

### 3. Confirmation Work in Switzerland

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#### 3.1 Introduction

For the first time ever, confirmation work in the whole of Switzerland has been examined in a representative study. Thus, after a first study, which was conducted in 2007/2008 only in the canton of Zurich (cf. Schlag/Voirol-Sturzenegger 2010), it is now possible to obtain a broader picture of the current situation, the various frameworks, expectations and experiences of the participating actors as well as of the profile and the different forms and the outcomes of confirmation work in the different Reformed cantonal Churches.

As it is already well known from the political situation, the background and characteristics of the Swiss Reformed Churches are highly plural in themselves (cf. Schlag 2014). In the whole country around 30% of the Swiss people are Reformed. But one also has to have in mind the fact of a massive decline of membership in both the Catholic and the Protestant Churches over the last forty years from more than 90% to currently around 60% of the total population with a generally strong tendency of religious individualisation and de-institutionalisation (cf. Stolz/Ballif 2010; Stolz et al. 2014). In some of the cantons there is still a stable number of Reformed, so for example, in the canton Bern or also in Basel-Land, whereas especially in the urban regions and cities like Basel, Zurich – not to mention Geneva – the Reformed population is clearly on its way to a diaspora situation: being only about 10% in Geneva, less than 20% in Basel and about 25% in the city of Zurich.

But not only the religious demography varies in the different cantons significantly, but also the understanding of the meaning of confirmation work and due to this, the shape of the concrete programs in the different cantonal Churches. One key challenge and also a factor for recent developments of confirmation work is the widespread withdrawal of the Churches from the public school which opened up the question of where and when to provide alternative forms of religious education and socialisation (cf. Helbling et al. 2013; Schlag 2013).

Thus, it is not easy to draw a clear picture of this plurality – which will be done in a more detailed way in a separate volume on Swiss confirmation work, where also the results of this study will be examined more in depth.

Despite and beyond these cantonal differences, there is one common ground of the meaning and aim of confirmation work in Switzerland: in a programmatic sense confirmation time should help young people to develop not only their individual understanding of the Reformed faith and tradition but to fully be-

come mature individuals concerning their membership within the Reformed Church. This general approach is highly reflected in the answers of the confirmands as well as of the workers, which will be presented in the next sections.

### 3.2 Participation in the Study

Altogether 477 ( $t_1$ ) resp. 426 ( $t_2$ ) parishes from 24 (out of 25, the canton Uri did not participate) Evangelical-Reformed cantonal Churches took part, as shown in Table 53.

Table 53: Number of questionnaires (Switzerland) in 2007/2008 and 2012/2013

	First study 2007/2008 (Canton of Zurich)		Second study 2012/2013			
	$t_1$	$t_2$	$t_0$	$t_1$	$t_2$	percentage matched (basis: $t_2$ )
Units	39	37	492	477	426	96 %
Confirmands	598	578		7217	6437	77 %
Workers	64	55		905	688	76 %

In preparing the study in summer 2012, all Reformed parishes in Switzerland – about 1400 – were invited to take part. About a third of all the parishes reacted positively to the invitation and were willing to take part. That means that German, French and also some Italian speaking parishes were included. Due to the fact that in each cantonal church a person had been chosen to accompany the study and encouraged the ministers and groups to be part of the project, it can be assumed that not only well-meaning workers or parishes with a positive attitude participated in the study.

Compared to the questionnaires in the other European countries the number of items was higher: about 150 questions each in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  for the confirmands; about 140 questions for the workers in  $t_1$  and 50 questions in  $t_2$ ; beyond that the voluntary workers received another 70 questions in  $t_2$ . In addition to the items in the common questionnaires of the European study, some specific items and batteries were included: some items from the Bertelsmann Religionsmonitor (Huber 2009), items on diaconical and ethical issues and also on personal expectations for the future. The following will mainly concentrate on the results comparable with the other European countries, but also some indications of the specific Swiss items, sometimes also related to specific cantonal results, wherever they differ significantly.

### 3.3 The Confirmands

#### *Results at the Beginning of Confirmation Time*

##### Motives of Participation

The confirmands, who were at the time of  $t_1$  between 14½ and 15 years old, took part in confirmation time mainly for individual reasons. Beside the fact that for 57% the motive for registering was »because it has always been like that in my family« (CA03), 53% noted as an important aspect »because I wanted it myself« (CA11). Only 14% felt »obliged to take part« (CA05) – a rather low number compared to the other countries. 42% notice as an important reason for participation »to come to my own decision about my faith« (CB03).

