

IV. Conclusions

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1. Main Results of the Longitudinal Study

1.1 Introduction

This part of the book offers a brief overview of the main results of the present study. The focus is on how adolescents responded two years after their confirmation. Following the main emphasis of this study, the approach is longitudinal. The adolescents' responses can be traced over three years because all of the respondents did not only complete one questionnaire but three questionnaires – at the beginning (t_1) and at the end of confirmation time (t_2) as well as two years after confirmation (t_3). Consequently, developmental tendencies can be identified which is a special characteristic of the present study. Moreover, such tendencies can be observed at a group level but also at an individual level. The data used in the study allow for following each individual adolescent over time. This truly longitudinal approach makes the present study an innovative contribution to research on youth and especially to research on religion in adolescence. While a comparable study has become available from the United States (Smith 2005 and 2009), the present study is the first of its kind in Europe.

The samples used in t_1 and in t_2 were representative for the confirmands in the participating countries and Churches – Germany (Protestant Church in Germany/EKD), Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, plus the Methodist Church in Germany (EmK) which is a Church with a different structure (a so-called Free Church, cf. p. 204 ff.; the Churches are named here in the order used in this book). The responses in t_3 were not representative, reflecting the fact that the data had to be collected on an individual basis because, after confirmation, there is no more group-setting in which questionnaires can be distributed. The value of the t_3 -data lies in their truly longitudinal character. The nature of the t_3 -data also implies that the sample is international but that comparisons between the countries are not possible or only to a very limited degree. However, the international scope of the sample strengthens the empirical basis of the study and gives additional support to longitudinal observations. Readers should keep this in mind by not looking for comparisons between the different Churches but for insights into the longitudinal developments of religion in adolescence. It is in this respect that new understandings can be gained that lead beyond prior research.

It should also be emphasised from the beginning that the longitudinal approach does not only fulfil longstanding social science demands for valid data on religious change but that it also is in line with practical educational aims, needs and interests. Most naturally, workers in the field of education want to make a difference, not only in the present – which remains important – but also for the future. Consequently, possible effects of educational programs should not disappear right after the end of a program. For the first time, the present study allows for questions referring to long-term effects of confirmation time. Even more, it offers a number of important insights into the question of how the efficacy of confirmation work can be improved. In other words, the present study holds the double promise of progress in a scientific sense and of new impulses for the practice of confirmation work, both due to the longitudinal approach.

The first section of this chapter which is on confirmation day is a certain exception to this general approach. The t_3 -study two years after confirmation was the first opportunity to receive responses from young people who were confirmed when they completed the questionnaires. Respective responses from the confirmands in t_1 and t_2 could only express expectations in this respect but were not based on actual experiences.

1.2 Confirmation Day

The results show that confirmation day is of very high importance for many confirmands. This is in line with general expectations, among others, of the Churches. In all the participating countries, the celebration on the day of confirmation is not only viewed as an important public cultural tradition but as the central ritual and symbolic peak of the whole confirmation time. The majority of the confirmands consider this day as an important event and relevant step in their biography, both for themselves as well as for their families, which is why it is well remembered for a very long time.

Of course, the adolescents appreciate the gifts and presents that are given to them on this occasion but they also highly value being the center of attention. Therefore the social or relational aspect characteristic of this day, that is, the celebration with their family is very important. At the same time, the special blessing received on the day of confirmation is also often mentioned by the young people as being very valuable. The results indicate a strong correlation between the religious family upbringing and the individual adolescents' appreciation of confirmation day. Respondents who consider their parents to be religious are more likely to experience confirmation day as a very important event in their life. Vice versa, for the ones who do not consider their parents

as religious, the material aspects of confirmation day have remained more important two years later. Confirmands with a strong religious background appreciate the social aspects of the confirmation celebration somewhat more than those without such a background.

Confirmation day can be considered a symbolic expression of the social relations between the confirmand, his or her family and other relatives, and his or her friends. Thus, while confirmation day can be understood as a social rite, its potential lies in the spiritual dimension as well. The social importance and the religious meaning go hand in hand, giving those who are familiar with religious rituals a more spiritual and stronger experience on the day of confirmation and also of confirmation time as a whole. There is also a close link between the experiences of the whole confirmation time and the day of confirmation. Especially the spiritual experiences connected to the day of confirmation validate and reinforce the experience of confirmation time, which is perceived more favorably by those with a strong appreciation of the ritual of confirmation day itself. Even more, if the rite of confirmation day is experienced as something positive, this experience also leads to an increased formative effect over time. A positive confirmation day experience boosts whatever good experiences confirmation time brought with it. In other words, confirmation day and the worship service celebrated on this day are obviously of high relevance for the long-term effects of the efforts made by the workers during confirmation time.

Consequently, confirmation day itself holds an enormous chance to bring together the pedagogical, theological and liturgical aspects implied by the deeper meaning of confirmation. Therefore, it is quite worthwhile for the ministers, in preparing the confirmation day, to establish a strong connection between the sermon, songs and prayers and the contents that were discussed and experienced during confirmation time but also to integrate the confirmands and their families in the preparation of the service and its different parts.

1.3 Beliefs

The question of the religious orientations and the faith of adolescents is of general interest not only for the Churches but also for society at large. Many studies on youth include this question, at least to some degree. In the case of studies from the social sciences or from general education, however, such studies often make do with a very limited number of items which do not allow for more detailed results. This limitation also explains why these studies are of limited value for practical purposes, most of all in the field of religious education where detailed insights are needed, for example, for designing effective programs.

The present study goes beyond earlier research in several respects. First of all, its longitudinal design which included three questionnaires over three years allows for insights into the dynamics of faith and religion in adolescence. The adolescents' religion obviously is not static but there are important changes that can be identified by following them over time. Moreover, since the present study includes the possibility of analysing the results on an individual level – or, in other words, to follow each individual adolescent over three years – the individual dynamics of religious development in adolescence could be captured. Finally, the study included a whole series of items relating to specific religious attitudes as well as to the church and to the Christian faith in general. Through this, the basis for the respective results is much broader than in earlier research and it leads to interpretations which are more differentiated concerning different aspects of faith and religion. As the results clearly show, there are important differences in relationship, for example, to faith in God in general on the one hand, and faith in God the creator on the other. Or, to mention another result, even if adolescents become more skeptical vis-à-vis certain contents of the Christian faith, they may still appreciate this faith in general. As long as one does not ask the adolescents in a differentiated manner about their faith, the results will not do justice to its complex reality.

