

*Youth Confirmation*

# Episcopal teacher

## SPECIAL ISSUE





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Lisa Kimball and Dorothy Linthicum, editors

The cover is the altar at a confirmation service at Church of St. James the Apostle, Oakland, California.

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## Youth Confirmation Can Be a Path to Discipleship

From historical perspectives to practical tools, from a bishop's reflections to lived experience, this special issue of Episcopal Teacher explores confirmation for young people. Over the past two years, Lisa Kimball and Kate Harmon Siberine have been involved with the ecumenical Confirmation Project looking at all aspects of confirmation. Dorothy Linthicum, who taught youth confirmation for a number of years, interviewed people about their memories of confirmation. These are captured in vignettes entitled *Through the ages* that are sprinkled throughout the issue – from a young adult in her 20s to an elder in her 80s. From different places we came to a single conclusion: Youth confirmation done right is well worth the time and effort a congregation puts into it.

Perhaps Bishop Ted Gulick, Diocese of Virginia, said it best in his reflection on page 17:

“In our Episcopal Church, we have been working so hard to include all within the saving embrace of Christ’s cross. Now it is time to disciple the included. Intentional confirmation, teaching and practice grounded in baptismal theology, is the Church’s best opportunity to do that.”

Hattie Strange, in her twenties and living in Chicago, said she never felt that she “needed” to be confirmed. “I decided I wanted to be confirmed,” she said, with a formal commitment similar to the way people enter into marriage. (See page 9.)

The issue begins with a summary of the history of confirmation by Sharon Pearson, who also describes the current state of confirmation. This is followed by a description of best practices, including mentoring, mission, and ministry, uncovered by Lisa and Kate during their research.

Youth currently involved in confirmation programs tell their own stories to Kate, who shares their insights with us. Ted Gulick adds his reflections from the perspective of a bishop, and Dorothy describes tools to measure congregational intentionality and inspire support for confirmation programs. Lisa provides an ecumenical perspective on confirmation and notes equivalent practices that can be shared. The issue ends with a challenge to continue the conversation about the relevance of this church office, both theologically and in practice.

Interspersed throughout the issue are stories told by people of all ages and backgrounds about their experience of confirmation as young people. A special testimony written by Sandra Montes has been translated into Spanish for our Latino readers on page 11.

Our next issue of Episcopal Teacher will include the top Vacation Bible School picks from the Center for the Ministry of Teaching and other articles about lifelong, life-wide formation.

We hope you have a thoughtful and rejuvenating Lent this year!

*Lisa Kimball, Kate Harmon Siberine, Dorothy Linthicum*



## EVENTS around the country

**April 25 – 28, 2017**

*Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry*  
Institute for Youth Ministry  
Princeton, New Jersey  
<http://iym.ptsem.edu/>

**May 22 – 24, 2017**

*Faith Forward 2017*  
Chicago, Illinois  
<http://faith-forward.net/>

**June 6, 2017**

*e-Formation 2017*  
Virginia Theological Seminary  
Alexandria, Virginia  
<http://www.eformationvts.org/>

**June 12 – 16, 2017**

*Faith Formation for All God’s Children in an Era of Change*  
Christian Formation Conference at Kanuga  
Hendersonville, North Carolina  
<http://www.kanuga.org/conference-calendar/>

**June 23 – 25, 2017**

*Drawing the Circle Wider*  
2017 North American Godly Play Conference  
Denver, Colorado  
<http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org/2017nagpc/>

**June 25 – 27, 2017**

*InterGenerate 2017 Conference*  
GenOn Ministries and Lipscomb University  
Nashville, Tennessee  
<http://www.intergenerateconference.com>

**July 10 – 14, 2017**

*Episcopal Youth Event 2017*  
The Episcopal Church  
Edmond, Oklahoma  
<http://www.episcopalchurch.org/blog/eye>

# How We Got Here from There: A Historical Perspective on Confirmation

By Sharon Pearson

Confirmation did not exist in the Early Church, but we can trace its beginnings to Christian baptism in the first centuries of the Church. Baptism has its roots in Jewish tradition, along with the practice of anointing and blessing by the laying on of hands.<sup>1</sup> Households were baptized together, including slaves and children, in the name of the Father, the Messiah, and the Holy Spirit. The liturgy involved questions of renunciation and commitment, and if children could not answer for themselves, others answered for them.<sup>2</sup>

The newly baptized emerged from the water and (in many parts of the Church) were anointed, usually over the entire body. Being marked with the sign of the cross with oil (the *consignation*), the newly baptized were then re-clothed (some in white garments).

