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THE DIOCESE OF CALIFORNIA AND ST. JAMES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Oakland, California | The Episcopal Church

BY *Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine*

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.

CO-DIRECTORS

Katherine M. Douglass | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)
Richard R. Osmer | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

PROJECT MANAGER

Kristie Finley | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

STEERING COMMITTEE

Reginald Blount | Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, AME
Kenda Creasy Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church
Gordon S. Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Joy L. Arroyo | Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesleyan Church
Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)
Shonda Gladden | Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, AME
Kate Obermueller Unruh | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC
Kate Siberine | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church
Jacob Sorenson | Luther Seminary, ELCA, Camp Consultant

SPECIALISTS

Michael Gewecke | Digital Missioner, www.smartchurchproject.com
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, www.smartchurchproject.com
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, www.designbysarah.net
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

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.

*“Confirmation preparation should be the holistic formation of body and soul.
 Every confirmation service should be multi-cultural.
 Music from around the world shows people they are part of a church
 that is bigger than the people who are gathered.
 It should be a celebration of great joy, with a party afterwards,
 and an element of community service.”*

- Jennifer Snow, Diocesan Associate for Discipleship Ministries¹

CONTEXT

Just as with real earthquakes, the epicenter of our exploration of confirmation practices in the Episcopal Diocese of California was an unlikely, unassuming place, a store-front restaurant in a brightly colored two-story half-block strip mall on 14th Avenue in an unnamed section of central Oakland. Bishop Marc Andrus had insisted on meeting us there for his interview, clearly as a matter of principle. Supporting a local minority-owned business as an Anglo purple-shirted clergy-collared bishop trumped everything, even if there were a chance we would not find a place to sit or be able to hear each other – concerns that had been raised by the Rev. Julia McCray-Goldsmith, the program team leader for the Diocese.

14th Avenue is a four-lane thoroughfare that runs unpretentiously from the Oakland docks along the San Francisco Bay to Interstate 580, the MacArthur Freeway. I-580 divides flatland Oakland from foothills Oakland. 14th Avenue is a bustling corridor of light industry, apartment complexes, once elegant Victorian houses, and way too many billboards advertising casinos. Only the street signs are consistently in English. We counted five languages in our short walk from the church to lunch. From any vantage point this is clearly a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual transitional neighborhood, and property owners use bright colored paints freely to disguise structural fatigue.

Saigon Deli is famous among locals, even though there is no website or printed menu. It is where you can order Pastor Banh Mi, bubble tea and a pollo taco on fresh handmade corn tortillas. The owners, Tony (Mexican) and his wife X

¹ Jennifer Snow, interviewed by Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine, November 1, 2014.

(Vietnamese) have created a distinct culinary fusion seasoned with extreme hospitality. As Kate and I stepped tentatively through the poster-covered front door a little before noon, a bell suspended from a worn red ribbon jingled and we (like every customer after us) were warmly greeted, and immediately treated to free samples. Within minutes our rickety linoleum tables and duct-taped, mismatched diner chairs were transformed into a banquet hall.

You cannot talk about confirmation in the Episcopal Church and not include at least some reference to a bishop, so there was something just right about the three of us (Julia, Kate and Lisa) leaning into our ever-expanding feast, squeezed up against the deli case constantly bumping into the bishop's expressive arms and extended legs as he held forth. While Marc gladly answered our interview questions, Tony's unapologetic insertions as a faithful Roman Catholic, inspired Marc to sit tall and articulate definitive positions on several of the liturgical theological issues that continue to confound the Episcopal Church. We were living on the threshold of multiple realities – a theme that would continue to present itself throughout the weekend.

A little backstory is important here: in May 2014 the Episcopal Diocese of California received national attention for holding its first Eco-Confirmation service under the redwoods in Sonoma County. According to Peters-Mathews (2014),

... the Liturgy of the Word for the Eco-Confirmation was a local modification of the Cosmic Walk originally created by Sr. Miriam MacGillis. A large basin of water, sitting in the center of a spiral of red rope on the ground, was blessed before an abridged version of the history of the universe was read. The red rope emphasized the presence of the Holy Spirit for the occasion of confirmation.

The Prologue to John's Gospel began the stations of the Cosmic Walk, and after the lesson from John, a reader shared the story of the Great Flaring Forth at the beginning of time. Other events noted in the history included the creation of stars, galaxies, and our sun; the formation of the Earth's atmosphere; the appearance of redwoods; Jesus' birth; and the founding of St. Dorothy's Rest. At each station a walker poured water from the baptismal basin into bowls marking the passage of time between each event.²

² Peters-Matthews, Joseph. "Eco-Confirmation and Woods to Waves Great Successes." <http://www.diocal.org/pcn/news/eco-confirmation-and-woods-waves-great-successes>.