Based on existing studies from the sociology and psychology of religion the general expectation will be that, with increasing age, adolescents become less religious and that the influences of childhood religious socialisation will become weaker or disappear altogether. The results of the present study show that there is a clear increase of the adolescents' affirmation of most religion-related items during confirmation time. Confirmation work can obviously strengthen the faith of the participating adolescents. After confirmation, however, the values decrease again, sometimes even below the level at the beginning of confirmation time. Yet this is not the case with all belief items. Especially the belief in a life after death received more agreement two years after confirmation than either in the beginning of confirmation time or at the end of confirmation time. This could mean that existential questions relating to this belief gain additional weight with age – an observation that could be helpful in designing educational programs offered by the Churches for older adolescents.

The data also show that there is a clear difference between the group level and the individual level. Many of the adolescents individually moved in directions that were different from the general tendencies. Moreover, their movements included some back-and-forth between the categories of the answers. This indicates that religious development in adolescence does not necessarily follow one and the same predefined pattern with all individuals. Influences, among others from religious education, can therefore make a difference.

It is also of interest to consider different items related to the adolescents'

faith. Belief in God the creator is one of the items which received much less affirmation two years after confirmation than at the time of confirmation. With a decrease of 11 percent points between the end of confirmation time and two years after confirmation, it is actually the item with the strongest decline. In the total sample, only 34 % of the adolescents agree to this belief two years after confirmation.

An example for items with increases and decreases over time is the conviction that »faith in God helps me in difficult situations«. In the beginning of confirmation time, 43 % of the confirmands agreed to this, at the end of confirmation time the number was up to 51 %, two years after confirmation it was down to 44 %.

On the whole, the results confirm the general assumption of a decline of the adolescents' religiosity over the years. Yet they also show that this decline is not linear with the 13 to 16 or 17 year old Protestants. The faith-related items clearly receive more assent at the end of confirmation time than in the beginning. It is also evident that the respective values decline after confirmation, at least in most cases. This result raises important questions about the long-term effects of confirmation work. Many of the positive effects of confirmation work do not last very long. It must also be emphasised, however, that the data from the present study do not allow for evaluating the long-term effects of confirmation work in comparison to adolescents who do not participate in confirmation work. The study only included the group of adolescents who actually participated in confirmation work – which, at least in some of the countries, comprised almost all of the Protestants at the respective age or, in countries with very high membership rates for the Protestant Church – even most of the whole population. It would be an interesting task for future research to compare this group with other adolescents. In any case, given the results from the study, the question what comes after confirmation is of core importance. Moreover, the results indicate that positive or negative experiences during confirmation time have an effect on the adolescents' attitudes towards the church after confirmation. In this respect, the present study is in line with earlier research: confirmation work does matter (cf. Niemelä 2008).

The adolescents' views of the church and also of the Christian faith in general remain very positive even two years after confirmation. More than two thirds of the adolescents express a positive attitude towards the church and the Christian faith in general two years after confirmation. The adolescents distinguish between the church and the Christian faith. In many cases, the view of the Christian faith is more positive than the view of the church but also the opposite occurs, i. e., that the church is valued more than the faith.

Concerning influences from childhood religious socialisation most results of the present study do not confirm the assumption that such influences become

weaker or disappear altogether during adolescence. In many respects, the opposite seems to be the case. The religious influence of the parents remains a main influence in the lives of the adolescents. While this result may be disappointing to some of the workers, it certainly is encouraging for the parents. Moreover, it should be understood as a reason for the Churches to develop programs for supporting parents in respect to nurturing their children religiously.

1.4 Relationship to the Church

Concerning commitment to the Church after confirmation and in later adolescence, it is obvious that the adolescents' development can follow different patterns. In the present study, using cluster analysis, the respondents were categorised into four different groups based on their commitment to the Church two years after confirmation. This analytical approach allows for analysing commitment to the Church from multiple perspectives, instead of just using single items. Another advantage of cluster analysis is that it does not start out with assumptions of potential groups but identifies them mathematically based on which groups emerge most distinctively from the analysis of the data.

The model with four groups turned out to be the clearest. The results show that the largest group among the young people in the study comprised those adolescents who had both a strong belief and a strong sense of belonging (»believing and belonging«, 30%). However, there were notable differences between the countries: young people of the first group were most common in minority Churches (for example, the Methodist Church in Germany) and less common in the Nordic countries, and the least common in Sweden. The other three groups into which the young people in the study could be categorised, were of almost equal size. One fourth of the young people had a moderate level of belief and sense of belonging (»moderate believers«, 25%) and about one fourth had distanced themselves from the Church (24%). A slightly smaller group consists of those who believed but did not have a sense of belonging (21%). The group with moderate belief and belonging was most typical for the Nordic countries. However, the distanced group was also very prominent in two of the Nordic countries (Finland and Sweden) as well as in Switzerland.

Furthermore, the results show that there is both stability and change in opposite directions concerning commitment to the Church after confirmation. While some of the adolescents tend to distance themselves from the Church, others become more attached to the Church after confirmation. At the same time, some of the adolescents seem to remain constant in their attachment to the Church. This applies to all four commitment groups but there are also

differences between them. The »distanced« and the »moderate« adolescents most often developed negatively after confirmation in terms of both belief and the sense of belonging, while two years after confirmation, the adolescents with a high sense of belonging and believing had been strengthened in their faith and belonging. Active church contact with positive experiences and volunteering as well as prior church contacts seem to play a crucial role for these effects.

At the same time, the results show that the adolescents' views of the Church remain typically very stable during the two years after confirmation. This means that even if the more personal attitude (including faith and sense of belonging as well as practicing) changes after confirmation, the less personal, i. e., the more general attitude towards the Church tends to remain stable.

The different commitment styles typically found in different countries and Churches entail some clear expectations for the future of the Protestant Churches in these countries. It is obvious that the strongest decline has to be expected in the future for Churches with many distanced young people after confirmation. However, when comparing different countries and Churches (from whatever perspective), one also must take into account whether confirmation is a majority or minority behavior among the young members of the Church. In most of the Churches in the study, confirmation is a majority behavior. For example in Finland, almost 100 % of the young people who belong to the Church in that age group participate in confirmation work. In Sweden, however, only about half of the young church members take part in confirmation time. This implies that in Sweden, even if participation in confirmation time is limited to those adolescents who seem to be attached to the Church the most, the share of distanced young people is highest.

1.5 Volunteerism

A main emphasis of this study is on volunteerism. Both in the first and in the second study on confirmation work in Europe, volunteerism was identified as a key feature of confirmation work (cf. Pettersson/Simojoki 2010; Porkka et al. 2015). The findings suggest that confirmation work and volunteerism can reinforce each other.

On the one hand, volunteerism has become an indispensable part of successful confirmation work. In contrast to the traditional model of confirmation instruction, today's confirmation work is characterised by participatory and experience-oriented learning methods that heavily rely on voluntary engagement – as do the camps which can not be run as a one-man or one-woman show. Especially young volunteers are most likely important and highly valued identification figures for the confirmands.

