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THE FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Lake Junaluska, North Carolina | The United Methodist Church

BY *Kate Obermueller Unruh*

A portrait completed as part of



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In addition to a national survey, researchers from The Confirmation Project visited congregations, using the research method of Portraiture to understand how confirmation and equivalent practices are practiced in congregations. Portraiture is a method of inquiry that shares some of the features of other qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative, but it is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. This Portrait is one from a gallery that can be found at www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery.

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ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

The Confirmation Project seeks to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth. These denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church. It seeks to provide Christian leaders with examples of good practice and with strategies that are effective in helping young Christians grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengthening discipleship includes nurturing faith in Jesus Christ and facilitating youth encounters with Christian traditions (Scripture, creeds, confessions, and practices) to support lifelong Christian vocation. This project is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary.

CONTEXTUAL SETTING

In the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, the people are genuine, friendly, and slow-paced. Bo Jangles and the Piggly-Wiggly are real places, contributing to the way that all the charming ideas I had of the South materialized here, as though I had stepped into the pages of a book. Lake Junaluska could not be more charming if it was fictional; yet it is a very real, and very peaceful, place to be. Like a diamond dropped in the crevices of the mountains, it glimmers up to the sky, even in the cold winter weather. The conference and retreat center at the lake has long invited groups from all over the South, and the Foundation for Christian Formation (FCF) has used it as the site of Confirmation retreats since 2006. Even the frozen earth and snow-covered ground could not deter the participants of this February confirmation retreat from being outside, wandering around the water, or sitting on the terrace overlooking the lake.

For some retreaters, Lake Junaluska is like an old friend. It is the site of church retreats that offer solace and that “special place” for campers. For others like me, this retreat was an introduction to the lake. Yet it was easy to be folded into its peace, whether alone by the water or with others, joined together in the loud, joyous sounds of the Foundation for Christian Formation’s folksy worship band. Coming from a heavily populated mid-Atlantic corridor, I appreciated the reprieve from noise, the slow pace of the South, and the way the mountains and water seemed to open up space even within myself to consider the works of God’s hands.

CONGREGATION/CAMP OF THE CONFIRMATION MINISTRY

Leadership

Chris and Gloria Hughes and Ed and Kathleen Kilbourne established the Foundation for Christian Formation in conjunction with Pfeiffer University’s Department of Religion in 2005. Executive Director Gloria is also an ordained Deacon in the United Methodist Church, a Christian educator, an artist, and one of the loveliest people I have ever met. Her husband Chris is equal to her in kindness and warmth, showing a genuine interest in others. He is both a writer and speaker,

as well as an ordained Elder. Kathleen, energetic and hospitable, is a UM Deacon and serves at Pfeiffer University as the Director of Master of Arts Studies in Practical Theology and the Center for Deacon Education. Her husband Ed reminded me of Jimmy Buffett with a tan and boat shoes, and the twinkle in his



eyes reveals his playful nature. He holds a Master of Divinity and is a recording artist, storyteller, and self-described “folk theologian.” The couples are old friends who find joy in helping young people understand themselves as members of Christ’s body and who work (and play) well together. They exude warmth and kindness to everyone they meet, and connect with students easily. After working together for years helping to lead confirmation retreats with another group at Lake Junaluska, these two couples began to have misgivings about the high-energy, entertainment-focused direction the ministry was going. With a deep desire to form young people into “Christ-people” in practical ways, the four branched off and, with the support of Pfeiffer, started the FCF. Ultimately born out of a passion to help young people own their faith, the FCF invites young people to follow Christ and helps equip them for a life of discipleship.

Foundation for Christian Formation

Many regional United Methodist Churches include, as part of their confirmation programs, a weekend retreat to Lake Junaluska, which is completely facilitated by the FCF – a nice break for youth workers and volunteers, who are able to focus on relationship-building rather than retreat planning. FCF hosts 10 of these “Confirm” retreats each year, which are centered on the core aspects of discipleship as defined by the United Methodist Church: Prayers, Presence, Gifts, Service and Witness. Attendance at every part of the weekend is a requirement to join the retreat, with the one exception of pastors who are required to lead worship in their home congregation on Sunday mornings. Leaders of the FCF tailor their events to engage adults as well, so that mentors can reap spiritual benefits and thus become better

leaders to the young people they mentor. This implicit emphasis on co-learning underscores the message that faith is a lifelong journey for followers of Christ.