Bishop Marc, “an outspoken commentator on the role of humanity in global climate change and on the need for an amendment of life of the whole human people to restore creation that has been commended to humanity’s care” Peters-Matthews continued, confirmed candidates in the center of the spiral, reminding them that baptism is the source of all Christian ministry, including care for creation. Literally refreshed by the waters of baptism symbolically sprinkled over the diverse assembly, the newly confirmed and their witnesses were invited to put renewed faith in action by participating in the 14 mile Woods to the Waves hike to raise money and awareness for health camps. Clearly the Diocese of California was trying something new. Diocesan confirmation services have traditionally been held beneath the pointed arches, grand vaulted ceilings, and clerestory windows of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, followed then by a bland reception on the Cathedral plaza or in the windowless Cathedral gymnasium.

As an extension of the published Diocesan mission:

- Embodied Justice for All People & for God’s Creation
- Church Vitality Rooted in Spirituality
- Transparent & Accountable Leadership
- Inclusive Community³

Bishop Marc Andrus suggested to his staff that it was time to re-imagine the practice of diocesan confirmation services (for all ages). He challenged his team to develop confirmation liturgies (and other rites of re-affirmation) to provide a rich context for candidates to make a mature public affirmation of faith while also experiencing authentic spiritual transformation in the midst of the celebration itself. The bishop dreamed of confirmation services that bridged transformative liturgy and awareness of the cosmos with immediate faithful activism.

³ "Diocese of California- Our Mission." <http://www.diocal.org/about/organizations/diocese-of-california> (accessed September 12, 2016).

CONGREGATION

The Beloved Community Confirmation on Saturday, November 1st, hosted by St. James/Iglesia Episcopal de Santiago in Oakland, was the second confirmation service in the Diocese of California built around the bishop's alternative vision. It was the first Diocesan confirmation to be held in the East Bay – across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco – a political threshold-crossing moment in its own right. This newest experiment, in what academics like to call contextual ministry, was also taking place in the oldest surviving church building in Oakland. Established in 1858, soon after Oakland was incorporated as a city, St. James was once the worship home of railroad barons and some of the earliest Wells Fargo Bank employees. Like so many urban churches, the history of St. James reflects the changing demographics and economics of its neighborhood. From its days of glory St. James' membership had declined to four stalwarts when the Diocese decided to intervene and call a new mission-focused priest rather than close the doors forever.

Today, St. James is an intentionally multi-cultural congregation where church life is organically bilingual and inclusive. Translation is at times deliberate and structured, but more often a spontaneous dance between Spanish and English weaving distinct yet interdependent narratives that require everyone to take turns standing at the threshold of not-knowing. This visceral experience of having to trust what cannot (always) be understood seems to cultivate capacity among its membership for attentiveness to the existential threshold between our world and the next. A hybrid mission statement-creed found in both languages on the parish website reveals additional thresholds honored by the congregation: Protestant-Catholic, individual-community, local-global, and ancient-contemporary:

- We are a multicultural community rooted in the tradition of the Episcopal Church in the Diocese of California.
- We strive to love our neighbors as ourselves and respect the dignity of every person.
- The Episcopal Church is part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, and traces its heritage to the beginnings of Christianity.
- Our liturgy retains ancient structure and traditions, and is celebrated in many languages.

- We celebrate our unity in Christ while honoring our differences, always putting the work of love before uniformity of opinion.
- All are welcome to find a spiritual home in the Episcopal Church.⁴

Under the faithful, creative, hard-working leadership of the Rev. Dr. Sam Dessordí Leite, the congregation is crossing yet another threshold – from death to resurrection. Sunday worship attendance has grown from 7 on Sam’s first Sunday to a reliable fifty in less than two years. Last April the Sunday School class mysteriously jumped from 2 children to twenty-five!

One third of the active adults cannot read or write in Spanish or English. “Many walk everywhere ... to go to work cleaning houses ... because they do not know which bus to catch,” Fr. Sam reported in a pained voice. They feel ashamed and can be reluctant to participate in public gatherings. In response, he and the core leadership of St. James, work hard to cultivate a climate of compassion and a participation threshold of warm engagement and deep listening for the Spirit rather than one marked only by printed text. This caring climate also assures undocumented individuals that Iglesia Episcopal de Santiago is a safe place to come out of the shadows, worship God, and mark life’s transitions. Fr. Sam estimates that half his congregation crossed the desert for a better life in the United States. As such, hosting a diocesan confirmation service was simultaneously great privilege and tangible risk for members of the congregation. To what extent would the event with its well-choreographed community action after the liturgy attract the attention of local authorities?