## EARLY HISTORY

For centuries, it was a bishop who presided over these services and at the end of the rite, he laid a hand on each of the candidates, in a dismissal prayer<sup>3</sup> (*missa*), leading to the breaking of the bread and admission to the Eucharistic community.<sup>4</sup> Baptism was seen as a water moment of the washing from sin and a cleansing act of forgiveness. The anointing, a representation of the rich, flowing life of the Spirit,<sup>5</sup> was a sealing of the gift of the Holy Spirit, being marked as Christ's own forever.

During the fourth century, the Church increased in numbers and many of its members lived in remote rural areas: the presence of a bishop was not always possible; baptisms were a more frequent occurrence in an expanding church; most were largely illiterate; preparation took place through worship, preaching, and hearing scripture read in worship; presbyters and deacons began to perform baptisms.

Catechumens continued to go through a lengthy period of instruction in the faith, often during the season of Lent in preparation for baptism at the Great Vigil of Easter. Around 450, Bishop Faustus of Riez gave a Pentecost sermon that serves as a benchmark for the classic Western theology of confirmation: baptism is a "washing" and the acts immediately after the water ritual as a "confirmation" to "arm and supply" those for "the struggles and battles of this world."<sup>6</sup>

From the eighth to the twelfth centuries, the rite of initiation consisted of baptism, confirmation, and first communion being three parts of one whole, not always experienced at the same moment, with each additional rite

adding new "strength" to the individual. These became separated as the doctrine of "real presence" arose in the eleventh century, so the "age of discretion" (typically 7 years old) became the key to a child's admittance to communion. However, many never returned to be seen by the bishop to "complete" the baptism.

## THE REFORMATION

The English Reformation (1534–1662) left the Church of England with a clear and definite process of Christian initiation. Baptism was a rite of infancy, followed by Catechism and Confirmation, normally at 14 to 16 years old, followed by First Communion. Admission to communion was seen as the response to a communicant making a public profession of faith—not an integral part of sacramental initiation.<sup>7</sup>

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer authored the 1540 Book of Common Prayer, with Confirmation a rite reserved exclusively to the bishop; its theological emphasis was on the gift of the Holy Spirit, for strength and constancy.<sup>8</sup> In the Book of Common Prayer of 1549, the anointing with oil is omitted for the first time since apostolic times in the rite of Baptism,<sup>9</sup> and the final rubric states, "And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion until such time as he be Confirmed."<sup>10</sup> Cranmer's prayer books therefore made baptism the first stage of a two-part initiatory process.

**"Finding itself in the midst of a culture of Protestant denominations that had rejected the practice of confirmation, the Episcopal Church relied on biblical foundations to explain the office."**

## AMERICAN PRACTICES

In Colonial America, the Catechism adopted as part of the American Book of Common Prayer followed closely the prayer book of the Church of England. Confirmation was to be administered to baptized persons of competent age when they could say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, and repeat answers from the Catechism with some understanding of meaning.

Those new to the Episcopal Church and those who had not been confirmed had to come for an episcopal blessing.<sup>11</sup> Confirmation emerged as a sign of membership in the Episcopal Church, because the United States had a variety of Protestant religious values, historically and geographically, and people were easily associated in communities by the church they attended.<sup>12</sup>

Finding itself in the midst of a culture of Protestant denominations that had rejected the practice of confirmation, the Episcopal Church relied on biblical foundations to explain the office. From the 1892 through 1928 versions of the Book of Common Prayer, the Episcopal Church followed this model of Christian initiation: baptism in infancy, clergy-led education using the Offices of Instruction, the laying on of hands by a bishop, then being welcomed as an adult member to receive Holy Communion for the first time.