Confirm retreats consist of four large group worship sessions, a workshop on each of the five core aspects of discipleship (prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness), and the creation of a stole. Worship at a Confirm retreat consists of typical elements: music, the spoken Word, and prayer. What makes it atypical has a lot to do with singer and “folk-theologian” Ed, who not only writes music but who has a knack for transforming popular secular songs (think Uncle Kracker and Sheryl Crow). Ed and Chris take primary lead when it comes to music, relying mostly on their acoustic guitars but also incorporating bongo drums, a keyboard, and other instruments, depending on what the music calls for. Knowing that one of the Foundation’s goals was to move away from the hype that can characterize youth ministry helped me glean a key insight: worship can still be fun without going over the top or seeming like a performance. Singing with Ed and Chris could be both lively and meditative, as well as educational: they often prayed between songs, asking the Lord to teach the confirmands what the words of a particular song could mean for them. Asking sections of the room to sing different parts also taught confirmands how to harmonize, which meant they were utilizing practical musical skills during worship. This technique could go overlooked, but to me it was evidence of how the leadership of FCF used every opportunity they had to demonstrate that being a Christian or having a spiritual life is not something separate from one’s everyday life. It is in one’s daily living – learning to sing or even playing sports – that a person is a Christian. Routine activities can be Christian because the person doing them is Christian. That is part of what it is to have living faith.

The worship session that I found particularly significant centered on exploration of Sacraments, with a special focus on Baptism. The intent is that students understand the promise that was made on their behalf in baptism as they prepare to proclaim ownership of faith in confirmation. After the Bible story, confirmands are invited to come forward and remember their Baptism by marking the sign of the cross on their foreheads with water. Because they are learning how to be active disciples, they then

have the responsibility – and privilege – to anoint the next student’s forehead and thus have an active part in the ceremony. Those who have not yet been baptized are encouraged to anticipate their Baptism, which, for the group with whom I spent the weekend, was planned to take place just before the confirmation ceremony at the end of the program. I was touched when Kathleen came to find me so she could invite me to participate, even though I was there in a research capacity. It was meaningful to remember my own Baptism, and it was especially significant to be sought out and included, even as an adult. Her actions are a prime example of the spirit of hospitality that permeated the entire event.

After the anointing, in preparation for communion, Ed told another Bible story and emphasized the vow being made when a person chooses to be confirmed and take ownership of their faith. He talked about the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice and how the love of Jesus enables us to walk as faithful disciples. Students were then invited to take communion together.



On Saturday confirmands rotated through the workshops, each one centered on a core aspect of discipleship and taught by a different member of the Foundation. Chris opened the “Presence” seminar by asking the group how confirmation was like a wedding day – immediately inviting participation and letting students know their time together would be interactive. He emphasized the intent of a wedding, likening it to the intent of confirmation vows. Just like at a wedding, people make vows and are supported by their community. Yet the wedding is not the marriage itself: marriage is when those two people live together, continually fulfilling those vows. Chris asked if the confirmands could think of reasons why people do not keep their marriage vows. In response confirmands were able to name some legitimately hard scenarios, and I was impressed both by their maturity and their willingness to thoughtfully engage. Similar to a wedding, Chris continued, confirmation is not

where our vow ends but is the beginning of a lifelong commitment to follow Christ. Citing a congregation he had served where the only 25% of members attended worship regularly, he pointed out that many people make a promise to be consistent and persistent, yet do not show up at church on Sunday mornings.