The original wooden A-frame sanctuary of St. James is now a heavily used, well worn all-purpose room with inadequate storage, dented metal folding chairs, and cheerful Mexican streamers hanging from the rafters. The simple space and rugged kitchen feel loved and inviting, despite the hand-written “Out of Order/*Fuera de Servicio*” sign on one of the two bathrooms. It is home to a weekly food pantry, ESL classes, a day laborer lunch program, *Quinceañeras*, all too frequent wakes, and of

⁴ “St James Episcopal Church in Oakland” <http://www.stjamesoakland.com/> (accessed September 12, 2016).

course constant church community meals and generous coffee hours. This is not only a multi-cultural congregation, but increasingly a vibrant multi-generational community. Children clearly feel welcome. They run squealing from one end of the hall, up a ramp, through the connecting corridor which has been furnished to serve simultaneously as a sacristy, meeting room and cozy gathering space, and up another ramp into the newer (late 19th century) church building, then way to the back where crayons, puzzles, picture books and cloth puppets are stored on a rickety bookshelf. Members of the congregation address young people by name, and the same youth proudly serve at the altar and sort food for the pantry.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

As the church continues to grow and thrive, confirmation has become a vital piece of youth discipleship and outreach to the community. We were able to sit down with three teens from St. James who, after 12 class sessions with Fr. Sam, were confirmed in May at the Diocesan Eco-Confirmation service under the stately redwoods of northern California. While markedly different from their 14th Street neighborhood, all of the youth expressed complete awe at the power of this simple liturgy of affirming their faith in the midst of the incredible abundance of creation. Rosa, the youngest and the only girl, said, “When they started throwing the holy water, I got the chills. And then we walked around everyone and blessed them.”⁵ These teens continue to be a blessing to their community through lives dedicated to service. They began volunteering at the parish’s weekly food bank program as part of their confirmation preparation and now, six months later, they still arrive at noon on Wednesdays to unload the truck of donated fresh food from the Alameda food bank and oftentimes stay until 5:00 or 6:00pm, supervising other volunteers and helping to serve 200 of their neighbors. Motivated by the reality that the Roman Catholic Church usually requires confirmation before hosting a young person’s Quinceañera, the teens and their families initially joined St. James so that they could go through the confirmation process. They have stayed in the parish because it has become a home where there can bring their spiritual gifts and regularly

⁵ Confirmand, interviewed by Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine, November 1, 2014.

encounter God in the liturgy and each other. José, said as he looked around the space which was resplendent with the altars and offerings for the Day of the Dead, “My friends don’t really get it, but I feel safer at St. James than I do anywhere else.”⁶

On November 1st, confirmands from other Episcopal congregations began arriving about 1:30pm for an advertised session with the Bishop at 2pm, and the service at 3pm. While warmly and spontaneously greeted by parishioners, there were no official greeters or guides. Most groups instinctively wandered



toward the church, stepping wide-eyed into a beautiful historic sanctuary lavishly decorated for *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). We watched as people paused in front of each altar to look closely at the artifacts collected to honor the lives of loved ones who had died. Traditionally families in Mexico build at least one altar on the days leading up to November 1st. Members of St. James and clergy from neighboring congregations had worked all week with a celebrated folk artist, Enedina Vasquez, to host educational workshops for the diocese on *Día de los Muertos*. Participants had built a collection of large, creative and stunningly beautiful altars. Symbolic *ofrendas* (offerings) were carefully and symmetrically arranged on brightly colored fabrics - items the spirits of the deceased would enjoy when they returned to earth to visit their living family and friends. The altars were over-flowing with hand-crafted tin ornaments, ribbons, candles, *pan de muerto* (fresh baked bread), incense, fruit, salt, photographs of the deceased, marigolds, and sugar skulls. Each altar was further individualized with extras such as cigarettes, chocolate, sports memorabilia, stuffed animals, Fritos, even a TV remote! Guests moved reverently from altar to altar, noticeably anxious when children reached out to touch an object or someone wanted to take pictures until Fr. Sam and Enedina reassured them that the altars were to be appreciated, enjoyed, and celebrated.

⁶ Ibid.

