

PREPARATION FOR CONFIRMATION – FINDING THE WAY TO A FAITH OF ONE’S OWN

A programme offered by the church for young people
in a European perspective

In significant respects in the Protestant tradition one of the central fields of work for the theme of this volume, the formation of faith, is confirmation instruction or, as it is called today, *confirmation work*. Its roots stretch far back in the history of Christianity. Nowadays several hundreds of thousands young people take part in confirmation work – alone in the seven European countries which took part in a recent study on confirmation work there are yearly ca. 500,000 confirmands.¹ In many cases the confirmation of adolescents is perceived as a characteristic feature of Protestant churches. In this view confirmation is an indispensable part of Protestant existence.

This empirical study of confirmation work in Europe has brought the field into an increasingly international and indeed ecumenical perspective. Above all the empirical findings of the study allow more reliable statements on the significance of confirmation work and confirmation for young people.

Related to this is also the rediscovery of the importance of confirmation work for society as a whole. Here young people have the opportunity to come in touch with pro-social attitudes, with values and norms. Not least, they meet volunteers, frequently only few years older than themselves, and discover that voluntary commitment is an important and attractive option. Looked at in this way confirmation work is an important area of non-formal education, both for the Church and for the whole society as well.

¹ F. SCHWEITZER / W. ILG / H. SIMOJOKI (ed.), *Confirmation Work in Europe: Empirical Results, Experiences, and challenges. A comparative Study in Seven Countries* (Gütersloh 2010).

If history shows an astonishing continuity and stability of confirmation work, we cannot fail to see far-reaching challenges for the future. It is by no means to be taken for granted that this programme will prove to be stable in the future as well, at least not necessarily with respect to the participation of the young people.

What we describe in the following relates particularly to those countries which took part in the study of confirmation work in Europe, namely Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Only for these countries or for the Protestant churches there are reliable empirical details and current national reports available.

I CONFIRMATION WORK IN EUROPE – A SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMME OFFERED BY THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

Looked at historically, confirmation work and confirmation go back to the baptismal rites of the early church.² At that period the ritual actions which are today called confirmation were carried out directly in the context of baptism, i.e. not as an independent rite. Only in the Middle Ages did confirmation achieve this position, acquiring the sacramental significance which is still given to it today in the Roman Catholic Church. The criticism of the Reformers was directed against the sacramental interpretation, for which they could see no biblical basis. The main aim of the Reformers was that all members of the Church should understand the Christian faith. The faith of the Church was no longer enough for them, and consequently a catechetical instruction was introduced. Already in the 16th century individual Reformers such as Martin Bucer in Strasbourg introduced a new rite which, with catechetical elements and a personal blessing, took place at the end of the instruction. Confirmation, however, was not established extensively in many regions and countries until the

² On the history of confirmation and preparation for it cf. K. FRÖR, *Confirmatio. Forschungen zur Geschichte und Praxis der Konfirmation* (Munich 1959); and G. ADAM, *Der Unterricht der Kirche. Studien zur Konfirmandenarbeit* (Göttingen 1980).

18th century, as a result of the influence of (pietistic) movements in the church as well as of the impulses of the Enlightenment for personal maturity and autonomy.

Particularly in the last 50 years, a significant renewal and reform of confirmation work has taken place. The conceptual change from »confirmation instruction« to »confirmation work« already points to this. The guiding model of traditional instruction and learning by rote is no longer decisive. Instead, one frequently draws consciously on experiences from Christian youth work, with creative and youth-oriented methods as well as opportunities for active participation. The confirmands are usually between 13 and 15 years old. In the past their instruction was the responsibility of the pastor alone. In the meantime confirmation work has become the task of a broad staff to which other church employees and volunteers belong alongside the pastor, in particular youth and young adults.

The duration of the confirmation time varies from country to country. Common to all the models is the concern to allow sufficient opportunity for an extended, thorough introduction to the faith and life of the Church, and for discussion.