Questions related to aspects of faith and church in a more explicit sense, are only important for a clearly smaller number of the confirmands: So only 25% of them stated that they wanted to »learn more about God and faith« (CB01). Only 22% affirmed »that they want to be strengthened in their faith« (CB08) and only 14% registered »because I am in a good personal relation to my parish« (CH-specific item). »To receive a blessing on the day of confirmation« (CB11) was an important motive only for every third confirmand; although here it has to be said that the blessing in the sense of a firm and traditional confirmation ritual – like in the Lutheran churches – is not as common and established in the Reformed tradition. In any case, the most important motives for registering for confirmation time are very concrete benefits: for 62% taking part is important »to have a beautiful celebration with family and friends on the day of my confirmation« (CB09), for 59% »to get money or presents at the end« (CB01) – in the canton Zurich the latter percentage is particularly high at 63%. The fact that these percentages rise at the end of the year – close to the confirmation – is hardly surprising.

##### *Interest in Topics and Forms*

The interest of the confirmands in their confirmation time concerning topics and forms is clearly oriented towards life-related aspects – also: 89% of them hoped for »fun« (CK05) during confirmation time. For 56% of them it was important »to be allowed to decide about the topics together with my fellow confirmands« (CK04). Concerning the range of different topics (CL01-CL23) there was high attraction in »friendship« (77%), »drugs and crime« (57%), »justice and responsibility for others« (52%), »love and sexuality« (50%) and »care and protection of the environment / ecology« (38%). The interest in »other religions« was with 43% also quite high. Especially all questions about the »meaning of life« with 58% and interestingly also about »death« with 57%

were important topics for the confirmands, which they wished dealt with during confirmation time.

In contrast to this, tradition-related topics found less interest. So only 37 % were interested in »Jesus Christ«, 29 % in the »Holy Spirit« and 26 % in »Last Supper«, but at least 51 % in »baptism«. Concerning the forms of confirmation work (CS07-CS11) it becomes very obvious that the confirmands favor »camps« with 75 % compared to »weekends« (41 %), »projects/practical experiences« (34 %) and especially compared to weekly lessons (24 %) and »compact longer lessons/modules« (16 %).

### *Interest in Worship Services*

The interest of the confirmands in worship services, which has been a major element of the survey, is generally not as negative as one would expect (CS01-CS06). Almost every third confirmand states that it was »unclear to me what one can expect from a worship service«. On the other hand, 56 % wished that they »experience services adequate for young people«, in Zurich even 63 %, in the canton Thurgau 67 %. 48 % noted that they liked meeting »nice people« in church services and 41 % that they liked listening to »interesting sermons«. It is interesting that 23 % were willing »to contribute my own ideas to the services« – which is compared especially to the Scandinavian countries (all between 8 % and 17 %) quite high. On the other hand, when it comes to »concrete action«, only some 11 % wanted to take over tasks in the services (»for example, do a reading«) – which is one of the lowest values in European comparison.

### *Faith and Religiosity*

The confirmands' answers on faith attitudes differ quite significantly depending on the concrete issue (CE1-CE10). The statements »God loves all humans and cares about each one of us«, »I believe in God« and »There is life after death« are acknowledged positively by every second confirmand, whereas the others did not believe in this or were just indifferent. »God created the world«, »There is life after death« and »Jesus has risen from the dead« was not affirmed by 50 % of the confirmands. 38 % were »insecure what I should believe«.

One central interest of the study was to find out, if and in which sense confirmation time influenced the attitudes of the confirmands. Of course, it would be presumptuous and also a kind of excessive demand, if one would expect groundbreaking effects of this typically one-year offer. But nevertheless it is revealing to look at the results at the end of the year.

*Results at the End of Confirmation Time***Satisfaction**

Looking at the numbers (Table 54), the satisfaction of the confirmands with their confirmation time is with 71 % considerably high – in Zurich with 75 % even higher. 73 % had »fun« (KK05), 79 % »experienced good community in the confirmation group« (KB02), und 60 % approved the statement that they learned »more about God and faith« (KB01) and that they were enabled »to come to my own decision about my faith« (KB03). The satisfaction with camps (81 %), with the main responsible workers (ministers, catechists, youth workers, 75 %), and »other workers« (73 %) is high. But also the »content/topics of lessons« and the »working methods (for example, working with biblical texts, group work, etc.)« find a positive echo with 60 % resp. 55 %.