Even deciding on the date for confirmation revealed how this congregation sits at the intersection of multiple thresholds, seeking to honor diocesan commitments, congregational traditions, and cultural rituals. In August, Fr. Sam learned that the Diocese had chosen November 1st for the fall “multi-cultural” General Confirmation service at St. James, he saw two serious problems. First, the title was wrong. All confirmation services are multi-cultural because every human being is created uniquely by a loving God and our lived experience is always shaped by culture. [It was later pointed out that several other Diocesan leaders shared this perspective.] Second, November 1st would be right in the middle of his congregation’s annual celebration of *Dia de los Muertos* - an ambitious undertaking in its own right, but more importantly a three-day festival focused on the lives of the deceased. Confirmation by contrast, focuses on the living. It is an opportunity for confirmands to make a public affirmation of their mature and present faith, and in the particular case of youth confirmations it is experienced as a rite of passage forward into the adult Christian community. Fr. Sam anticipated that there would be both resistance and confusion among the parents of his own confirmands if they were asked to juggle two such distinct traditions on the same day. At the same time, he was eager to continue the practice of St. James hosting diocesan events that he views as an opportunity of mutual benefit. He thoughtfully suggested to the Diocese that moving the General Confirmation to December 12th, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, would be helpful and culturally more appropriate. (The feast day of the Virgin of Guadalupe honors the belief that in 1531 Jesus’ mother Mary, who is Mexico’s patron saint, appeared twice to a man in Mexico City. Marking the day has become a popular and important festival in Mexican-American communities throughout the United States.) To Fr. Sam, its themes of mothering, family, and God’s revelation seemed like a natural fit with the theology of confirmation. Despite accommodating efforts by Snow (Diocesan Associate for Discipleship Ministries) to renegotiate the date and/or location, it was agreed that the Fall General Confirmation would take place on November 1st as originally announced. Graciously, Fr. Sam agreed to host what had then been reframed as the Beloved Community Confirmation, and wisely set about developing a program to prepare his

own congregation for the cultural mash-up to come, and to educate the wider church on the significance of *Dia de los Muertos*.

Thankfully, Enedina was available to help St. James host two evening workshops that proved to be extraordinary opportunities for the congregation's hospitality to shine. Wisdom and joy transcended class, language, race and age. We were all encouraged to take pride in our particular ethnic and cultural heritage. Teenagers asked each other what they would want placed on their altars. "Pizza" did not surprise me, but "My retainer" did! One young confirmand Raul from Grace Church in Martinez, attended the Thursday evening workshop with his grandfather. Quietly, and with great care, he made a copper *offrenda*, and insisted on taking it home because it was not finished at the end of the evening. Raul brought the ornament back to St. James on Saturday and spent a long time determining exactly where to hang it. We learned later that Raul had made the ornament in memory of his deceased baby brother about whom he never talks. Despite his initial concerns, and thanks to extraordinary support from the diocese, faithful and strategic decisions were made to trust the ancient words of Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well," and indeed they were.

As musicians for the diocesan confirmation service began to rehearse, confirmands and their sponsors were encouraged to move into the parish hall. It was noisy and quickly filling up with bodies. Women from the parish were preparing for the reception, moving trays of food efficiently between the kitchen and a line of tables running down the middle of the room. Clergy seemed to be gathering in one corner, some already vested and others holding vestments over their arms. Some people had found their way to the limited seating, old pews pushed up against the walls. Well-groomed teenagers were standing around, awkwardly waiting for something to happen. There was a lot of hair twisting and weight shifting going on, but very little real conversation. A group of Latino youth from St. James were the most relaxed, and the most formally dressed. They were joking around in English while their parents addressed them in Spanish. The girls bright floral bouquets stood out against their elegant white dresses, while the boys were in trim suits with pristine patent leather shoes; evoking associations with traditional weddings.

A stack of the dented folding chairs was soon rolled out. The Bishop jumped in and began to create a seating area. Glad to have something to do, most of the visiting teenagers rushed to help. Once the commotion of chairs scraping across the floor had died down, Bishop Marc invited the confirmands to make themselves a nametag and then take a seat. He did not wait long before starting to talk. Unfortunately, there was never a microphone or translator for the 40-minute presentation, and sight lines were constantly interrupted by the late arrivals. The bishop welcomed everyone to the Beloved Community Confirmation Service, introduced himself, and asked which congregations were represented. Sadly, the twenty individual confirmands from five East Bay congregations (5 adults and fifteen youth) were not given the chance to introduce themselves. By later reviewing the diocesan registration materials we learned the fifteen teenagers came from 3 congregations, and ranged in age from 11 to 16. One young man, David, had come across the Bay because his adoptive family wanted his confirmation to take place in a setting that would affirm his Guatemalan birth.