There are differences in how confirmation work is structured in terms of didactics. In many churches – e. g. in Denmark – confirmation work is closer to the traditional school than to youth work, and the extent varies to which a relationship to the congregation is seen and developed. A further difference relates to the significance of models of organization which include overnight stays – a possibility which is most frequently used in Sweden and Finland. In almost all the groups in Finland camps or other events lasting about a week are undertaken; in many other countries shorter retreats – e. g. for a week-end – are usual, and some countries up to now still abstain completely from such intensive phases with the confirmation groups.

The fact that confirmation work is throughout connected with education related to the Christian faith and young people's personal orientation for life makes it clear that here we have to do with a non-formal area of formation. The (re-)discovery, apparent in recent years, of the significance of this type of education should consequently also include confirmation work.³ Its significance has long since been recognized as supplementing the school and differing from school religious education

through its stronger connection with congregation and praxis. This aspect becomes even more important in view of the widespread tendencies in the western world towards religious individualization and a religious socialization which no longer implicitly includes a relationship to the church.

In most of the countries or churches represented here almost all young Protestants take part in confirmation work. To this extent confirmation work, even seen quantitatively, counts as one of the most important areas of non-formal education in society. Admittedly the development of the degrees of participation also belongs to the challenges which we shall go into in more detail in the last section of this article.

2 CONFIRMATION WORK IN EUROPE IN AN EMPIRICAL PERSPECTIVE – AN ECUMENICAL PROJECT

The results of the first international empirical study of confirmation work in Europe were able to be presented in 2010. The study was carried out in the seven European countries / churches named above by the *International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work*, founded in 2007. Here for the first time both the ministers and other full-time church employees as well as their voluntary colleagues and in particular the young people themselves and partly even their parents could be included.

2.1 THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL STUDY OF CONFIRMATION WORK IN EUROPE

The study was carried out between 2006 and 2010. The data were gathered in 2007/2008. With almost 20,000 young people involved in it the study is one of the largest youth studies in Europe. The following table gives details of the numbers participating:

³ Cf. G. BRENNER (ed.), *deutsche jugend. Schwerpunktheft Jugend und Religion - Konfirmandenarbeit*, Issue 9/2010.

Table: Numbers questioned in individual countries

Country	Total	GER	AUS	SWIT	DEN	FIN	NOR	SWE
Congregations	943	635	29	39	34	107	65	34
Confirmants	19445	11513	540	598	1193	2176	2343	1082
Helpers	2386	1601	118	64	46	212	130	215
Parents	6909	5788	240	246	-	-	635	
<i>For Comparison: Confirmants p.A.</i>	467195	262194	3169	4075	50452	58624	42587	46094

The study is based on a two-step procedure, - with questionnaires in the first months of the confirmation time and then some weeks before confirmation.

A picture emerges of the activities in confirmation work which is characterized by both commonalities and differences. In Germany, for example, the period includes approximately 43 meetings, while in Austria and Finland there are fewer than 14. The differences with the camps have already been mentioned. The following table summarizes the individual details.

Table: Activities during the confirmation courses in the seven countries

	Total	GER	AUS	SWIT	DEN	FIN	NOR	SWE
Number of all meetings of the whole group (apart from »normal« services)	35,79	42,86	13,71	29,57	25,67	13,93	15,94	
»Normal« class hours (excluding excursions, special activities etc): total hours (of 60 min.)	47,06	45,74	21,89	30,06	38,25	68,85	15,57	
No of »confidays« of at least 3 hours (e.g.confir-Saturday)	3,07	3,21	1,96	2,71	2,36		2,36	
No. of excursions (lasting at least 3 hours)	1,01	1,02	0,75	1,49	1,29	0,68	1,18	
Retreats and camps: no. of overnights	3,98	3,26	2,61	2,71	0,48	7,96	1,58	11,08
Practical work in congregations: hours per confirmand	2,14	2,27	1,04	1,74	0,93 [0,70]		2,29	
Other: no of times during course	1,51	1,42	0,43	2,31	1,17		3,20	
Joint activities with the church youth (where it exists): no. of meetings/activities	1,96	2,1	1,04	0,40	0,85		1,98	

A blank space means that in the particular country the question was not included in the questionnaire

2.2 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFIRMATION WORK FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAITH

One of the most impressive findings is the high degree of approval that the confirmation work meets among the confirmands. On average in the countries taking part 72 % are satisfied on the whole with their time as confirmands. The percentages for the feeling of fellowship, for satisfaction with those mainly responsible for the confirmation work and for the camps are even clearly higher. Conversely worship services and devotion clearly find less approval. The following table gives an overview differentiated according to the countries.