Table 54: Satisfaction of the confirmands with different aspects in confirmation time ( $t_2$ ) in Switzerland

To what extent are you satisfied with ...		M	SD	Yes
KN01	the whole confirmation time	5.08	1.32	71%
KN03	content/topics of lessons in confirmation work	4.69	1.27	60%
KN07	minister/person primarily responsible for confirmation work	5.38	1.55	75%
KN08	other teachers/workers	5.24	1.47	73%
KN10	church services	4.49	1.39	53%
KN11	camp(s)	5.76	1.61	81%
KN14	music, songs and singing	4.58	1.56	55%
KN20	working methods (for example, working with biblical texts, group work, etc.)	4.61	1.37	55%

N = 5593-6379; scale: 1 = not satisfied at all; 7 = totally satisfied; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation; Yes = Positive response (5, 6, 7).

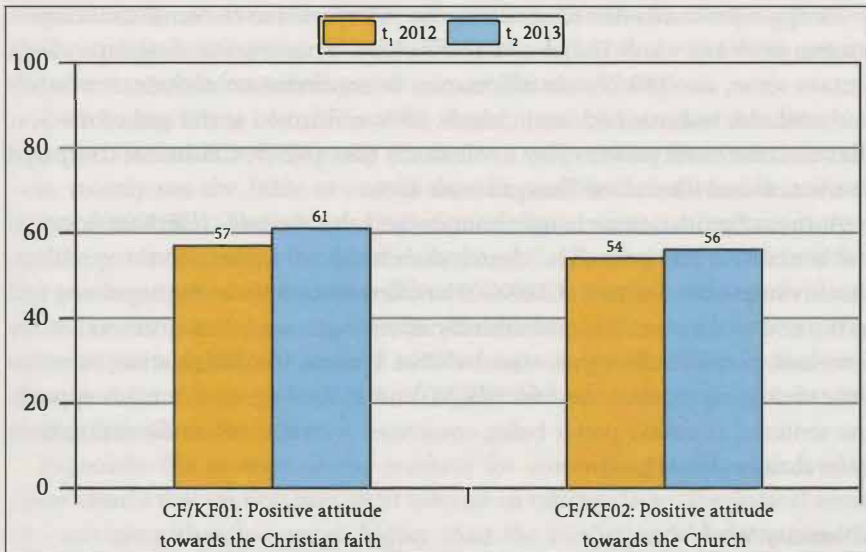
**Perception of Worship Services and the Church**

Concerning the satisfaction with services (KS01-KS17), 57 % approve that they have experienced »forms of worship adequate for young people (e.g., youth services)« and 33 % that they have experienced »interesting sermons«. Almost a third approves, »to have contributed to services with their own ideas«. Not unimportant is the fact that 39 % confirm: »I liked being part of the worship community« and only 16 % felt uncomfortable in the services. Concerning participation, 37 % of the confirmands had tasks in the services (for example, do a reading).

### Faith and Identification with the Church

Over the year the knowledge about »what the Christian faith entails« (CE/KE10, from 46% to 51%) rose significantly. Concerning faith and identification with the church a growing positive perception can be seen. The confirmands were asked at the beginning and at the end of the year: »How would you describe your current attitude towards the Christian faith in general?« (CF/KF01) and »How would you describe your current attitude towards the church?« (CF/KF02). To the first question, 55% responded positively at the beginning of the year and 60% at the end. To the second question about the perception of the church, 53% responded positively, at the end 55%. The approval to the sentence »It is important for me to belong to the church« rose from 26% to 31%.

Figure 42: Faith and identification with the Church in the beginning and in the end of confirmation time ( $t_1$  and  $t_2$ ) in Switzerland (%)



$N = 6886-6955$  ( $t_1$ );  $N = 6077-6128$  ( $t_2$ ); the share of those with a positive response (4 or 5) on a scale 1-5 (1 = very negative, 5 = very positive)

It is encouraging for the importance of confirmation work that at the end of the year around half of the confirmands affirmed that they »got to know the parish better« (KB19, CH-item). Even two thirds had the impression that »in our parish I feel welcome and accepted« (KK37). Almost as many affirmed that »I came into good personal contact with the leaders and workers« (KK03).