The bishop explained the origins of the idea of Beloved Community as emerging from the work of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights movement, seeking to provide a vision of reconciliation and cooperation while affirming the particular truths of all people. “Likewise, in Jesus Christ we are not seeking to erase our differences, but rather to bring those differences together so that they can exist in creative tension with each other. The Beloved Community is the product of that reconciling work.”⁷ Bishop Marc emphasized that confirmation was intimately tied to the transformative actions of baptism:

Confirmation is related to baptism. According to St. Paul, baptism is first a death before it is new life. Humans are born into a system that is broken. Christians are invited in baptism to let go of and die to sin. Only God can give us new life and we must choose to receive it. Today you are confirming that which has already been done by God which we must continue to choose and say yes to every day...When San Francisco pitcher Madison Bumgarner was asked how he pitched two near perfect games under huge pressure in the recent World Series, he said, “I did it by pitching one pitch at a time.” And

⁷ The Rt. Rev. Marc Andrus, recorded by Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine, November 1, 2014.

that's exactly how we live our lives of faith too ... one step or action at a time. Today you are taking an important public step, and I commend you.⁸

While the confirmations at Grace Cathedral used to include the option for friends and family of the confirmands to stand behind them and lay hands on them as the bishop confirmed, Bishop Marc found the practice troubling. Some confirmands kneeled before him with crowds gathered around, and others knelt alone with just their sponsoring priest. He explained that he has strongly encouraged a transition to having just one clergy presenter in order to make a liturgical and theological statement about confirmation as a mature affirmation of faith. “Why do you need to be presented? Because your presenters represent the system of support that has brought you to this point, certify your readiness, and will welcome you into your continued walk with Christ.”⁹ However, it is the confirmand, not their parents, family, or church, who must make these promises for themselves and be open to the gifts for ministry that God will grant them in their confirmation. “This is not a gift because you are good, or smart, or have studied, but it is a gift from God to use to do God’s work in the world.”¹⁰ The significance of standing alone was also affirmed by Fr. Sam to make a clear distinction within his particular Latino ministry context. *Padrinos*, or godparents, play a central role in the liturgical actions of baptism and first communion standing with the candidates and laying their hands on their godchildren to symbolize the support and companionship they are promising to provide throughout the faith journey, but in the confirmation ceremony *los padrinos* are instructed to process in with the teens and are then expected to sit separately signifying that this is a sacrament of maturity.

The liturgy for confirmation was carefully crafted to occupy the shared space of Christian tradition between particular national, racial, ethnic, political, and economic cultures. The bulletin, printed in parallel format with Spanish and English, was developed using the weekly template from St. James. The music was led by a self-identified lesbian Filipina vocalist and two Latino musicians moving

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

confidently between guitars and percussion instruments, all accompanied by a small volunteer mixed-age, multi-racial choir of individuals from the confirmands' congregations. The accessible music was chosen from diverse cultural traditions, sung in multiple languages and invited everyone to worship standing (literally and figuratively) between tradition and innovation, verbal and non-verbal expression, embodied and intellectual knowing.

In many ways the liturgy unfolded smoothly and uneventfully although the back and forth between the spoken English and Spanish was an ever-present reminder that the truth we share is greater and more mysterious than the particular words we speak. This reality must have been reassuring to the Rev. Julia McCray-Goldsmith as she attempted to translate the Bishop's sermon into vernacular Spanish. Ever the scholar-priest, and currently a student at the California Center for Integral Studies, Bishop Marc chose to explore the vastness of interstellar space and its relationship with the communion of saints, weaving a systematic theology of creation and - tying in the Day of the Dead - our connectedness with the faithful who have gone before us. The sermon would have been well received by a scientifically-sophisticated congregation whose first language was English and second perhaps by molecular physicists, but unfortunately most people were left with an appreciation for the Bishop's passion and a vague idea of his point. It seemed that the Bishop's good intentions overwhelmed his awareness of the context. There was palpable relief throughout the nave when the sermon ended and the more familiar presentation and examination of the candidates for confirmation began.



Wearing cope and mitre, and holding his crosier, Bishop Marc took his appointed position facing the congregation from the chancel platform at the top of the center aisle in front of the elaborately decorated altar. The confirmands stood up and left their pews, moving with their sponsoring priests to the front of the church but

leaving open the space directly in front of the Bishop. Each priest addressed the Bishop saying, “I present this/these person(s) for Confirmation.” Or at least that is what they were supposed to say. Notably, more than one sponsoring priest added the words “the sacrament of” to their declaration, illuminating a sustained theological debate in the Episcopal Church.

Presented, the candidates were then examined by the Bishop in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, “Do you reaffirm your renunciation of evil?” they were asked and confidently responded in unison, “I do.” “Do you renew your commitment to Jesus Christ?” he continued. This time the responses were a little more tentative as the candidates did their best to remember the scripted response, “I do, and with God’s grace I will follow him as my Savior and Lord.”