Table: Satisfaction with various aspects of the confirmation course in the seven countries

Satisfaction with	Total	GER	AUS	SWIT	DEN	FIN	NOR	SWE
Confirmation period as a whole	72%	67%	68%	66%	63%	87%	72%	88%
Fun	68%	72%	76%	70%	43%	65%	53%	88%
Theme	58%	49%	48%	52%	66%	81%	60%	76%
Community	77%	71%	69%	73%	83%	88%	82%	86%
Minister/main responsible leader	76%	72%	76%	74%	72%	84%	76%	87%
Other helpers	72%	69%	70%	66%	60%	84%	65%	89%
Services	52%	47%	47%	43%	44%	73%	52%	65%
Retreats/Camps	77%	73%	69%	76%	66%	86%	76%	91%
Devotions	52%	43%	40%	40%	46%	77%	50%	72%
Music/Songs/Singing	60%	51%	48%	44%	55%	84%	58%	80%

The study also provides important information with regard to education in faith. In the first place it shows that the young people taking part in confirmation work are by no means sure of their faith. For example, at the beginning of the confirmation period on average 42% of the young people questioned agree with the statement that God created the world, 50% believe in a life after death, while only 45% are convinced that Jesus has risen from the dead. The greatest agreement was with belief in God, at 57%.⁴

When the questions were put again a few weeks before confirmation, in almost every case there was an increase in the percentages of assent, although this increase was small. The greatest increase was in the statement that they (now) know what belongs to the Christian faith and in the interest in participation in a Christian youth group after confirmation.⁵ Their own baptism in childhood already plays a comparatively important part in young people’s motivation to be confirmed.

2.3 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFIRMATION WORK FOR THE CHURCH

Looked at theologically there is still as formerly a very close connection between confirmation work and the core of all Protestant theology: Personal faith plays an important part in the expectation of the confirmands as also in that of the full-time and voluntary leaders. In confirmation work the interest in faith is combined with other motives which are rather more related to youth culture. Here in the eyes of the young people themselves the different motives are not in competition with one another, i.e. they are equally important to them. Especially where confirmation work meets the needs and interests of the young people they estimate the effects on their personal faith as stronger.⁶

In confirmation work the church presents itself to the younger generation. In many cases the young people have already been involved in

⁴ SCHWEITZER/ILG/SIMOJOKI (see fn. 1), 308.

⁵ V. ELSNBAST / F. SCHWEITZER / W. ILG, Similarities and Differences of Confirmation Work in the Seven Countries – First Orientations, in SCHWEITZER/ILG/SIMOJOKI (see fn. 1), 212–222, 219–220.

⁶ Cf. K. NIEMELÄ, Religious Change during Confirmation Time, in SCHWEITZER/ILG/SIMOJOKI (see fn. 1), 244–253.

church activities before their confirmation time, but this participation remained on the whole less intensive. To this extent the confirmation time offers the church what is often a unique chance in the life of its members for a more intense contact over a longer period of time.

The fact that this opportunity is still not yet sufficiently exploited and that there is a need to catch up here will be taken up again in the last section of this article.

2.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONFIRMATION WORK FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

We have already referred to the significance of confirmation work in relation to engaging confirmands with values important to society as well as encountering voluntary work, possibly as an opening to voluntary engagement of their own. In view of these observations and the fact that the significance of confirmation work for civil society was seldom recognized in the past, a special investigation focussed precisely on the contribution of confirmation work to civil society.⁷

The study here examined three hypotheses:

- that confirmation work supports social interaction and participation:
- that confirmation work boosts young people's commitment to ethical values:
- that confirmation work familiarizes young people with voluntary involvement and activates them for it.