To drive home the point, Chris asked everyone to stand up and find a partner of roughly their own size. Once in pairs, he led them through a version of the trust fall. It was more of a trust ‘lean’ in which they were to lean back into the hands of their partner, whose palms were placed on their shoulder blades. They leaned backward and forward until everyone had a turn being supported. “I have your back” was used as a metaphor for the confirmation vows in which believers promise to *be* the church for each other. The physical leaning illustrated that the vow means something, that there are consequences if someone says “I have your back” but is not actually present. Being an integral member of the church means that something falls through when we are absent. The promise to be persistent gets broken when other things fight for our time, and church becomes expendable. Many confirmands shared what they were missing to be at the retreat: academic bowl, a volleyball tournament, lacrosse, tennis, soccer, practice, games, and parties. Chris pointed out that with all they have going on, keeping their pledge could be difficult at times, and they were going to have to help each other. “It doesn’t have to be one or the other,” he said. “We can figure this out together.”¹ He reminded them that their stole is the outward and visible sign of their commitment, and that being there for someone else means that someone is there for them, too.

The second half of the workshop entailed a discussion about what it means to be a theologian. Because they walk around with understandings of God and explore what those are, they are theologians. To help them gain a theological or faith vocabulary, Chris said that the main thing theologians do is ask two questions: first, “where is God?” (to which they responded heaven, their hearts, and everywhere), and second, “When is God present?” Though they all agreed that God is present all the time,

¹ Chris Hughes, opening workshop at Confirm Retreat hosted by the Foundation for Christian Formation, Feb. 2015.

confirmands said they were not particularly aware of God being there in that moment. They granted that they were sometimes less and sometimes more aware of God's presence, particularly in worship and especially during communion, because the bread and wine represent Jesus. At least half of the group raised their hand to indicate they had experienced God's presence at some point. Chris pointed out that practicing something makes a person better at that thing, and that they could get better at experiencing God's presence – and, in fact, part of their pledge in confirmation was to be consistent at doing just that.

Another critical piece of each Confirm retreat is making a stole that will be given to them at their confirmation. At the conclusion of each of the first three worship services, confirmands decorate a piece of the stole. Besides serving as a creative way to incorporate the arts into worship, the stole is meant to represent the unique person that God has made each confirmand to be and to indicate that they are beloved by God. The first section, on the lower right as it faces them, focuses on what God says about them. They write their names, nicknames, positive descriptors of their personalities, symbols that they feel represent them, and Scripture passages they find meaningful. They are then asked to show-and-tell with their group as a community-building exercise.

The other side of the stole, created after the second worship session, symbolizes who God is and thus includes descriptors and names for God. The theme is for students to see themselves as vocational Christians, or as ministers of the Gospel where they are. Wherever there is room, confirmands are to add the names of Christian mentors or examples. They also identify important roles they play (“student,” “friend,” etc.) and illustrate it with a symbol or drawing of their choice – a soccer ball, a cross, a depiction of their family – anything they choose. Once that is complete, they are asked to add the word “Christian” above their role, discussing how adding the word “Christian” changes their self-understanding. This exercise further enhances the idea that Christian faith is lived in daily routine instead of a separate spiritual sphere. Students have the opportunity to claim who they are as people uniquely created and loved by God, as well as get to know each other in deeper ways.

Following the third worship session, they fill in the final section of the stole that sits on the neck. Here confirmands trace their handprint, with the letters PPGSW – one letter on each finger – to remind them that prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness are all part of what it means to follow Jesus. The final worship service on Sunday mornings includes the “Receiving of the Stoles” in which confirmands are reminded of the call on each of our lives and the commitment to faith they are making. All this is part of the ministry of all Christians, and is a privilege and responsibility. Through every aspect of the retreat, being a Christian is communicated as a sacred and special thing. Faith is a calling; it requires something of us; God’s love is big and deep and incredible. The seriousness of Christ’s sacrifice is worthy of our gratitude. Communicating in this way has the effect of helping students to understand that claiming faith is important and is something they commit to because Christ is worthy of our commitment. At the same time, they are part of the body of Christ and understand that others are making this commitment with them. They are accountable to others who help build them up, and they do the same. Christian life is lived in the presence of God and the presence of others.

Youth Experience

Though congregations often retreat here as an introduction to or culmination of the confirmation experience, the group I was visiting with was an anomaly. Their retreat fell in the middle of the program, which takes place during sixth grade – two years sooner than the typical program. Consequently, this marked the first time that many of the students had been away from home by themselves for an entire weekend. Some of the girls said they missed their families, and indicated that each of them gave up something to be there, from time with a sister who was home from college to various sporting events to other family trips. Many parents volunteered as chaperones as well, leaving the rest of their families behind for the weekend. This sense that the retreat had a tangible cost for many complements the FCF’s focus on commitment through prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. For this congregation, confirmation was also part of the maturation process.