On the other hand, the studies also show that confirmation work strengthens young people's motivation for becoming active as a volunteer. By giving confirmands opportunities to try out voluntary work, by discussing the benefits of volunteerism and by motivating the confirmands to volunteer in the Church after confirmation, confirmation work can make voluntary engagement accessible to the young people. In the previous studies on confirmation work in Europe, this contribution was interpreted in the wider context of education for civil society.

However, the earlier studies were limited to the experiences, developments and expectations during confirmation time itself. With the t_3 -data gathered two years after confirmation, it was possible for the first time to trace »pathways into volunteerism« over a time-span of three years. As pointed out in the introduction to this book (p. 12 ff.), the results gained by this longitudinal approach are not only of interest to researchers or practitioners in the field of confirmation work. The longitudinal approach and the focus on later adolescence add important insights to the existing research on volunteerism in general because this age group has most often been neglected in this research.

What are the main results of the present study regarding volunteerism? It is helpful to start with the distinction between the volunteers on the one hand and on the other hand, those adolescents who have never volunteered in church or Christian youth after confirmation or who have stopped being a volunteer. This question served as the central reference point of the present analysis. 17% of the respondents in t_3 were active as volunteers in the Church two years after confirmation. Almost every tenth had volunteered at some point but, for whatever reason, ceased to do so before t_3 . The other respondents – i. e., by far the majority – had never volunteered in church or Christian youth work after confirmation. In a longitudinal perspective, the t_3 -results indicate that not all chances for winning young people as volunteers were actually used. Two years earlier, at the end of their confirmation time, almost four out of ten had stated that they could imagine working in the Church as a volunteer after confirmation.

Against this backdrop, the present project's main research question related to volunteerism gains even more significance: why do some confirmands become volunteers after confirmation while others do not? In this study, different approaches were taken for finding answers to this question.

(1) Important factors could be discerned by comparing volunteers and non-volunteers. Some of the factors identified as influential are not related to confirmation work but point to differences in the social and personal context as well as in the religious and family background of the respondents. According to these findings, confirmands are more likely to become volunteers after confirmation if they:

- are female
- were brought up religiously
- have parents interested in religion
- have parents who are active as volunteers
- had been volunteering in several fields before confirmation time
- were intrinsically motivated in the beginning of confirmation time.

Again, the data reveal a pattern that is familiar from earlier research on the effects of confirmation work: »To them that hath shall be given« (Krupka et al. 2015). The respondents' willingness to volunteer is strongly shaped by their social and religious background. To put it negatively: the less familiar confirmands are with religion and volunteerism, the less likely they are to become active as volunteers after confirmation.

(2) Other factors refer to the (positive or negative) effects of experiences during confirmation time. Young people are more inclined to become volunteers after confirmation if they:

- felt welcome and accepted in the parish during confirmation time
- had the opportunity to try out voluntary work during confirmation time
- discussed the societal importance of volunteerism in confirmation time
- are satisfied with their confirmation time
- experienced camps and outings during confirmation time.

These findings include valuable insights for practitioners. If parishes want to motivate young people for volunteerism, they need to become active in this respect: by providing confirmands with the opportunity to try out voluntary work, by adapting their guidelines for confirmation work and, most importantly, by establishing a culture which appreciates the wishes, views and values of young people.

(3) Further insights were gained by using the more complex analytical tool of multi-level analysis. Here, the number of the confirmands' contacts with people who are active as volunteers turned out to be a particularly strong predictor. Again, the motivation to volunteer seems to be closely linked to the existence of a culture of volunteerism in the respective group or parish. According to the results of this study, such a culture is supported by:

- close interaction between volunteers and confirmands
- workers who are dedicated to encouraging voluntary commitment through example and encouragement
- the availability of groups and activities accessible for young people after confirmation.

(4) The respondents were also asked directly about their reasons for volunteering or not volunteering. For those who chose to volunteer, expectably, having fun plays a big role. But social, altruistic and, to a lesser extent, faith-related motives were important as well. Since almost three out of four respondents had not volunteered after their confirmation, their answers also were of special interest. Not surprisingly, lack of time is the reason for not volunteering mentioned most often. Others did not see why voluntary work should be important to them – a reason that was especially important for those who were not motivated to volunteer at the end of confirmation time. A particularly worrisome finding must also be reported here: for more than four out of ten of the non-volunteers the decision not to volunteer was influenced by the fact that no one ever asked them. Ideally, a culture of volunteerism should include as many interested young people as possible. Nobody with an interest to participate should have to feel excluded from voluntary engagement.

(5) The analysis also called attention to a group that is easily overlooked: the ones who were active as volunteers after their confirmation and then chose to quit. These short-time volunteers are more extrinsically motivated than the long-time volunteers and often come from a less religious background. Therefore, it was argued, they need special support and attention from the full-time workers which so far they do not seem to receive, at least not in all cases.

1.6 Confirmation Work as a Factor of Religious Socialisation

Traditionally, confirmation work has been an important part of catechesis in Protestant Churches. Its role in life-long religious learning and education was considered indispensable. The results of the present study show in various ways that confirmation time is indeed meaningful today as well. This applies to the individual level concerning, for example, young people's relation to faith and to their sense of belonging to the Church, and to a more general level, concerning knowledge and young people's view of the Church. However, confirmation time alone is not sufficient to secure effective religious socialisation.

The results of the study highlight the importance of plausibility structures in explaining young people's relation to religion and commitment to religion. The data show that the commitment to religion and faith as well as religious practice are mostly explained by the religiosity of the people around them. This applies not only at the micro-level (religiosity in one's own family) but also at the meso-level (religiosity at the peer group level) and the macro-level (religiosity in the society/in the wider church context in general). This means that religion is a social matter and is strongly linked to the community around an

individual. In many ways the results show that an individual's experiences with his or her parents and the core family are of crucial importance for the later relationship to religion but other people are also important. Religiosity of a young person is mostly supported in contexts where other young people, for example, in a confirmation group tend to be strongly committed to the church as well and where the general level of religiosity among the parents also is high. This supports the results of earlier studies by confirming the significance of parents' religiosity in explaining children's and adolescents' religiosity. Families have traditionally been significant contexts for religious socialisation and the transmission of religion from generation to generation. Religious behavior appears to carry across several generations. As shown in many earlier studies, parents' religiosity has significant effects on children's religiosity. All of these effects are corroborated by the present study as well.