The findings support all three hypotheses, although differences can be detected in the different countries/churches. Consequently even after a more precise examination of the empirical results it is legitimate to describe confirmation work as a non-formal education for civil society. In other words: Not only the church but also society as a whole profits from confirmation work.

2.5 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY ON CONFIRMANDS FOR THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Already since the 1950s there have been ecumenical exchanges on confirmation instruction and confirmation work involving Protestant churches.

⁷ P. PETERSON / H. SIMOJOKI, Does Confirmation Work Contribute to Civil Society?, in: SCHWEITZER/ILG/SIMOJOKI (see fn. 1), 265-275.

ches all over the world.⁸ Initially questions relating to ecclesial doctrine and the theological understanding of confirmation work were central. Later there was a stronger concern with educational questions and the possibility of relating ecumenical agreement to areas of ecclesial praxis and of conceiving it from that standpoint.⁹

The empirical investigation of confirmation work in Europe takes up such attempts for ecumenical agreement and offers it an extended basis. In the framework of the research project an intense form of ecumenical cooperation could be fostered, initially within the research team itself. Public presentations in various countries followed. In the meantime the study is also finding interest in additional Protestant Churches, e. g. in Poland and Hungary as well as beyond Europe in the USA. In the Roman Catholic Church the study is being used as a starting-point for its own examination of confirmation. Within the frame of a dissertation project a comparative investigation is carried out in the Russian Orthodox Church (Belarus).

In all of this we can see that the interest in international exchange and ecumenical encounters grows when empirical results on church/Christian educational practice are available. Moreover, the study demonstrates the importance of ecumenical cooperation, also with respect to the general public and politics, for example on a European level.

2.6 OPEN QUESTIONS – PREPARATION FOR A SECOND INTERNATIONAL STUDY

In presentations of the findings of the study time and again questions cropped up which were not answered by the first examination. For example, one of these was the question about the long-term effects of

⁸ Cf. K. FRÖR, Internationales Seminar über Fragen der Konfirmation, in *Monatschrift für Pastoraltheologie* 50, 1961, 494–503.

⁹ Lutheran World Federation, Departement for Mission and Development Christian Education (ed.), *Confirmation Ministry Study: Global Report, 4–8 September 1995, Geneva, Switzerland* (LWF Documentation 38, Geneva 1995). For the exchange with the Church of England cf. *Bereits erreichte Gemeinschaft und weitere Schritte. 20 Jahre nach der Meissener Erklärung / Communion Already Shared and Further Steps. 20 years after the Meissen Declaration*, ed. Ch. Hill et al (Frankfurt/Main 2010), 3–196.

positive or negative experiences with confirmation work and confirmation, for which until now we only have first results from Finland.¹⁰ Another question was about the transitions after confirmation, particularly to voluntary engagement (in the church). These questions are all the more crucial since the findings have been circulated and found attention in almost all the participating countries in their own publications in various languages.¹¹

With the aim of being able to offer for the Reformation Jubilee in 2017 further findings which will then allow comparisons as well as insights for the questions which have remained open, a second international study of confirmation work is now being prepared. In addition to the seven countries or churches which took part in the first study, the churches mentioned above have made their interest known, and the Methodist Church in Germany will also participate. At the moment various Churches in the USA are checking the possibility of taking part. It is probably not saying too much when a number of observers are already saying that only seldom in the past has an ecumenical undertaking of a comparable kind taken place.

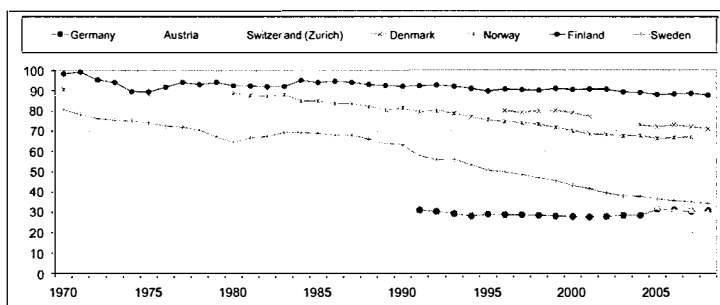
¹⁰ K. NIEMELÄ, *Does Confirmation Training Really Matter? A longitudinal study of the quality and effectiveness of confirmation training in Finland* (Tampere 2008).