Even if only on a low level, there is also a certain rise concerning the ques-

tions »If I should have personal problems, I would turn to a minister« (KG06, from 7% to 13%) and »I am interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation« (CG/KG08, from 11% to 16%) – the number is of course higher where actually such groups and offers exist. Somewhat surprising seems to be the fact that the fraction of confirmands who wish their future children to be baptised (CG/KG03) goes down from 81% to 78% at the end of the year; by the way, the same decline happened in almost all the countries and churches participating in the research.

And obviously during confirmation time a more intense reflection about »what is good or bad in my life« occurred (CB/KB07, from 25% to 52%), and the whole time was also experienced as an »important step in growing up« (CB/KB04, from 35% to 49% at the end of the year). But in this respect, it has to be taken into consideration that the confirmands' expectations might have been so low at the beginning just for the mere fact that they did not know what to expect of the whole time.

All the aspects mentioned above can be interpreted in the sense that confirmation work as a whole somehow contributes to a positive stabilisation and in a certain sense, also to a certain affirmation or confirmation of their own habits and attitudes towards faith and church. 37% confirmed at the end of the year that their faith will »always play a role in my life« (KP47, CH-item), compared to the cantonal Church of Thurgau with 47%.

At the same time, uncertainty about »what I shall believe« (CE/KE05), stayed stable at 38%. The item »The church does not have answers to the questions that are important for me« (CG/KG02) is affirmed by 36% at the beginning and at the end of the year. It is undoubtedly alarming to read that at the end of the year half of the confirmands stated »What I learnt in confirmation time has little to do with my everyday life« (KK35) and 39% of the confirmands approve the sentence »I would prefer being confirmed without the confirmation time beforehand« (KK41).

### Voluntary Work

In the Swiss political and social self-concept, voluntary work is of crucial importance for daily democratic life. This is due to the fact that public responsibility for or in a certain institution – be it the political community, the school, the church or any association – is always understood as an individual public duty. Therefore such public responsibility has to be carried out by the citizens themselves and is not be handed over to professionals in the sense of fully paid representatives.

This self-concept is somehow also reflected in the results of the confirmation study. More than half of the confirmands do some kind of voluntary work, be it in the school or in associations, and almost as many can imagine carrying on

with this voluntary commitment. But although 61 % of the confirmands affirmed that »the church gives young people possibilities to become a voluntary worker« (KP03) only 21 % »can imagine working in the church as a volunteer after confirmation time (for example, in youth work or confirmation work)« (KP01). So the rate of potential young volunteers for the church is significantly lower than for other public institutions.

### 3.4 The Workers

The results of the workers' questionnaires show, in general, that they are mostly very satisfied with the work they are doing in this field. Most of them perceive confirmation work as a core area of their professional parish work. They consider their theological as well as their pedagogical competence as extremely high. 82 % are satisfied with the confirmation work (VM02), interestingly enough also a broad majority of 82 % are satisfied with the financial support for their work from the parish (VM05, CH-item) and 77 % say that they get the necessary support from their parish administration (VM06).

Concerning forms of confirmation work, it can be seen that the didactical approach is dominated by group discussions and working with texts – by the way, mainly not the Bible or certain workbooks but their own collected and selected materials. The use or integration of digital or social media is not yet widely common, except for establishing some Facebook groups. It seems that the workers appreciate the camps almost as much as the confirmands themselves. Looking at the average number of days which are spent in camps, they seem to put a significant amount of time and energy into the preparation of these camps; at least the relation of regular lessons and camp days shows a tendency towards the latter.

Especially the motives of the workers for conducting confirmation work show clearly that on one side, their interest in raising classic theological issues is – not astonishingly – much higher than the confirmands' interest; on the other side, they are very sensitive towards the young people's needs and interests. It is impressive that more than 80 % – the highest percentage among the churches participating in this research – »had at least one personal conversation with each confirmand during confirmation time« (VD05). So without any doubt the empathy and willingness of the workers to involve themselves into this program is quite high.