At the same time, the results of this study also have new insights to offer. The multi-level analysis which refers not only to an individual level but also to a group level and the larger church level, shows that all these levels are important as such in explaining religious commitment. All three levels are more important in explaining young people's beliefs and sense of belonging than any other single factor that was measured in the present study. This means that it is not only the family which matters, but also the larger surroundings. This is an important result in explaining contemporary religious change. While recent studies still show a strong tendency for people's religious beliefs and practices formed within the family to persist from childhood into adulthood, they also suggest that these influences are weakening (e.g., Bengtson et al. 2013). The results of the present study also indicate that the effects of religious socialisation in the family are weaker if the religious upbringing is not supported by the larger surroundings. This means that in a social and cultural situation or atmosphere where a family is rather alone with its religious attitudes, the religious upbringing at home will most likely not carry into adulthood. Accordingly, when the general level of religiosity declines in a society, the rate of individual decline is likely to accelerate as well. This also becomes visible in international comparative studies (see, e.g., Bertelsmann Stiftung 2013).

However, confirmation time itself and how confirmation work is done, also plays a role in explaining young people's later religious commitment. Satisfaction with confirmation time clearly influences young people's later beliefs and sense of belonging as well as later voluntary engagement. Concerning later voluntary involvement, the model experienced during confirmation time is crucial: it is important that there were volunteers in confirmation work and that the confirmands had the chance to become familiar with young people working in the church as volunteers and through this, were encouraged to work as volunteers.

1.7 Benefits of a Longitudinal Approach: Methodological Considerations – Consequences for Future Research

In this study, young people's relationship to religion was studied from various perspectives based on longitudinal data. The data was collected during a period of three years: in the beginning of confirmation time, in the end of confirmation time and two years after confirmation time. The young people were studied during the years when they typically face important transitions in life. Their compulsory education comes to an end, they make their first vocational choices, get typically involved in first romantic relationships and take important steps towards a life more independent from their parents. Many studies also show that during these years people are more likely to make various religious choices than during any other life period, both in relation to religious commitment and to distancing themselves from religion. The results of the present study show that indeed many changes take place during these years among the adolescents and their relation to religion. On an individual level, there is development both towards distance from religion as well as development towards deeper religious commitment.

The study leads to several methodological considerations concerning research on adolescents and their relationship to religion, especially in a longitudinal perspective. The first consideration is related to collecting the data. It is always to be expected that follow-up studies involve notable drop-out rates. This implies that it is likely that the follow-up includes more respondents to whom the topic under study is personally more important, and less respondents who are indifferent to this topic. In this study, it was clearly visible that young people with a more positive relationship to religion were more likely to answer. When it comes to religion, however, also those who are negative about religion, may be more likely to respond than those who are indifferent. These considerations highlight the importance of being clear about the connections between the first data collection and later data sets and matching them. In this way, it becomes possible to recognise possible problems with the data and estimate the influence of one-sided sample compositions. Given the expected drop-out rates, it is important that the initial sample is large enough so that there will be sufficient respondents for the questionnaires at later times.

The second consideration involves the influence of age and how age influences the patterns of answering questions related to faith-related issues. For example, what does believing mean to young people after their cognitive capacities have expanded? Increase in age often also means wider cognitive capacities to relate to conceptual issues in measuring commitment to religion. Does believing or agreeing with belief-related items mean the same for young people at the age of 13 to 14 years as to those between 16 or 17 or even older? Many

changes take place during adolescence and when entering adulthood and these changes also involve cognitive development. This needs to be taken into account when planning studies that involve people at different ages and when interpreting the results, especially if the time-span is long.

The third consideration involves the time-span needed for longitudinal studies. This question has implications on several levels. Setting up a longitudinal study requires thorough planning, including practical aspects and funding as well as long-term commitment from the members of the research team. Regardless of the initial commitment there always is a risk of drop-outs in the research team as well. This calls for clear documentation during the research process so that valuable information will not be lost when members of the research team leave the project. Also, funding plans may not turn out to be feasible. It is rare for long-term studies that funding can be secured in advance for the whole time. This requires accepting uncertainties during the research process but also calls for funders to consider the commitment for long-term funding. Given the far-reaching importance of the results and insights to be gained, it must also be emphasised that longitudinal research deserves special funding from public sources, even if it applies to a field like confirmation work which is related to the Churches.

1.8 Perspectives for the Further Development of Confirmation Work

Again it has to be said that the research on confirmation work and the t_3 -study include many impulses for improving confirmation work. At this point, the whole range of such impulses will not be described again. Instead, two promising perspectives related specifically to the study carried out two years after confirmation will be developed in the following.

Promoting a Culture of Youth Volunteerism During and After Confirmation Time

The findings of this study suggest that youth volunteerism deserves particular attention in the further development of confirmation work and Christian youth work in general. From this point of view, the results on volunteerism summarised above have important implications for the ongoing discussion on the future shape and structure of confirmation work. Those who are engaged in this field of work should feel encouraged to foster and promote a »culture of youth volunteerism« as a central element not only of confirmation work but of church and parish development at large.

The benefits of such an approach have already been widely discussed in this study. They can be summarised in four points, each of which marks a fundamental perspective on confirmation work.

First, youth volunteerism clearly improves the quality of confirmation work. For the confirmands, young volunteers are important models of a lived faith they can relate to and identify with. They are more satisfied with confirmation work when young volunteers are involved. The positive impact of youth volunteerism becomes particularly visible in the camps which could not be organised without volunteers.

Second, youth volunteerism has great potential for the Churches. As described in the introduction of this book in more detail, the question of what comes after confirmation refers to a crucial tension or break-down in the relationship between Protestant Churches and their adolescent members. In spite of the high satisfaction with confirmation work among the participating young people, the day of confirmation in many cases marks not the beginning of a new phase of commitment to the Church but the end of the adolescents' participation in the Church. In the light of the findings of this study, youth volunteerism can provide a conceptual answer to the pressing question of how the relationship between the adolescents and the Church can be improved after confirmation.

Thirdly, youth volunteerism in confirmation work also is of importance beyond the Church. It is a contribution to the whole society. It fosters attitudes and competencies that are of vital importance for civic engagement in society. In this perspective, volunteerism in confirmation work can be understood as education for civil society.

Fourth and most importantly, the adolescents themselves benefit from volunteerism in confirmation work. Young volunteers can gain important pro-social skills and experience faith and church in a more participatory setting.

However, the results of this study also indicate that such effects can not be taken for granted. On the contrary, in many cases there are obstacles to volunteering in the Churches. In the countries participating in this study, adolescents are often already involved in different kinds of compulsory and non-compulsory activities and, as a consequence, have no or only little time for (additional) voluntary engagement. Moreover, faith and church are not of central importance to many of them, which, naturally, affects their willingness to be active as a volunteer after confirmation. Finally, it became very clear that the young people most often only volunteer if they really feel like doing it. In most cases, they do not become volunteers for conventional reasons or due to social expectations, but they decide for themselves if they want to volunteer or not. Hence, it is not enough to just offer them opportunities to volunteer. Instead, Churches and parishes need to find ways of developing programs, forms and settings of voluntary engagement that are attractive for young people.