From about 1890 until 1970, a school of thought, popularly known as the "Mason-Dix" line, held the view that confirmation was the second and completing half of the full sacrament of initiation. It made a distinction between baptism of water, which provided cleansing from sin, and baptism of the Spirit, bestowed through the imposition of hands. This view insisted that the Spirit was active not in baptism, but in confirmation; the seal of the Spirit completed Christian initiation.<sup>13</sup>

Dom Gregory Dix in 1946 published *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism*, in which he maintained that confirmation was a rite from the New Testament,<sup>14</sup> consisting of a sealing with chrism—the outward sign of the sealing of the Spirit until the day of redemption. He advocated a revision of the doctrine of confirmation, calling for no interval of time between baptism and confirmation.

In 1951 in *The Seal of the Spirit*,<sup>15</sup> G. W. Lampe argued that confirmation was a post-apostolic rite for strengthening those baptized in infancy with the Holy Ghost the Comforter. He insisted that since membership in Christ is given by faith in the sacrament of baptism, baptism mediates the indwelling presence of the Spirit that also dwelt within Christ. The blessings of initiation are given at baptism, which is unrepeatable and rooted in the New Testament and early church liturgies. Baptism is itself the "seal." He felt that confirmation should be administered as close to baptism as possible, with the ratification of baptismal promises.

## RECENT HISTORY

Various doctrinal commissions and reports over the past 30 years in the Episcopal Church have studied these two schools of thought in regard to confirmation. It has been largely agreed that baptism alone is complete initiation and fully admits a person (child or adult) to communion. Confirmation/laying on of hands has a pastoral role in the renewal of faith among the baptized and should no longer be seen as a requisite for communion.

In 1970, the Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church published *Prayer Book Studies 18*, promoting a unified rite of baptism that appeared in the *Services for Trial Use*.<sup>16</sup> In this rite, when candidates have been baptized, the bishop or priest, in full sight of the congregation prays, ". . . Sustain them, O Lord, with your Holy Spirit . . ." Then he or she lays a hand on each person's head and signs their forehead with the cross, using chrism if desired, and says, "N., you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." With these words and actions, the sealing of the Spirit and the hand-laying are united in baptism. Confirmation was to be eliminated as a separate service, but this proved to be unacceptable because there was no provision for commitment to Christ at the age of discretion.

At the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation held in Boston in July 1985, it was acknowledged that Cranmer had shifted the emphasis of an outward rite to a catechizing event that had lost its sacramentality,<sup>17</sup> and the 1991 International Anglican Liturgical Consultation stated that baptism is complete sacramental initiation, including the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>18</sup>

The Episcopal Church struggled with the development of new rites to reflect this understanding. *The Introduction to Prayer Book Studies 18* explained, "The basic principle of this proposal is the reunion of Baptism, Confirmation, and Communion into a single, continuous service, as it was in the primitive Church."<sup>19</sup> Urban T. Holmes, a member of the Drafting Committee (1974 to 1976), argued that the description of confirmation as an adult affirmation of baptism was not consistent with the typical church practice of confirming young people at ages 9 to 12, calling the current practice "modern individualism" and "Pelagianism" because grace was being given in relation to merit and free will.<sup>20</sup>



Sharon Pearson

Controversy continued on sacramental and pastoral grounds. In 1971 the House of Bishops issued the *Pocono Statement*<sup>21</sup> on the pastoral and catechetical side of confirmation. It stated that in Holy Baptism a person is made fully and completely a Christian and member of the Church. Confirmation was not to be regarded as a procedure of admission to Holy Communion, but a rite of mature affirmation of faith in the presence of the bishop and sealed by the laying on of hands.

