

FOUNDATIONS FOR CONFIRMATION MINISTRY

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confirm / kon'fuhm / vt / **1** to make firm or firmer; strengthen **2** to give approval to; ratify < ~ a treaty > **3** to administer the rite of confirmation to **4** to make certain of; remove doubt about by authoritative act or indisputable fact.

[THE NEW PENGUIN ENGLISH DICTIONARY]

What is Confirmation?

The institution of Confirmation is neither mandated nor forbidden by Scripture. It is a matter of *adiaphora*, a human tradition devised in the Christian church across the centuries for the purposes of catechesis. Historically, Confirmation developed out of the rite of Baptism: in the early centuries of the Christian church, a bishop would impart a blessing to confirm the validity of a person's baptism. Confirmation thus served an ecclesiastical purpose, and was not originally understood to complete or add to baptism in any way. This understanding of Confirmation is important from a Lutheran perspective, where Baptism is confessed as a full and sufficient means of grace whereby persons are engrafted into the body of Christ and gifted with the Holy Spirit. In Lutheran circles, Confirmation is now commonly referred to as *Affirmation of Baptism*: the rite and process associated with preparation of persons for Confirmation is intended to emphasise the promises of God given in Baptism, and the Christian life as a daily return to those promises. A number of theological "fundamentals" can be thus be enunciated for a Lutheran approach to confirmation.

1. In and through the rite and process of Confirmation, God is the one who confirms, assuring baptised persons of his love and grace for them. Confirmation is a celebration of God's grace, active in the lives of the confirmed and their communities of faith.
2. God carries out his confirming work through communities of faith. Through the education, pastoral care and "mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and

sisters” associated with Confirmation ministry, God builds up persons in faith and imparts his love to them.

3. As persons are confirmed in baptismal faith in and through their faith communities, they are called to live out that faith in these communities, growing into the implications of full membership of the body of Christ (discipleship) appropriate for their age and development.
4. As affirmation of baptism, Confirmation of young people is part of a lifelong process of assurance and strengthening in baptismal faith.
5. Confirmation of young people, as one stage in a life-long process of baptismal affirmation, involves confirming to young people that God is indeed *for them* in the context of their experiences of adolescence.

Principles for Adolescent Confirmation Ministry

On the basis of the above theological “fundamentals”, a number of principles can be proposed for Confirmation ministry with adolescents.

- Confirming young people involves communicating to them the content and implications of God’s baptismal covenant with them. In the Lutheran faith tradition, Luther’s Small Catechism has been used as the basic instructional materials for Confirmation ministry. At the core of the Catechism, and of “confirming ministry” with adolescents, is the assurance of God’s grace for them as sinners. Confirmation ministry is primarily concerned not with conveying certain information, but with proclamation of Christ, with a law-gospel encounter between adolescents and the God of their baptism. Catechetical instruction with young people in Confirmation ministry is significant when and where it acts to confirm them of God’s grace and faithfulness toward sinners.

- Confirmation of young people in baptismal faith takes place in and through their interactions with their communities of faith. In other words, in Confirmation ministry, whole congregations function as confirming communities. Young people learn the content and practices of faith primarily through relationship with others who model to and for them the love of Christ, and confirm them as full members of the body of Christ. Confirmation ministry with adolescents functions best, therefore, when serious attention is given to its relational dimensions. Relationships convey and embody content as much, if not more than catechetical instruction. Indeed, the two require and validate each other as interconnecting aspects of ministry. Significant relationships are particularly important for youth as the “blankies” they carry with them ‘to mediate their passage from the familiar territory of the primary family into the public and sometimes scary world of adulthood’¹. Effective Confirmation ministry with adolescents provides opportunities for intergenerational relationship building within the faith community, for enhancing parent-youth relationships, and for promoting a positive, faith-centred peer culture for young people.
- Confirmation ministry prepares young people for ongoing discipleship as members of the body of Christ, active in their locale as their community of faith. Young persons involved in Confirmation ministry are persons in transition. They are between childhood and adulthood, moving beyond what is was to be a child, but not yet cognisant of what it means to be an adult person. Effective Confirmation ministry apprentices young people for continuing engagement in Christian community, initiating them into new and increased responsibilities and privileges appropriate to their potentiality and giftedness. Such apprenticeship involves immersion of young people into the life and practices of their faith communities, giving them real experiences of ministry and an authentic voice in shaping the forms of community life.

¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, Ron Foster *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Upper Room Books, Nashville, 1998; p. 27.

- Confirmation of young people in baptismal faith must take seriously the context of their lives as adolescents. Christ is not an abstract principle, but God incarnate who meets us in the complications and contradictions of our lives. Effective Confirmation ministry grapples with the issues of adolescence and the life situations of young people, bringing the law and gospel to bear upon the realities of their lives. Working contextually involves a willingness to take seriously and deeply grapple with the questions that young people pose in the course of our ministry with them.
- Confirming young people in baptismal faith involves recognition of their unique giftedness in the Holy Spirit, and of their present and future vocation as persons of faith. Effective Confirmation ministry assists young people in discerning their gifts and defining their sense of Christian vocation. Young people are “blessed to become a blessing” in Confirmation ministry.
- Confirming young people in baptismal faith is a shared responsibility of both their families and the faith communities. Affirmation of baptism calls families and congregations back to consider the promises they made as part of the baptismal rite to support and nurture the baptised person in Christian faith. In Confirmation ministry, congregations are called to partner with, support and equip the home as the primary context for faith nurture. Parents, for their part, are called to recognise their calling as “confirmors” of faith and share in the processes of teaching and mentoring involved in this ministry.
- Understanding Confirmation ministry as one stage in a life-long process of baptismal affirmation removes the pressure from catechists to “cram in” all the key doctrinal teachings into this ministry juncture, and if actualised into an intentional process of lifelong catechesis, can denude the notion of Confirmation as “graduation” from Christian education.

Shaping Confirmation Ministry

The above principles for Confirmation ministry suggest a clear and concrete shape for Confirmation ministry.

Content as Proclamation Teaching which brings Scripture and Catechism to bear on the life situations of young people, with strong emphasis upon a law-gospel dialectic.

Relational Ministry A strong focus upon a relational methodology, with emphasis given to adult mentoring, intergenerational faith sharing, peer-to-peer friendship and ministry and parent-youth relationships.

Community as Curriculum Engaging youth meaningfully in the core activities of their faith communities (worship, service, fellowship, giving, devotional practices); “apprenticing” young people for meaningful roles and responsibilities in their faith communities; guiding each young person toward their own ministry in their community of faith, in relation to their giftedness.

Contextualisation Engagement with the real questions and issues posed by adolescents; cultivation of a free and open thinking environment which permits young people to test their ideas against the teachings of the faith tradition.

Gift Naming	A focus upon naming and affirming the gifts of young people and helping them discern their Christian vocation.
Home-Supportive	Teaching and support of parents as the primary faith nurturers; involvement of parents in ministry programming; linking teaching with faith practices in the home.
A Life-Long Perspective	Integrating the Confirmation of young people into an extended, ritualised process of age-appropriate learning, growth and baptismal affirmation. A life-long Confirmation plan might include the following elements: (a) basic catechetical instruction with children; (b) adolescent confirmation ministry; (c) a revisitation and deeper exploration of doctrinal basics and vocation with young adults; (d) a phase of ministry with “thirty-something” adults focusing (where appropriate) upon the vocation of parenthood and the nurturing faith in the home; (e) a phase of ministry with “mid-lifers” involving reassessment of personal goals and God’s calling in one’s life; (f) a final phase of ministry in later-life examining God’s calling of the elderly as faith mentors in Christian community. Such a system of life-long confirmation would offer many possibilities for intergenerational engagement and ministry, and would communicate powerfully to young people that adolescent Confirmation is not graduation, but one step in an ongoing journey of discipleship.