As already highlighted in this chapter, the empirical findings point to some key factors that either enhance or diminish the appeal of voluntary engage-

ment. It became particularly clear that this question should not be seen in isolation from the broader context of confirmation work. Among young people, the willingness to volunteer is strongly influenced by their perception of the parish and parish life as a whole. They are much more likely to volunteer if they feel welcome and accepted in the parish during confirmation time. Consequently, youth volunteerism is also not related just to confirmation work. It is a more comprehensive task of parish development. Confirmation work should be embedded in a culture of youth volunteerism – a general climate that is appreciative of young people and attentive to their opinions, interests and preferences. Such a culture comprises many aspects of parish life, from Sunday services to parish leadership.

Based on the empirical findings, volunteerism should be included more systematically in the curriculum of confirmation work. Confirmands are more likely to be active in the church after their confirmation if they had the opportunity to try out voluntary work during confirmation time and to consider its meaning during confirmation time. Moreover, the respective aims and attitudes of the workers are of particular importance in this respect as well. Therefore, this dimension needs to be integrated in the professional training of pastors and youth workers.

Furthermore, a culture of youth volunteerism should comprise all confirmands. The empirical findings of this study draw attention to two groups that seem to be at least partly neglected in current programs of youth volunteerism in confirmation work. On the one hand, there seems to be a considerable share of confirmands who did not volunteer after confirmation because no one asked them. Second, more attention needs to be given to those confirmands who chose to quit volunteering during the first two years after confirmation. This seems to disproportionately apply to confirmands without strong religious upbringing and with a more extrinsic motivation.

Finally, it became clear that all these findings have to be situated in the existing plurality of concepts in different countries and Churches in Europe. The challenges regarding volunteerism vary considerably from context to context. Some countries have no tradition of involving young volunteers in confirmation work, others have established models, standards and curriculums for youth volunteerism, while still others are somewhere in-between. Consequently, the institutionalisation of training programs for young volunteers is a crucial task. In many cases, the range of the structures and training programs is still rather limited. It is also suggested that international exchange and comparative research should play an important role in future efforts to further develop and implement youth volunteerism in confirmation work.

The Need for Convincing Contents – Dealing with Difficult Questions

The results of the present study concerning the beliefs of the adolescents show a pattern that, on the one hand, could be expected from the beginning based on everyday experience with young people but which, on the other hand, must also be called critical. Some people would even refer to it as alarming. In many cases, the confirmands' assent to these items had grown during confirmation work – an effect that is certainly intended by this program – but two years after confirmation most of the increases had disappeared. This result is to be taken especially seriously because the study did not only use one question about the adolescents' faith but made use of a whole number of different items – including faith in God the creator, resurrection, afterlife, etc.

Most likely there are a number of possible reasons for the pattern identified for the beliefs of the adolescents. For many of the adolescents, contact with the Church or with programs offered by the Church for young people became much thinner during the years after confirmation. The group of the fellow confirmands with whom one could share the interest in the Christian faith at least in the sense that all of them took part in confirmation time, no longer exists after confirmation. New interests may come into play as the adolescents get older. Personal, social and affective factors offer plausible explanations for the decline of the values for most faith-related items two years after confirmation. Yet it is also plausible that this development has to do with how contents are treated in confirmation time. Creation faith is an example which allows for closer scrutiny in this respect.

It is important to remember that the responses to the item »God created the world« (C/K/QE01) showed 43% agreement at the beginning of confirmation time, 44% at the end and 34% two years after confirmation. There is not much increase concerning this belief during confirmation time, while the decrease after confirmation is very strong. It is actually one of the strongest decreases found with the faith-related items in the study. Another example with a strong decrease is the item »Jesus has risen from the dead« (C/K/QE04) with values of 51% (t_1), 53% (t_2) and 42% (t_3).

How can these decreases be explained? Faith in God the creator as well as the belief in the resurrection of Jesus have in common that they clearly are in tension with natural scientific worldviews. Theories of evolution describe the origin of the world differently from faith in creation. The relationship between creation and evolution has become the topic of a whole body of theological and philosophical publications as well as of popular books like Richard Dawkins' (2006) world-bestseller »The God Delusion«. Both, the small change in agreement to this faith during confirmation time as well as its strong decrease after confirmation may well mirror the influence of popularised natural science accounts of the origin and evolutionary development of the world.

Faith in resurrection can be seen in a parallel way. That death is not definite because dead people can come back into life contradicts all understandings of biology and medical science as much as people's own experience. Theologically, of course, resurrection does not mean resuscitation. People who could be resuscitated, for example, after an accident, will still die at a later point while resurrection refers to eternal life and to overcoming death, not only for today but forever. Yet is the difference between resurrection and resuscitation which theologians take for granted, also clear to the adolescents? Or are they caught in what remains a contradiction for them – to have to believe in something that they cannot reconcile with their taken for granted rational understanding of the world?

In any case, these findings speak for the need to also take the cognitive dimension of confirmation work very seriously. The transition from traditional instructional models and from rote learning to youth-oriented ways of doing confirmation work remains important, as can be seen, among others, from the high satisfaction rates among adolescents concerning confirmation work. Yet contents also matter! Good experiences in the group and opportunities for forming friendships which are often seen as the strongest assets of today's confirmation work should go hand in hand with convincing contents.

But is there even a chance for confirmation work to have an impact on beliefs like faith in creation? This question is quite important because it would certainly not be recommendable to invest time and energy into endeavors which, from the beginning, have no chance to make a difference. However, the longitudinal approach used in the present study does offer encouraging results in this respect. It shows the negative tendencies described above, for example, the decrease of young people's agreement to faith in God the creator. At the same time, it shows that underneath the tendencies at the group level, there are many changes at an individual level that follow different directions. In other words, the changes at the group level do not simply determine what happens at the individual level.

Concerning educational programs, including confirmation work, the results at the individual level can be viewed as encouragement. While the results of the study do not answer the question what kind of influences may actually be responsible for the changes at the individual level, they clearly show that such influences exist and that they make a difference. It is at least very likely that influences related to education count among these influences.

The responses two years after confirmation have implications not only for confirmation work and confirmation time but also for possible programs offered after confirmation. Such programs should be mindful of the decline of agreement with core elements of the Christian faith. Just like confirmation work, they should be open for critical questions posed by young people and

help them find ways for reconciling the Christian faith with, for example, views from the natural sciences. Research from the psychology of religion shows that the achievement of complementary thinking should be an important aim of religious education in adolescence – a way of thinking that understands that, at least in some cases, contradictory explanations make sense or even are needed, just like with the explanation of light in physics.

