8
KG08: I am interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation (t ₂) (5-7)	47	24	25	15
KP01: I can imagine working in the Church as a volunteer after confirmation time (t ₂) (5-7)	49	31	40	28
QP51: Is or has been active as a volunteer in Church or Christian youth work (1 or 3)	43	18	21	16
QP51: Is still active as a volunteer in the Church or Christian youth work (1)	33	10	13	8

N = 2857-2868; CG08/KG 08/KP01: the share of those with a positive response (indicated in the table) either on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable) or on a nominal scale 1 to 3 (1 = yes, 2 = no, 3 = not anymore).

well as non-belonging has been increasing strongly among the »distanced«. In the end of confirmation time, 43 % of them did not believe in God, but two years later the share was 85 %. In the beginning and in the end of confirmation time, the sense of belonging was already low among this group, only 21-23 % felt that it is important to belong to the church, in the end of confirmation time the share was 0 %. A similar trend was visible in a Finnish 10-year-longitudinal study which followed the confirmands from their confirmation time until they were 25 years old. Non-believing had increased strongly among a certain group of young people and these were strongly distancing from both belief and belonging after confirmation time. They accounted to about one fourth of the confirmands; these young people also very often ended up resigning from church membership (Niemelä 2015).

When looking at the change in belief on an individual level, the change can be tracked by comparing the responses from the beginning of confirmation time until the end of it, by comparing the responses from the beginning of confirmation time until two years after, and by comparing responses from the

Table 15: Belief in God and importance of church membership: t₁ (2012), t₂ (2013), t₃ (2015) [weighted %]

	1. Believing and belonging	2. Believing but not belonging	3. Moderate	4. Distanced	5. Total
Believed in God (CE/KE/QE09: answered 5-7)					
In the beginning of confirmation time	89	80	58	35	66
In the end of confirmation time	89	87	61	34	68
Two years after confirmation time	100	100	35	0	60
Did not believe in God (God CE/KE/QE09: answered 1-3)					
In the beginning of confirmation	6	8	20	43	19
In the end of confirmation time	4	4	20	41	17
Two years after confirmation time	0	0	25	85	27
It is important for me to belong to the Church (CG/KG/QG01: answered 5-7)					
In the beginning of confirmation time	68	45	43	21	46
In the end of confirmation time	76	48	46	23	50
Two years after confirmation	98	16	48	0	44

N = 2907; scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

end of confirmation time until two years after. All of these three different measuring points offer interesting results.

First of all, when looking at the developmental trends more clearly and also on an individual level, it becomes clear that there are also diverse patterns within each group and diverse patterns at each measuring point. In each group there is development both towards a stronger sense of belonging and belief as well as weakening of them.

The comparison of the change patterns reveals more of the phenomenon that was noticed above when comparing the mean values and percentages at each of the three measuring points: after confirmation the four groups are increasingly different from each other. The »distanced« group as well as the

Table 16: Change in belief in God during confirmation time and from the beginning and from the end of confirmation time until two years after among the four groups of commitment (%)

	1. Believing and belonging	2. Believing but not belonging	3. Moderate	4. Distanced	Total
Change in belief in God from beginning of confirmation time until two years later (a change from CE09 to QE09)					
Positive (> 1)	33	37	22	9	25
No change	55	42	18	22	35
Negative change (< -1)	12	21	60	69	39
Change in belief in God from the end of confirmation time until two years later (a change from KE09 to QE09)					
Positive (> 1)	31	32	20	7	23
No change	58	42	19	22	36
Negative change (< -1)	12	26	61	71	41
Change in belief in God during confirmation time (a change from CE09 to KE09)					
Positive (> 1)	23	30	29	33	28
No change	58	45	39	36	45
Negative change (< -1)	19	24	31	32	26

N = 2907; a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

»moderate« group are the ones often experiencing negative development in relation to both belief and to the sense of belonging.