Today in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer (within the Rite of Holy Baptism), the entire community is invited to recommit himself or herself to Christ, along with the candidate. A prayer is said for the renewal of what has already happened in baptism: forgiveness of sins, sealing with the Spirit, and binding to God's service. 🏰

*Sharon Ely Pearson is an editor for Church Publishing Incorporated (CPI) with experience in Christian formation on the local, judicatory, and church-wide level.*

### Endnotes

- 1 Recall the anointing of Samuel and David in 1 Samuel and Abraham's blessing of Jacob in Genesis. The conveying of responsibility by the laying on of hands was also an ancient practice existing in Israel; it was a regular and agreed upon method of either transferring or shifting responsibility in the community. This custom predates Exodus, and following this public binding, a participation in a common meal as a form of communion with the divine ancestor was shared. Many of these Jewish customs found their way into the initiation rites of the early Church.
- 2 Daniel B. Stevick, *Baptismal Moments: Baptismal Meanings* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1987), 9.
- 3 Paul Turner, *Source of Confirmation: From the Fathers through the Reformation* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 12–13.
- 4 Aidan Kavanagh, *Confirmation: Origins and Reform* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, Inc., 1988), ix–x.



- 5 Charles P. Price, "Appendix—Occasional Paper Number Four—Rites of Initiation," *Baptism & Ministry: Liturgical Studies* 1 (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1994), 96.
- 6 Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretations*. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 146.
- 7 Reginald H. Fuller, "Confirmation in the Episcopal Church and in the Church of England," in Kenda Brubaker Cully, ed., *Confirmation Re-Examined*, 11.
- 8 Charles U. Harris, "The Anglican Understanding of Confirmation" in Kenda Brubaker Cully, ed., *Confirmation: History, Doctrine and Practice* (Greenwich, CT: The Seabury Press, 1962), 22.
- 9 Harris, 21.
- 10 Children's Committee, *Children and the Holy Communion: Guidelines and Resources for Parishes* (The Church in Wales: Council for Mission and Ministry, 2002), 7.
- 11 Stevick, *Baptismal Moments*, 25.
- 12 Louis Weil, "American Perspectives: (ii) Confirmation," *Children at the Table: The Communion of All the Baptized in Anglicanism Today* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1995), 71.
- 13 Ruth A. Meyers, "By Water and the Holy Spirit: Baptism and Confirmation in Anglicanism," *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2001), 417.
- 14 J. D. C. Fisher, "Confirmation: Then and Now," *Alcuin Club*, no. 60 (London: S.P.C.K., 1978), 147.
- 15 G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1951), 305.
- 16 Fisher, "Confirmation: Then and Now," 151.
- 17 "Children and Communion," *Children at the Table: The Communion of All the Baptized in Anglicanism Today* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation, 1995), 133.
- 18 Ruth Meyers, "By Water and the Holy Spirit: Baptism and Confirmation in Anglicanism," *Anglican Theological Review* 83 (2001), 420.
- 19 Ruth Meyers, *The Renewal of Christian Initiation in the Episcopal Church 1928–1979* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1992), 215.
- 20 Meyers, *The Renewal*, 262.
- 21 Louis Weil, 74–75.

# Research Supports Renewed Commitment to Confirmation

By Lisa Kimball

Today, the Episcopal Church recognizes baptism as full initiation into the Body of Christ, and with that comes admission to Holy Communion. What remains less clear, as expressed through the diverse practices of local congregations and dioceses, is the purpose of the Rite of Confirmation. If confirmation does not complete baptism as Thomas Cranmer suggested in the 1540 Book of Common Prayer, if it is not required to receive Holy Communion, and if it is not the litmus test for membership in the Episcopal Church, what is it? And, why bother?

These were the questions that haunted me in the fall of 2012 as I accepted an invitation to join a preliminary study of youth confirmation practices in five Protestant denominations. Now four years later, after two generous Lilly Endowment grants and extensive research, I have become a near-rabid youth confirmation advocate.

As long as the Rite of Confirmation remains lodged in the Book of Common Prayer, the Church has an obligation to

provide intentional faith formation. If, "in the course of their Christian development, those baptized at an early age are expected, when they are ready and have been duly prepared, to make a mature public affirmation of their faith and commitment to the responsibilities of their Baptism" (BCP, 412), the Church must pay attention and notice when young people are ready to examine their faith.

We must then offer intentional means by which they can be prepared to make a confident, public affirmation of their faith. To the extent that parents still expect their children to be confirmed, there is also a cultural window in early adolescence with higher than normal expectations for faith engagement, and the Church is foolish to ignore it.