Confirmands JT, Amy, and Sarah allowed me to join them on the walk across the lake to the gift shop and shared with me their thoughts on their experience of the program so far. As we walked, the girls and I marveled at how the water sparkled blue and green, even in February. Just a few days earlier their schools had been closed because of light flurries, and now the sun was shining in the bright blue sky, with no clouds in sight. Despite the cold, there was a boat on the water – an idyllic picture against the Great Smoky Mountains. Perhaps it was the theme of wedding vows lingering in my mind that made Lake Junaluska seem like a diamond as it sparkled and shimmered underneath the warm sun.

With that in mind as we walked, the girls were open to conversation about commitment. Sarah told me she was doing confirmation so she could “feel like a part of the church.”² She was able to clearly articulate that confirmation meant “making a pledge” and to briefly discuss the similarity of commitments and covenants. Because these girls were in sixth grade, a full two years younger than the typical confirmand, I was especially impressed by their ability to articulate how confirmation meant commitment and belonging that encompassed participation in congregational life.

Articulate and confident, JT is a self-proclaimed artist and the most vocal of the group. Though she was the first to admit her apprehension about being away from home, she was clearly enjoying the retreat and told me that doing confirmation means being welcomed into God’s life. She said that in confirmation, “You’re making a big, big decision that you need to keep responsibility for. A commitment.”³ Like Sarah, JT had a firm grasp on the pledge they were being asked to make. She said that when she was younger, she thought that God was just something that people made up, like a ghost or a phantom. Largely as a result of confirmation, she said she now saw God as a real being with whom she can have a relationship. God is someone she can talk to and rely on.

² Sarah, informal interview with Kate Obermueller Unruh, Feb. 2015.

³ JT, informal interview with Kate Obermueller Unruh, Feb. 2015.

I continued to be impressed by the content they shared with me, and amazed at how these eleven-year-old minds could connect the dots of what they had been learning throughout their program and at the retreat. While they perused the gift shop, I sat on the terrace overlooking the lake and reflected on how joyful I was that these girls were having truly formative retreat experiences.

RETREAT: ATMOSPHERE & EXPERIENCE

Music was playing as we poured into the back of the sanctuary and took our seats on Friday night. The back of the room had a lower ceiling and was set up with round tables that held art supplies and a blank canvas stole at each chair. Where the low ceiling ended, it vaulted into a two-floor



space with a balcony above – the main space for large group worship. In the center of the stage was a cross, to its left was a vertical blue mural, painted by Gloria herself, and to the right were guitars. Microphones stood on either side of the stage in front of wooden stools, on which sat two of the founding members of the Foundation: Ed and Chris. “Good evening, Church,” Chris said, and the crowd began to quiet.

As introductions were made the crowd was addressed again as “Church,” and I wondered how it sounded to these adolescent ears. Had they heard this before, or was it new to them? It was not Sunday morning and we were not at a church, but we were worshipping. Though I understand the Church as the body of Christ, made up of people, it still surprised me to be addressed as such. I wondered if any of the confirmands shared my surprise.

Ed, with white hair and a tan even in February, looked like he belonged on a boat as he got the music started with pop songs he had rewritten. He taught each side of the room different parts in a quick music lesson, and the energy in the room began to grow as they brought the parts together. Music filled the room and confirmands

were engaged, but I could not help but notice what was missing: the rafters weren't shaking with bass. There was no screaming, no extra noise. There were no drums or flashy lights. Rambunctious sixth grade boys were *not* punching each other in the guts. All the things that I realized I had come to expect and – to be quite honest – to dread, were notably absent. At every point during the day that I had anticipated chaos, I was pleasantly surprised. Even now, even in a big group with a high energy level. There was no hype. Just worship. This environment simply was not chaotic. It was energetic, charged, and engaging, but it was not frenzied or hectic. There was a sense of peace, yet I still wondered how long it would be before we reached the tipping point when that middle school insanity would take over.