The »believing and belonging« group is the one which has most often remained the same concerning belief both during confirmation time and after it. If one compares the responses in the beginning of confirmation time and two years after confirmation time, more than half (55%) of those »believing and belonging« have responded similarly, whether they believe in God or not, one third (33%) has responded as believing »more« and only 12% as believing »less«. Of those who were classified as »moderate« or »distanced«, as many as 60% and 69% responded as believing »less« two years after confirmation than in the beginning of it. This means that the slight positive development which had been taking place among these groups during confirmation time had clearly faded away after confirmation time.

Table 17: Change in the importance of church membership during confirmation time and from the beginning and from the end of confirmation time until two years after among the four groups of commitment (%)

	1. Believing and belonging	2. Believing but not belonging	3. Moderate	4. Distanced	Total
Change in the importance of church membership from the beginning of confirmation time until two years later (a change from CG01 to QG01)					
Positive (> 1)	61	18	42	11	35
No change	25	22	25	22	24
Negative change (< -1)	14	60	34	68	42
Change in the importance of church membership from the end of confirmation time until two years later (a change from KG01 to QG01)					
Positive (> 1)	49	13	37	9	29
No change	33	27	25	18	26
Negative change (< -1)	18	60	39	73	45
Change in the importance of church membership during confirmation time (a change from CG01 to KG01)					
Positive (> 1)	41	38	40	37	39
No change	35	30	32	31	32
Negative change (< -1)	24	33	29	32	29

N = 2907; a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

Changes on an individual level concerning the importance of church membership after confirmation show very clear patterns within the groups. Of those who belong to the group »believing and belonging«, as many as 61% had a more positive response to the question of the importance of church membership than in the beginning of confirmation time. At the same time, about two thirds of those »believing but not belonging« (60%) and of those »distanced« (68%) had a more negative response two years after confirmation than in the beginning of confirmation time. This means that these two groups have strongly been distancing themselves from the Church as an institution, the one still finding faith important at a personal level, the other very distant from faith and the Church.

3.4 Conclusion

Examining these results, it is obvious that the development after confirmation may take very different patterns among the young people. While some of them tend to distance themselves from the Church and its beliefs, some tend to become more attached to the Church after confirmation. Whereas the attitudes in the end of confirmation time are mostly positive throughout the different groups, there is clearly a growing distance to the Church after confirmation; this is very visible both in belief and in the attachment to church membership, while the general attitude towards the Church seems to remain quite stable.

By using cluster analysis, the young people were categorised into four groups based on their commitment to the Church two years after confirmation. These groups were named: 1) believing and belonging (30%), 2) believing but not belonging (21%), 3) moderate believers (25%) and 4) distanced (24%). There were clear differences among the youth in different countries: young people believing and belonging were most common in Churches in a minority position while the distanced youth were most common in some of the Nordic countries and in Switzerland.

Comparing the development in church relation and beliefs, the results show interesting differences between the four groups. The »distanced« and the »moderate« young people tend to experience a negative development in relation to both belief and the sense of belonging after confirmation while the young people with both a high sense of belonging and believing two years after confirmation tend to be strengthened in their faith and belonging after confirmation time. The developmental patterns seem to be strongly dependent on the young people's experiences with church and religion before and after their confirmation time. Among those »believing and belonging«, almost half had been active as volunteers in the Church while among all other groups the share of volunteers is notably lower. The same applies to home religious upbringing.

The results in general show that the very often given statement that the younger generation is not interested in faith, religion or the Church at all definitely has to be differentiated. Many of the young people are strongly committed to the Church both in their beliefs and sense of belonging. The results show that it is obvious that a core factor of young people's willingness to stay a member of the Church, not to mention their willingness to engage as volunteers, is highly dependent on positive personal experiences with religion and the Church, be it in the sense of their religious upbringing in the family, be it of early contacts with the Church, with its central messages as well as the ritual practice.