When asked if we, the congregation, “will do all in our power to support these persons in their life in Christ?” there was a resounding chorus of “*Asi lo haremos!*” and “We will!” It was very clear we wanted to be there. Our energy was engaged, and alternating languages we boldly renewed our baptismal covenant. We were then led by a litanist to pray for the candidates. As we approached the liturgical climax that everyone was expecting - the actual confirming of each candidate - the bishop offered a prayer beautifully summarizing Christian discipleship and making God’s transforming action in confirmation explicit. The mature human act is to show up in the midst of the gathered assembly, to be ready for whatever God has in store.

Almighty God, we thank you that by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ you have overcome sin and brought us to yourself, and that by the sealing of your Holy Spirit you have bound us to your service. Renew in these your servants the covenant you have made with them at their Baptism. Send them forth in the power of that Spirit to perform the service you set before them; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.¹¹

One by one, each confirmand then moved into position in front of the bishop. They stood waiting, anticipating, with arms tightly by their sides, beautifully and vulnerably the center of everyone’s attention. Twenty times, the bishop lifted his

¹¹ *Book of Common Prayer*, 418.

ornately-draped arms and placed his bare hands firmly on a confirmand's head, saying:

Defend, O Lord, your servant with your heavenly grace, that they may continue yours for ever, and daily increase in your Holy Spirit more and more, until s/he/they come to your everlasting kingdom.

As the last candidate returned to her place, the Bishop offered this concluding prayer invoking the Spirit to guide and sustain the newly confirmed in their Christian vocations:

Almighty and everlasting God, let your fatherly hand ever be over these your servants; let your Holy Spirit ever be with them, and so lead them in the knowledge and obedience of your Word, that they may serve you in this life, and dwell with you in the life to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord.¹²

And with that the Peace was exchanged, creating holy mayhem throughout the sanctuary as parents and grandparents scrambled toward the confirmands, eager to hug and kiss their very own but warmly greeting everyone else along the way. If there were only one photograph from the whole day to communicate the Beloved Community, it would have been taken during the Peace. For those ten minutes, any vestige of fear and otherness melted away; pure love reigned.

The only obvious logistical glitch in a thoroughly well-planned event happened next. No one stepped forward to lead the Prayers of the People. After an appropriately long, bordering on awkward, silence the proven utility-hitter Julia gracefully filled in. Following the prayers, the Liturgy of the Table began. Bishop Marc demonstrated his facility with liturgical Spanish and members of St. James provided robust responses to a service they knew well. Throughout the Eucharist and final procession, the music was familiar and joyful - easily learned by ear, no matter what your native tongue.

While the planners of the Beloved Community Confirmation certainly sought to affirm people in all their diverse hopes and expectations, to live that out perfectly was impossible. Fr. Sam reflected on the day:

¹² *Book of Common Prayer*, 419.

We had so many opportunities going on. We embraced a few and missed some. I have this image of a juggling clown ... we caught some of the balls and dropped others. Among them, one hopeful expectation is always, “The Bishop is coming!” but I do not know how much of a chance [my people] had to be with the Bishop because we went directly from the mass to the talk with the Mayor. And I [had] warned Jennifer and Scott that when the Mayor comes, the Latinos would leave. And they did. So I think it was within 20 minutes [of the service ending] and most of the Latinos were gone. They were expecting what you do usually ... go say “Hello!” to the Bishop, take a picture with him, ask him to sign their books, touch, touch. I remember when I was confirmed in Brazil, being touched by the bishop as a confirmand was a powerful thing, and seeing my family come and have a word with the bishop was huge.¹³

Over the course of an Episcopal Christian’s life, confirmation is typically the outward and visible sign of connection that most laypeople have with their bishop. As such, Fr. Sam’s desire to protect that special time made good sense, particularly for a community filled with former Roman Catholics. The Episcopal Church offers Latinos, whose piety is sacramental and who recognize their roots in our ecclesiology, the potential for a welcoming, non-judgmental spiritual home. For the many who have fallen short of Catholic social teaching on marriage and birth control, the possibility of being received into the arms of a compassionate bishop is awe-inspiring.

In the writing and revision process for the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, the text that unites all of Episcopal worship, the Standing Commission on Liturgy and Music recommended the removal of the Confirmation service in favor of one repeatable liturgy of Reaffirmation of Baptism. They recognized that the true sacramental work and full initiation into the Body of Christ happened at baptism and claimed confirmation had become a pastoral rite, primarily used as a coming of age “ceremony” within the Church. Interestingly, it was the bishops who advocated for Confirmation to remain an established, distinct pastoral liturgy of the Church in large part because in its current form it is a rite that requires the involvement of a bishop, thus allowing them to meet and form connections with young people in their dioceses.