2. Main Results of the Different Studies 2006-2016

The findings reported in the present volume belong to a series of studies on confirmation work conducted over the last ten years. It therefore makes sense to explain the position of the present study in this series by bringing together, as far as this is possible in a few pages, the results of the different studies. For this reason, the studies will be briefly introduced and then be interpreted under different aspects. This may also be of help for readers who are not familiar with all volumes in the present series. The results presented allow for an empirically based understanding of the situation of confirmation work in Europe today. Moreover, they also include many indications of potentials that can be tapped in the future. At the end of the chapter, a number of strategies will be described that could be the starting point for further improvements in this field of work.

2.1 The Studies in Overview

An important beginning of the international research on confirmation work in Europe was a symposium at Tuebingen University (Germany) in 2007. The purpose of the symposium – and later of a volume developed from it (Schweitzer/Elisenbast 2009) – was an exchange on current research on confirmation work. This implied that the symposium also served as a basis for bringing together research traditions from different countries which explains why it also became the starting point for forming an international group of researchers in this field.

In 2010, the first study on confirmation work in Europe was published (Schweitzer et al. 2010). Its purpose was to gain a broad and detailed view of confirmation work in the seven participating countries – Germany, Austria, Switzerland (Zurich), Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. The study included data from the confirmands as well as from the workers, both full-time workers and volunteers. It used a design with two questionnaires, at the beginning and towards the end of confirmation time. It was an innovative study, among others because of the large sample sizes and the attempt of achieving

representativity as much as possible. Representative samples in the different countries are the presupposition for valid international comparisons which were another central aim of the study.

The second international study was published in 2015 (Schweitzer et al. 2015a). Nine European countries took part in it – in addition to the seven countries of the first study, Hungary and Poland joined the team. Moreover, the German Methodists (Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche) also took part, and there is a parallel project in the United States (cf. Douglass 2015). The focus of the second study was on long-term developments and tendencies that can be described in two respects:

- The study was carried out five years after the first study. This implies that comparisons over time became possible, especially since about two thirds of the items in the questionnaires remained the same. Consequently, the results from 2007/2008 and from 2012/2013 allow for valid comparisons. These comparisons show both, important changes as well as surprising continuities.
- The study used a third questionnaire for the adolescents two years after confirmation (in the year 2015). In this way it became possible to gain insights into the changes taking place after confirmation, at a group level as well as at an individual level.

The present volume mainly reports the results of this last part of the study, the survey with adolescents two years after confirmation. It carries further two main interests of the second study, finding out more about how young people become volunteers, especially in confirmation work but also in other fields, and investigating the relationship between experiences during confirmation time and adolescents' attachment to the Church.

The present study can be read and understood independently from the preceding studies, as a contribution to research on developments in adolescence concerning church and religion. It can also be viewed in the context of the earlier studies, shedding additional light on the experiences of confirmation time.

2.2 The Shape of Contemporary Confirmation Work: Success, Satisfaction and the Need for further Improvements

One of the main aims of the studies was to establish a basis for an empirical description of the current state of confirmation work in the participating European countries and Churches. It is of course not possible here to summarise all the details that the studies uncovered, although this would be of interest as

well. Instead, a number of basic tendencies will be identified. Moreover, it will not be possible here to do justice to the differences between the countries with their special presuppositions. The country-related chapters in the different publications of the project should be consulted for such aspects.

In most participating countries, confirmation work can be considered a vital and successful field of work. The new forms of doing confirmation work which, depending on the country, were introduced about 40 to 50 years ago, are well accepted – by the confirmands themselves but also by the workers and by the parents of the confirmands. In the first place, the high degree of acceptance seems to be due to the fact that the traditional models of instruction have been replaced by more youth-oriented models. Creative methods, games, outings and camps lasting for several days and nights have become a core characteristic of today's confirmation work. Moreover, the confirmands enjoy the experience of being together with their peers in a special group. Last but not least, confirmation work is most often carried out by a team of workers that includes a number of voluntary workers who often are only a few years older than the confirmands. This also implies that confirmation work has become much less hierarchical, since the traditional dominance of the minister has now been balanced by other influences within the group of the confirmands themselves but also with the volunteers. Such factors explain why 76% of the adolescents said at the end of confirmation time that they were satisfied with this program (Schweitzer et al. 2015a, 379).

Yet it is easy to see that there is not only success or satisfaction with confirmation work. There also is the need for further improvements. A starting point for a more critical view can be the assets mentioned above. In most cases, these assets are not guaranteed – neither with the new methods nor the outings and camps or the availability of volunteers. It makes sense to consider these aspects as a benchmark for the quality of confirmation work. Each Church should think about ways to improve their confirmation work in order to live up to the respective criteria of successful confirmation work.

In many countries, worship services seem to be a special problem for the confirmands. Often, the adolescents are required to attend the services but they experience them as boring. One of the consequences is young people's dissatisfaction with worship services which increases during confirmation time.

Another problem has to do with the contents treated in confirmation work. Many confirmands doubt that the church has answers to the questions which are really important to them – and again, their doubts are stronger at the end of confirmation time than in the beginning. In other words, in this case, confirmation work does not seem to strengthen the adolescents' trust in the teachings of the Churches. Faith in God the creator probably is the best example for this. This faith is not shared by many of the confirmands from the beginning, and

the young people have clearly moved away from this faith, two years after confirmation.

Especially the results from the study two years after confirmation raise the question of how long the effects of confirmation time actually last. Confirmation time has positive effects on the beliefs of the young people but most of the increased values mirroring this influence have disappeared two years after confirmation. There is a clear need for attractive programs after confirmation. Or, to put it more critically, so far, the Churches do not seem to be interested enough in what comes after confirmation, at least in most of the participating countries. Having successful confirmation work is not enough in order to foster long-term interest and commitment with the adolescents.

It must also be noted that negative experiences with confirmation work have lasting effects. This can be seen very clearly, among others, from how such experiences influence young people's willingness to become volunteers in confirmation work after their own confirmation. Positive experiences during confirmation time support this willingness – negative experiences have the opposite effect.

Another weakness of confirmation work can be seen in its isolation as a field of work that is not connected with other fields and programs of the Church. In some of the countries, there still is a strong division between confirmation work on the one hand and general Christian youth work on the other – a division that mirrors the different histories of these fields. Yet in today's situation with its challenges, it hardly makes sense to continue this division. It would make more sense to work together and to bring the confirmands in touch with other programs from the beginning of confirmation time so that they might find their way into such programs after confirmation.