Consider too what Bishop Ted Gulick says later in this issue (page 17) about the role of confirmation in the Episcopal Church today:

"... we have been working so hard to include all within the saving embrace of Christ's cross. Now it is time to disciple the included. Intentional confirmation, teaching and practice grounded in baptismal theology is the Church's best opportunity to do that."

While confirmation is not the unfinished work of the Holy Spirit, it may provide exactly the ecclesiological structure we need to transmit a living faith to the next generation, particularly as *doing it as we have always done it* religious affiliation declines precipitously.



Church of St. Michael the Archangel, Colorado Springs, Colorado

## RENEWING A COMMITMENT TO CONFIRMATION

The time is right for a renewed commitment to confirmation preparation and celebration, and we have sound research to guide the way. The Confirmation Project set out to “learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth.”

With 6,777 completed surveys (parents, leaders, and youth) and 25 completed program visits (to congregations and confirmation camps) the Project has extensive data to describe the current state of confirmation practice and to inform our future.

First there is good news. Healthy confirmation programs exist and they can be found in tiny congregations and large program churches across the United States. There are young people who look forward to confirmation:

“I just hope that it will help me start to build a personal relationship with Jesus and God because it’s just a really hard thing to start if you’re just thinking about it by yourself and it’s really good to connect with people and to try to build on that throughout your life. So I feel like it’s really a start or more deep thinking about religion. Like not just go to class, get confirmed, and be done, but it’s really the start of making your religion the center of your life and really helping it drive you.”

And there are young people who are asking deep questions and expecting a lot from their confirmation experience:

“This is a really weird time in our lives, there’s a lot going on and this is a place to really ask the questions: ‘Why are we all here? What’s the world for?’ And if you build a real relationship with God it’s a lot easier to be comfortable with not knowing exactly why everything happens.”

### A CLOSER LOOK AT THE DATA

A demographic scan of the Episcopal survey data is revealing, particularly in comparison to the findings from site visits and to data from other denominations. From a total of 1,139 completed surveys (155 parents, 350 youth, 634 leaders), Episcopal confirmation programs are small: 40.1% of the leaders indicated their programs would have five or fewer participants that year, and just 25.1% expected 6-10 young

people. Only 1.3% of the surveyed congregations had more than 50 teenagers active in their program.

Similarly, Episcopal programs are short – both in duration and length of individual sessions. While 51% of Lutheran (ELCA) confirmation programs last 13-24 months and another 39% last more than two years, 40% of Episcopal programs last up to three months with 48% of the class sessions being no longer than an hour.

While 64% of the respondents use a lecture format to teach, 97% also incorporate group discussions, 56% use a variety of experiential and hands-on learning activities. Almost half (49%) of the programs include adult mentors, reflecting a range of pedagogical approaches designed to engage young people more fully.

The Episcopal Church confirmation practices, as reported on the surveys, are distinct from other denominations in two ways: age of participation and education level of the leadership. Twenty percent of Episcopal youth begin confirmation preparation at 15 or later, while none of the other denominations had more than 2% in this age bracket. A total of 38% of the Episcopal youth confirmations occur at 16 or older.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising that 44.1% of the Episcopal parents who responded to the survey have a Master’s degree or higher, and 76.5% of the confirmation leaders meet that same threshold. We remain a well-educated denomination, and that has implications for how we practice discipleship.

### EXPECTATIONS

A cluster of responses suggest many of our congregations have moderate to low expectations of young people in their confirmation programs. Forty-one percent require no independent volunteer hours inside the congregation and only 29% require one to five hours of parish service by individuals. By comparison, 15% of ELCA congregations require 20 or more hours. Perhaps more surprisingly, 55% of the Episcopal respondents require no wider community volunteerism.

The results show a more promising commitment to mission or service projects as a group. Thirty-four percent require such participation, but another 34% do not offer it at all. While 61% of our congregations do offer young people an opportunity to write a statement of faith, 76% do not offer a structured environment to present it. A good 95% of the congregations expect young people to attend the confirmation classes, and 72% require some measure of church service attendance during their program, yet only 8% of us keep attendance records, and 73% keep none at all!