¹³ The Rev. Dr. Sam Dessordí Leite, interviewed by Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine, November 1, 2014.

In their effort to realize a new vision for diocesan confirmations, the planning team had focused on making the service a transformative experience and on building momentum from worship into immediate faith-in-action. Given the rich multi-cultural character of the Beloved Community Confirmation, having no designated time or space on November 1st for the Bishop to interact with the newly confirmed and their families was an unintentional oversight. A little too much innovation and not enough tradition left some participants disappointed.

At the same time, for many it was exhilarating to spill out of the church into the parish hall for an abundant feast of donuts and tacos as the Mayor was being introduced at a podium mic set up in one corner near the kitchen. The faith-action for the day was a forum on Measure BB, a local ballot initiative to expand public transportation in Alameda County while keeping it affordable for seniors, young people and people with disabilities. Youth organizers spoke eloquently and motivated the crowd to vote, to distribute leaflets, and to advocate for accessible transit. It was yet another crossing of thresholds, intended by the activist planners to invite newly affirmed faith into action but experienced by many of the undocumented families as a threatening collision of church and state. Despite the care with which the Diocesan organizers oriented the visiting community leaders, one Latino family was approached by an enthusiastic campaign volunteer who asked, “Are you registered to vote?” The adults smiled and nodded politely, then scurried their children toward the back door. Two of their siblings are currently in detention because they were caught without documentation. Their son’s courage to make a public affirmation of his faith put them in (perceived) legal jeopardy because of another person’s idea of what a transformational confirmation experience could be.

There was much to celebrate at 6 o’clock as José, the church sexton, unceremoniously stuffed the final paper plates into a bursting plastic trash bag. Fr. Sam obviously relieved and exhausted made the rounds locking doors. Two parish matriarchs were laughing as they washed huge cast iron pots in an under-sized kitchen sink. The crowds were gone, for now. The parish would gather again in the morning to complete its celebration of *Día de los Muertos* on the Feast of All Saints’

but this evening the church building was eerily quiet, the altars still, and twenty newly confirmed Christians had been unleashed on the world. Iglesia Episcopal de Santiago had successfully hosted almost two hundred people for a cardinal event. Working with leaders from several East Bay congregations, the Diocese of California Discipleship Ministries team had conceived, planned and implemented a second anything-but- general confirmation. And the Bishop was pleased. His vision of confirmation services as memorable celebrations of Christian discipleship was catching on.

The Diocesan Discipleship Ministries team deserves more attention. The Rev. Julia McCray-Goldsmith serves as the Working Group Head but acknowledges that the heavy-lifting on program development and network building falls to her able associate, Jennifer Snow. Jennifer was hired in November 2011 bringing extensive experience in campus and young adult ministry, and a Ph.D. in religion from Columbia University. Together, Julia and Jennifer develop resources, training, and ongoing consultation for congregations to provide culturally-appropriate Christian formation for all ages, with particular emphasis on equipping the church for intergenerational ministry. Jennifer approaches this work with urgency, observing,

There's a sickness in our church and it goes back 60 or 70 years. Like, it's not starting now. The generations are unable to communicate. Adults do not have a strong sense of their spirituality at all, or how they can grow spiritually, that there is more to do as you grow older and grow in your faith ... At least they are coming [to church] and bringing their kids, but they don't know why exactly, even for themselves. And then it's connected to this weak ecclesiology we have, what is a church for? Why? "Oh" they say, "There's music there. I see my friends. It's exciting."¹⁴

Jennifer is also overseeing the rebirth of a diocesan youth ministry program that sputtered for many years. This requires recognizing that there is a wide continuum of congregations across the diocese, from a few well-resourced parishes with their own flourishing youth ministry programs to many very small congregations with few teenagers, no ongoing program and no dedicated staff. As one might imagine,

¹⁴ Jennifer Snow, interviewed by Lisa Kimball and Kate Siberine, November 1, 2014.

such uneven support for Christian formation overall meant youth confirmation preparation was weak to non-existent in many places.

Seeing an opportunity for faith enrichment, Julia developed a web page devoted to confirmation resources, clarified diocesan guidelines (including a recommended minimum age of 12), and introduced the idea of a diocesan youth confirmation retreat for which Jennifer then recruited a team of Christian formation leaders to design the program. At the first retreat, three years ago, Jennifer learned that the young people in attendance needed even more basic formation than she had anticipated. For most of the teenagers, this was the first time they had talked seriously about their faith. For many, they had never read the Bible by themselves. Several admitted they did not know how to pray. They were fascinated when the subject of sin came up, and fell silent when asked about the condition of their soul. Jennifer wisely simplified the program to focus on the baptismal covenant and living it as a rule of life in Christian community.