Convinced that I needed to conserve my energy, I left just before the end of worship, tired from my travel. On my way out I met Gloria, and I loved her instantly. We had exchanged a few emails in preparation for my visit, but this was our first chance to meet face-to-face. She exuded warmth and kindness, and I was yet again pleasantly surprised by the hospitable welcome I received. We chatted for a few minutes and agreed to find some more time together the following day.

We got that time together over dinner the following evening, when the Hughes and the Kilbournes graciously treated me to dinner at one of their favorite spots in town. Over a shared meal, I learned some important pieces of the group's history that helped form an expectation of trust in students that I had been noticing throughout the weekend. The story of their journey to begin the Foundation for Christian Formation illustrates well their approach to ministry.

In the early 2000s, as the foursome grew tired of the hype that was beginning to permeate the former ministry they worked with, they felt a growing sense that the style of worship and environment seemed more about entertainment than engagement. Ed also noted that the hyped up approach was reflected in the attitude of the students who attended in that it became more about what students could get out of it. The production-style worship promoted a critical stance on the part of campers, who looked at leadership the same way many teens look at their parents: "You're old. What can you possibly teach me?"

The desire to recover an aura of discipleship spurred the creation of a more natural environment that was free from gimmicks and hype. With the vision of nurturing student engagement and using their gifts for teaching and music, they adopted an air of peace instead of chaos. Instead of a rock band and flashing lights, Ed plays the guitar in his own folksy style, using some of his own music. Each of the four is able to draw on extensive ministry experience to teach, facilitate workshops, and lead worship in a genuine, lively, and interactive way. In addition to a relaxed style of worship, Ed noted that ten years of working with the Foundation also meant ten years added to their age; now, instead of looking at him like a parent, students view them more like their grandparents. As he pointed out, young people “love their grands!” He feels more of a sense of respect as a result, and I am convinced that is also a reflection of the deep respect they show for their students. When I noted to the Foundation leaders my surprise that kids this age were not acting out, Ed confidently replied, “It’s because we don’t expect them to.” The *expectation* of good behavior and engagement from their confirmands creates this trust and makes a difference in both behavior and attitude toward content. This is made possible by high levels of trust and respect: respect for confirmands as Christian people with something legitimate to contribute to the world, coupled with an innate trust that, when empowered to do so, these young people would live into that identity. In this case, that means not only behaving well, but engaging in worship and theological exploration. This high level of trust is, in my opinion, an outstanding basis for ministry. The FCF deserves credit for creating this atmosphere, which can be attributed to their age and experience as well as their passion and genuine desire to help others know Christ.

An effect of that sense of trust is that I myself felt at ease, and it would be safe to bet that the confirmands shared that sentiment. The evening service included a celebration of the Eucharist, and the sense of trust and liberating expectation I had perceived was steady and strong. The belief in young people’s capabilities of doing and understanding was equaled by their trust in God to move in the hearts of those same people who had followed God’s call to confirmation and the retreat. All this led to a very successful retreat, indeed.

My last impression of the Confirm retreat, before making the three and a half hour drive back to Atlanta that night to catch a plane home, reflects the positive attitude toward faith that permeates Confirm retreat. The church I visited with had a tradition to walk around the lake and meet together in an amphitheater under a large, lighted cross after worship on Saturday evening. The air was crisp and our breath came out in wispy white puffs as students silently walked down the steps and filled the cold stone benches under the light of the cross.

The youth pastor opened by summing up some of what the group had discussed over the weekend, then told them that the Psalms say that the mountains and hills and rivers will sing God's praises. He instructed them stand and shout "Praise God!" at the top of their lungs on the count of three, and to be silent immediately after. One...two...three. "PRAISE GOD!" we all shouted. The wind carried our voices across the water and against the mountains, which echoed our praise back to us. In the stillness of the night, we listened as the sound bounced from hilltop to hilltop, marveling at the resounding "Praise God." As we repeated the exercise twice more, I felt certainty deep in my spirit that, like these shouts of praise, the ministry of the FCF would echo through these students lives as they learned live into their confirmation vows as active participants in the Body of Christ.