¹¹ Examples: Finland: T. INNANEN / K. NIEMELÄ (ed.), *Rippikoulun todellisuus* (Tampere 2009); Denmark: L. CHRISTENSEN, *Hvad mener konfirmanderne om konfirmandforberedelsen?*, in *Kritisk Forum for Praktisk Teologi* 15, 2009, 15–25; Norway: I. M. HØEG, *Konfirmasjonstiden har vært bra – jeg har fått litt mer kunnskap og hatt det fint sammen med de andre konfirmandene*, in *Samfunnet i gudstjenesten. Praktisk-kirkelig årbok*, ed. S. Lægdene, 2009, 221–236. B. KRUPKA, *Konfirmasjon som innlemming i kirkens tradisjon: Norske konfirmandmedarbeideres perspektiv på konfirmandtiden*, in: op. cit., 237–254; Scandinavia: B. KRUPKA / I. REITE (red.), *Mellom pietisme og pluraliteit. Konfirmasjonsarbeid i fire nordiske land* (Oslo 2010); Switzerland: T. SCHLAG / R. NEUBERTH / R. KUNZ (ed.), *Konfirmandenarbeit in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft* (Zurich 2010).

3 CHALLENGES AND CHANCES FOR THE FUTURE

The study of confirmation work in Europe has identified numerous aspects which are important for further work in this area. At one and the same time they represent challenges to which this work must do justice and chances which could be used to greater effect in the future. Five such aspects are taken up in the following.

A first observation concerns the percentages of participation. The diagram below shows the various ratios of participation for the seven countries named, each in comparison with the total population in this age group:



While for several countries, such as Germany or Finland but also Austria, one can discern a high degree of stability over the last 40 years, in other countries, particularly in Sweden but also in Norway, considerable declines are to be registered. While participation in Sweden in 1970 was still more than 80%, it now lies at around 35%. This shows that stability must not necessarily extend without question into the future.

In some of the countries confirmation work is only to a limited extent connected to other fields of work in the church. Such links are not even achieved with youth work, although both offers are aimed at the same age-group. Possibilities of such a connection should be used more consistently in the future – also to create links with the time after confirmation.

The experiences of the young people with the services of worship which they must attend frequently during the period of confirmation work can be described as »troubled«. Dutiful attendance at worship ser-

vices as a rule does not lead to a positive relationship to them.¹² Frequently the negative perception of the worship service is more pointed at the end of the confirmation period than at the beginning. That there are also exceptions to this rule points to the possibilities of a form of service which is also attractive for young people: here lies a further task for the future.

A further problem relates to the competence of dealing with today's major questions which the young people do (or do not) expect from the church. During the confirmation period the proportion of those who doubt that the Church has answers to the questions which are important to them increases from 31 % to 34 %.¹³

This scepticism can be seen not least against the background of the increasing cultural, ideological and religious pluralism in western society. In such a situation church traditions are not self-explanatory anymore and their plausibility is questioned. For example, young people wish for more consideration of non-Christian religions during the confirmation time. At present the instruction refers too little to these.¹⁴

If one in the end looks for a perspective of interpretation which focuses the yield of the study in the same way as the tasks for the future which it marks, much speaks, alongside the motif of community, for the formulation in the title of this article - »Finding the Way to a Faith of One's Own. It expresses one of the strongest subjective motives for participation in confirmation work but also refers to, as we saw above, a special cause for disappointments. During the confirmation period young people want to find their way to a well-founded faith of their own, but at the same time often have the feeling that what is their own is not given enough attention. If this is so, the central challenge for the future organization of confirmation work is to a large extent congruent with the classical theological reason for this task of education in the church: Much stands or falls with how successful the European churches are in opening up conceptional ways in which what young people consider their own can flourish in relationship to the Christian faith.

¹² Cf. SCHWEITZER/ILG/SIMOJOKI, Summary of the Results - perspectives for the Future, in: Id. (see fn. 1), 278-294, 289.

¹³ Op. cit., 290-291.

¹⁴ Op. cit., 290.