The second year, necessity really was the mother of invention. When no adult chaperones registered with their youth for the retreat (a diocesan policy), Jennifer quickly recruited young adults from around the diocese. They added energy to the program and served as fresh faith mentors for the participants. Over the course of the weekend, each young adult had the chance to tell his/her confirmation story, and many appreciated the opportunity to stop and reflect on the condition of their faith. Jennifer commented that while she heard very different stories leading up to their actual confirmation services, there was one consistent refrain, “And then I left the church for a while ... but I came back.” This, Jennifer points out, is exactly what is inadequate about our current practice of confirmation. It is understood as a terminal degree with nothing to reach for beyond it. Once confirmed, many people slip out the back door taking their spiritual independence literally. When individuals have a spiritual awakening and choose to return to the church, Jennifer proposes that congregations should mark their renewed commitment or rebirth with the Rite of Reaffirmation, Reception (from another denomination), or another local ritual. In her opinion, the only rite most people recognize beyond confirmation is ordination leaving a lot of fallow ground in-between.

Even better than ritualizing the Prodigal Son's return, the Diocese of California is working to make adolescent confirmation an experience that strengthens young people's ties to the Church and deepens their sense of Christian vocation. Although Jennifer admitted that as a member of the Diocesan staff, she has never been invited to participate in a centralized discussion of hopes for confirmation, she is glad to be responsible for expanding and implementing a vision the bishop cast. In her words,

Confirmation preparation should be the holistic formation of body and soul. Every confirmation service should be multi-cultural. Music from around the world shows people they are part of a church that is bigger than the people who are gathered. It should be a celebration of great joy, with a party afterwards, and an element of community service.¹⁵

Jennifer understands that real formation - personal and structural - happens slowly. She recognizes that bishops, at least hers, do not think slowly and that her job is often to reverse engineer a good idea one trusted conversation at a time.

Responding to a draft of this narrative description, Jennifer wrote:

... reading your draft, and discussing it with Julia, helped me to see what I believe are some takeaways for me. First, there is a definite practical tension in reimagining spaces that have always been congregational or secular as "diocesan liturgy" spaces -- from a campground to a beach to a parish church. This presents challenges of various kinds as seen in the planning for the Beloved Community confirmation service. But beyond the practical, there is the seed of this idea Bishop Marc offers that the confirmation liturgy itself is or can be formational and transformational -- not just the graduation ceremony from a curriculum that has been more or less effective or challenging or deep. While I'm sure most clergy would agree that liturgy should be transformational, in practice confirmation, and its attendant liturgy, has become almost a habit. It is done because it is expected to be done, and it is expected to be done in a church in the way it has always been done -- in the most "churchy" way possible, at Grace Cathedral. The "reverse engineering" is taking an idea which comes from "the top" and helping people not only understand it, but empower them to participate in creating and opening up these new transformational possibilities. To me, it seems that the main resistance to these new confirmations is not active, but passive -- not moving against, only moving in the way we always have. The door that could let new life in to the liturgy has never been locked; people simply forgot the door was there because no one has used it in ages.

¹⁵ Ibid.

So, as you say, one trusted conversation at a time to let people know that the door is there, and open-able. The work for the diocese now, in my understanding, is to listen, hear, share, and encourage to create.¹⁶

METAPHOR & AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS -----

Just as with real earthquakes that are often followed by smaller shocks for a period of weeks, months, or even years, the impact of a diocese dramatically changing its practice of General Confirmation services continues to make itself known. Clergy and parents preparing young people for confirmation in Episcopal congregations around the Bay Area are being presented with choices that invite (or some would say, force) rethinking the purpose of confirmation and their expectations of the bishop. To the extent the preparation confirmands receive in their home congregations equips them to understand and engage the theologically rich experiences offered at an innovative General Confirmation, the potential for spiritual transformation is great. To the extent that General Confirmation services deliberately focused on the baptismal promises, held in imaginative settings, and connected to an immediate opportunity for faithful action equip confirmands to be more confident followers of Jesus Christ, they will be forever changed. And, the extent to which newly confirmed disciples claim their true vocations as joyful, brave builders of the Kingdom of God on earth, the world will experience redemption and transformation. In geological terms, the larger the mainshock, the larger and more numerous the aftershocks, and the longer they will continue. Some things need to be shaken up. The Episcopal Diocese of California is well on its way to establishing the practice of youth confirmation as a disruptive event that entails risk and provides a moment of real choice to “come and see” and “follow Me.”

¹⁶ Email, Jennifer Snow, December 6, 2014