2.3 Potentials

The studies on confirmation work refer to potentials of this field of work in a number of ways. First, potentials that could be used more include the aspects called assets of successful confirmation work above, like youth-oriented models with creative methods, camps, etc. Second, one of the surprising results of the studies is related to the very positive views of the church and of the Christian faith which is characteristic of the majority of the adolescents participating in the studies. This result raises the question why the Churches are not more successful in relating to young people. According to the results from the studies on confirmation work this can hardly be explained, for example, by general theories of secularisation. The results show a rather stable picture concerning the adolescents' religious attitudes. At the same time, participation rates in the

countries of the study vary strongly and in some cases, there is a clear decline. In this case, the question of how the potentials of confirmation work can be used for reaching more young people becomes even more urgent. In all countries, belonging to the Church is an issue that must receive more attention – not only by addressing it in confirmation time but also – and possibly even more important – by making the Church a welcoming place that is attractive for adolescents before as well as after confirmation.

Another presupposition for making confirmation work more successful has to do with the contents treated during confirmation time. It is easy to see that the Christian contents should be presented in a manner that makes sense to young people today – an aim that does not seem to be achieved in a sufficient manner in many cases.

One of the most important potentials of confirmation work as well as of the time after confirmation has only been discovered over the last decades or, depending on the country, even more recently. The involvement of young volunteers in confirmation work appears to be a very promising possibility for improving confirmation work itself while, at the same time, making engagement in the Church more attractive for young people after confirmation. It is a very hopeful sign that many Churches have already come to benefit from the potentials of the combination of volunteerism and confirmation work and that other Churches are in the process of moving into this direction as well. Yet the results also indicate that even more should be done in order to make the participation of volunteers in confirmation work most effective. As the experiences most of all from Finland show, i.e., from the country with the longest tradition of young volunteers in confirmation work, it makes sense to give the young volunteers more independent responsibilities, to offer specific leadership training to them and to give them access to tasks, among others, in the context of worship services and teaching. Moreover, the group of young volunteers should not only be appreciated and welcomed because they can improve confirmation work. They should also be accommodated with their own interests and needs as a group of older adolescents. In many of the Churches participating in the present study much more could be done for the young volunteers which would presuppose the realisation that working with this group should be understood as a special kind of youth work itself.

2.4 Recommendations and Strategies for Improvement

Confirmation work in a particular Church typically follows special traditions and corresponds to specific presuppositions prevailing in the respective country or area. Although it can be described as a field of work with common basic

characteristics which identify this field across national boundaries, its concrete shape in any particular place depends on many additional factors. This is why it would hardly make sense to formulate strategies for improvement at a necessarily abstract international level. A minority Church, for example, in Austria or like the Methodist Church in Germany with its small membership has different needs and possibilities than, for example, the Church in Finland which comprises the majority of the population. Yet at the same time, all of the Churches participating in this study are working with a similar age group and in the context of contemporary Western societies. Their programs address adolescents growing up in comparable circumstances, at least to some degree. The distinction between recommendations and strategies in the title of this section tries to do justice to the commonalities across the countries and Churches on the one hand, as well as to the differences between them on the other. The results of the studies on confirmation work allow for formulating a number of general recommendations but the development of concrete strategies and action plans based on these recommendations must be left to the individual Churches.

In the following, eight recommendations will be described, not in the sense of an exhaustive program but as examples for how the empirical results of the research on confirmation work can be translated for improving the practice in this field. Readers should not forget, however, that empirical research is only one of the presuppositions for developing practical strategies. Unavoidably and more than can be explained here, normative judgments and theological orientations have to come into play in this context as well.

The Present Improvements of Confirmation Work Should Be Secured and Continued

The improvements of confirmation work which can be observed in most of the Churches participating in the studies on confirmation work truly amount to something like a shift in paradigms. The older paradigm was based on the idea of instruction and, more often than not, on rote learning, with the adolescents as objects of this instruction as it has come to be critically described. The contemporary paradigm follows the model of youth work, with creative methods, outings and camps as well as with a team of voluntary workers who often are not much older than the confirmands themselves.

The results of the different studies clearly show that it is this contemporary model which has made confirmation work so attractive and which explains the high approval rate with the adolescents. It is, therefore, recommended that the respective reforms should be secured and continued. This implies that the Churches should make every effort possible for supporting the parishes in their attempts of adopting the improvements in their own local contexts. Moreover, the regulations and recommendations issued by the Churches should clearly

reflect the obligatory character of what has been called the contemporary model of confirmation work here. The decision of involving young volunteers, for example, should not be left to the individual parishes but all parishes should be encouraged and, as far as possible, even be obliged to work in this direction. It is easy to see that this also implies respective changes in the training of future ministers who should be prepared for the changing tasks ahead of them.

Parishes Welcoming Young People

It is not only confirmation work which makes a difference but the whole parish plays an important role in how young people view the Church and for how they feel about the Christian faith. According to the results of the studies on confirmation work, there are strong differences in this respect. Not all respondents reported that they felt welcome in their parish.

Accordingly, the Churches and parishes should consider what can be done in order to show young people that their interests and needs as well as their questions and critical perspectives are indeed appreciated in the Church.

Worship Services Which are Attractive for Young People

The results of the studies show both, skeptical views of worship services and negative experiences during confirmation time but also encouraging responses in some of the participating countries and parishes. This implies that there is a clear need for giving young people more opportunities to experience forms of worship that they find attractive. The results also show that this is indeed possible. Worship services attractive for young people are not a hopeless case.

Taking Young People's Questions and Doubts Seriously

More than probably expected by many in the field, the results show that the contents addressed in confirmation time are of importance for the confirmands' religious attitudes and their experience of confirmation time. On the one hand, the adolescents often feel that the questions which are really important to them were not addressed. This is one explanation for their impression that the church does not have answers to such questions. On the other hand, there are topics especially from the Christian tradition that appear doubtful to many of the adolescents. Faith in creation is a prominent example for this, the belief that Jesus has risen from the dead is another. At the same time, topics like life after death are especially important to older adolescents.

The result that most of the higher values in the adolescents' responses at the end of confirmation time tend to disappear again after confirmation should be the starting point for thinking about ways of how such contents can be presented more convincingly and how they can be made more accessible to young people. It seems that the renewal of confirmation work has been more success-

ful in respect, for example, of the group experience (which remains quite important for the future as well) but that more remains to be done concerning the contents in relationship to the adolescents' and their understandings, questions and doubts.

Attractive Programs for Young People after Confirmation

Confirmation work clearly increases the adolescents' interest in taking part in programs and groups organised by the Churches. This is an encouraging result. Yet it is also obvious that by far not all those who show such an interest at the end of confirmation time, really come to participate in respective offerings. In part, this may be due to the adolescents' interests and intentions themselves which are not always stable and, after confirmation, certainly can change. In part, however, the adolescents interviewed two years after confirmation report that there are no programs organised by the Churches that would be attractive to them. This implies that the adolescents' interests are not taken seriously enough.