### 3.5 Challenges and Questions for the Future

Even if these somewhat sporadic results have to be interpreted in their relation to each other and also in their contextual dependency, it can be said in a sense of a preliminary conclusion that during the confirmation year a lot of positive experiences seem to happen to, for and with the Swiss confirmands.

The results show that the workers put a lot of attention and dedicated effort into confirmation work and that a large part of the confirmands are quite open and willing to involve themselves with the topics as well as to engage and contribute to the dynamic of their confirmation group. The full range of results indicates that most of the workers are well aware of the specific challenges of adolescence and that they try to cope with them in a very active and almost passionate sense. They intend to take on these challenges in most productive and creative ways. And it is obvious that this positive approach is well acknowledged and appreciated by many of the young people.

The fact that life-related issues and experiences, like community in the group, are obviously of greater interest than tradition-related issues, is nothing Swiss-specific – and of course, the results especially concerning the issue »Christian beliefs« is compared on the European level somewhat low (cf. pp. 33–35).

But at least two reasons could be named, why especially such results, that show a more critical approach compared to the other European countries, are considerably high. One is that Swiss confirmands are on average about ½ to 1 ½ years older than the confirmands in the other countries. This means that a certain critical attitude towards certain faith rules or an authoritative set of beliefs can well be connected with their adolescent development. The other reason for these findings can be that due to the Reformed self-understanding the tradition of firm confessions and therefore forms of catechetical learning are less important and less distinct than in the other more Lutheran-rooted Churches – not to mention the fact that the number of services which the Swiss confirmands have to attend is clearly lower than in any other country.

At the same time, almost all of the results indicate that in the perspective of theological »substantial« learning and communication about the Gospel in its meaning for daily life, there is still a lot of potential for improvement and innovation. From the results especially on their experiences during the year the strong assumption can be drawn that the confirmands make their decisive experiences of orientation well before and probably almost independently of their experiences during confirmation time, which strongly questions the common understanding of confirmation time as rite of passage.

Especially worrying is that about a third of the young people seem to more or less slip away from the offers or at least seem to be cognitively and emotionally

untouched by confirmation work. It can not be ignored that in Switzerland there is a significant gap between the satisfied and the unsatisfied confirmands; and even more demanding is the fact that the religious and family background is of high importance for the question of overall satisfaction.

From the Swiss results it can be learned that the motivation, integration and inclusion of the young people who feel a severe distance to the church is one of the major challenges of future confirmation work. A certain challenge lies in the fact, that in some other Swiss-specific items it turned out that a large number of the Swiss youth do not really struggle with their live and future in an existential sense. 73 % are confident, that they will have a safe job in the future (KP42), 39 % say that they are worried about their future (KP39) – compared to 50 % that are worried about the future of the whole world (KP40); 39 % wish for more security for their own life (KP41). »Only« 12 % say that there is nobody to speak to when they have a problem (KP45). And for 86 % »life« is to be enjoyed (KP46)!

Looking at these results one of the major challenges for confirmation work in Switzerland will be to take these perceptions seriously and use these hopeful potentials also as strong positive forces for church, parish and group work. But from there it is also necessary to look closely after those who do not belong to the group of these optimistic and privileged ones, be it inside or outside the concrete setting of confirmation work.

In any case, confirmation work as one of the main characteristics of the Reformed Church in its public educational appearance can and should continue to be professionalised in its pedagogical and theological dimensions, including improving and enlarging the opportunities for focused advanced training for the professionals as well as for the voluntary workers.

Concerning materials for confirmation work, it has to be mentioned that in accordance with the 2007/2008 study in the canton Zurich, a voluminous set of materials for confirmation work has been developed and only just recently been published (cf. Evangelisch-reformierte Landeskirche des Kantons Zürich 2014). Currently in a lot of the cantonal Churches this material is presented and finds intensive interest among the ministers and catechists who also think of using this material in their context.

For non-Swiss readers, this does not seem to be surprising; but in fact it indicates almost a paradigm shift within Switzerland insofar as for the first time there is a broader border-crossing interest and attention for confirmation work in »other« cantonal Churches beyond the specific »Kantönligeist« (a metaphor for a specific cantonal, almost spiritual identity) also in this field of church practice. By the way: this growing sensitivity for the common challenges and chances of confirmation work is probably triggered by the development and the results of the study itself.