Of course, it must again be emphasised that the programs for volunteers and the involvement of volunteers in confirmation work and beyond is a hopeful sign for how effective answers can be found for what should come after confirmation. It should also not be overlooked, however, that the number of those who report that they have never been asked if they want to become involved with voluntary activities, is still very high. Clearly, more needs to be done in this direction.

The same is true concerning the programs organised for young volunteers. In the future, more emphasis should be given to the task of viewing such programs not only as preparation of future voluntary workers and not only as based on the intention that confirmation work can benefit from the involvement of young volunteers. The programs should also address the young volunteers themselves – as young people who have needs and interest of their own.

Thinking beyond Confirmation Work

The preceding recommendation concerning attractive programs for young people after confirmation already implies that the time after confirmation should receive more attention. In addition to this, a different critical observation must be mentioned here as well that refers to the time before confirmation. The renewal of confirmation work during the last 40 or 50 years has been called successful above because it has led to a new appreciation by all groups involved. Yet in retrospect, it is also easy to see that the strategies used in this process had their exclusive focus on confirmation time itself, at least in most of the countries. The efforts aimed at improving confirmation work which implied a concentration on the time before confirmation.

The suggestion for the future is not that these efforts should end – as stated above, they are still needed. Yet they should now be combined with a new point of view which allows for an eye on both, confirmation time and what comes after confirmation, as well as the implications of such a dual view for both periods of time. This recommendation can be expanded even further as will be shown in the next section.

Confirmation Work as Part of Christian Education in General

Again and again, the results from the studies on confirmation work show that the most powerful influences in religious socialisation have their roots in childhood. The influence of the religious socialisation experienced from the parents makes itself felt, for example, in how adolescents are motivated to participate in confirmation work. Moreover, the influences from early religious socialisation are also visible in what confirmands experience during confirmation time and in how they benefit from confirmation work. Such results are a reminder of the fact that confirmation work should not be seen in isolation. As described above, confirmation work makes a contribution to religious socialisation of its own. Yet it is easy to see that it remains important that confirmation work is prepared to meet the young people with their presuppositions developed and acquired in other contexts. This is why it makes sense to consider the different fields of religious socialisation and Christian education together. This applies to the parents, to programs for children and youth organised by the Churches, to Sunday school, possibly to Religious Education at school and, where available, to kindergartens sponsored by the Churches. In all of these cases, possibilities of cooperation and mutual reinforcement should be considered. Concerning the confirmands, it would be helpful if possible transitions between the fields – before and after confirmation time – would be kept in view, not only as a lucky coincidence but as planned forms of working together across different fields.

Confirmation Work as Education for Civil Society

Given that modern religion in Western societies has often taken on exclusively privatised forms it may be surprising that this recommendation is included in the present list. Yet the results from the studies on confirmation work clearly show that confirmation work does indeed hold the potential for major contributions to strengthening civil society. The studies indicate that confirmation work can be an important source of socially desirable values in general and that it specifically has a positive influence on young people's willingness to become active as volunteers. Getting to know young volunteers during one's own confirmation time, having the opportunity to try out voluntary work and thinking about the meaning of voluntary work in church and society obviously are powerful possibilities for introducing young people into this field.

For the Churches, the understanding of confirmation work as part of education for civil society holds an additional promise. This understanding can support the acceptance of confirmation work beyond the Churches and through this become a reminder of the fact that the Churches have an important role to play in society at large, not least through their educational programs.

From Recommendations to Strategies

The recommendations described above can and should be the basis for developing concrete strategies and plans for action. Such strategies will have to be more concrete than the general recommendations. Yet the recommendations can be used as a starting point for developing country-specific strategies (for an example referring to Germany, see the strategies described in Schweitzer et al. 2015b; for examples from Switzerland, see Schlag et al. 2016).

3. Looking ahead: The Third International Study on Confirmation Work

The present volume present results from the second international study on confirmation work (also see Schweitzer et al. 2015a). The third study mentioned in the title of this section would be a continuation of the research which began with the first international study on confirmation work more than ten years ago (Schweitzer et al. 2010). It makes sense at this point to look ahead and consider why such a continuation appears desirable und what benefits can be expected from it.

The first international study on confirmation work in Europe which was conducted in seven countries has already been very well received, by practitioners as well as by researchers in the field of religious education. The results included many new impulses that were taken up at different levels, in confirmation work itself but also in the context of training future ministers and other workers as well as by institutions responsible for designing programs in this context or for the ongoing training of workers. Most of all, the results brought with them a new kind of awareness of the importance of confirmation work which, in turn, was experienced as very encouraging by many in the field. Concerning research, the study succeeded in developing perspectives for educational work in parishes that has often been neglected. Last but not least, the results were also taken up by church leaders in designing new programs and guidelines for confirmation work. In many cases, such guidelines are based, at least in part, directly on the results from the studies on confirmation work. Obviously, empirical research of the present kind can have an innovative influence.

In planning the second international study on confirmation work the question why another study was needed, was discussed extensively. In the end, against some doubts and insecurities in the beginning, the expectation prevailed that a second study would offer possibilities that had not been available in this field before – and at the end of the second study it can be said that this expectation turned out to be justified:

- comparisons over time which are methodologically valid because the studies were designed such that they would allow for such comparisons;
- identification of long-term developments and tendencies concerning youth and religion as well as the development of the practice of confirmation work;
- discernment of possible risks as a basis for church leadership;
- insights into possibilities for influencing or changing existing forms of practice in respect to further improvements;
- innovations based on comparing different models at an international level.

The third international study on confirmation work recommended here for the future can be expected to again fulfil all of the expectations mentioned above. Both, practical work as well as research would benefit from it, and so would church leadership. Most of all, it would be a decisive step towards giving such studies a permanent place in the field. The presuppositions which have become available through the first two studies can be considered an excellent starting point. There now is a culture of research that can be used as a basis for future studies. The form of practical *ecumene* experienced in the international research project was warmly welcomed in many places which, at a time of decreasing interest in ecumenical questions, also is of special value. All these experiences are a basis upon which a third study could successfully build. It must also be mentioned that a third study would increase the chance for the results to be noticed beyond the church and beyond theology, for example, in general research on youth and religion.

New possibilities are also developing in terms of conducting such research. Making use of the almost omnipresent smartphone would most likely allow for less expensive ways of data collection. The instruments developed for this purpose can also be used by the parishes for evaluating their work with the confirmands.

In sum, it can be said that a third international study on confirmation work should be carried out ten years after the second study, at the latest. The first round of questionnaires for the present study were distributed in 2012. The preparations for this step started one or two years earlier. Consequently, a new study is not a question only for the distant future. There is no concrete plan yet for a third study at this point but it certainly is a task and a challenge to be taken up together by the Churches and in research.