There is also evidence of minimal program evaluation with 66% of responding congregations depending on oral feedback from participants and only 6% collecting written

feedback from parents and 24% from youth. In general, it seems Episcopal congregations prefer to offer young people a menu of choices as they prepare for confirmation. The components are sound but the Project site visits suggest something more is needed.

### HEALTHY PROGRAMS

Healthy confirmation programs work off the real lives of people and congregations. Quality confirmation preparation is highly contextual and an intentional component of a congregation’s faith formation/discipleship ecology. Innovative programs emerge only after processes of deep listening to the lives of teenagers and paying close attention to the theological commitments of that particular faith community.

Confirmation cannot be transformative as a traditional class with a pre-purchased curriculum. At their best, confirmation programs are congregation-wide commitments. They are intergenerational and highly relational, led by dedicated and skillful leaders who are well-formed Christians.

A focus on the uniqueness of each confirmand allows a program to be responsive to individuals while modeling the

tradition. When young people feel seen and heard, their faith readiness becomes apparent. When they sense that they are valued, confirmands can be drawn into authentic community life where mutual respect and deep examination of belief and practice matter. Creating a responsive and engaging climate both sustains a confirmation program and strengthens the congregation.

So, what is [youth] confirmation? And, why bother?

Youth confirmation is a culturally-sanctioned, developmentally ripe season of “faith intensification.” Done well, confirmation equips young people to discern their readiness to “stand up and be counted” as a follower of Jesus Christ in the context of a particular Christian community, tradition, and time.

Whether confirmation survives the next Prayer Book revision process or not, there will always be a need to engage teenagers in a relevant, life-giving process of faith formation where they can encounter Jesus. Indeed, people of all ages would benefit from such an immersive experience in discipleship. Readiness and faith maturity shift across the decades of our lives, which is exactly what the repeatable Rite of Reaffirmation (BCP, 419) offers. 🙏

## Through the ages: 20s

Hattie Strange, Chicago, Illinois

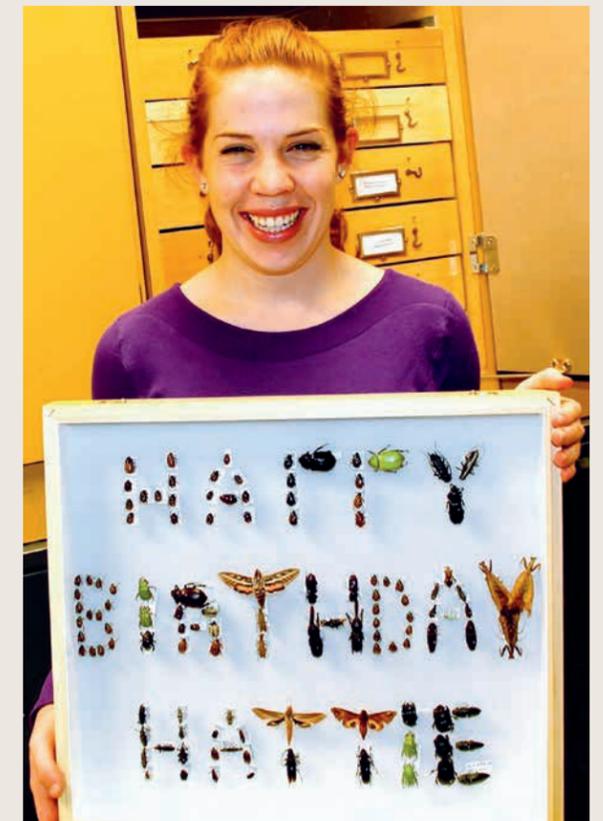
“I did everything backward,” said Hattie Strange in describing her confirmation experience. She was confirmed at Grace, St. Luke’s in Memphis after her freshman year in college at the University of Wisconsin.

At the university, she was active at St. Francis House, an Episcopal ministry on campus. “I decided I wanted to be confirmed,” she said, with a formal commitment similar to the way people enter into marriage.

On returning home, she visited the rector at Grace, St. Luke’s and announced two defining statements about her faith: “I have a relationship with God,” and “I have a relationship with the Church.” Strange added that she didn’t “need” to be confirmed. “I just wanted to be a member of a community that I already knew I was a part of.”

The rector quickly added her to a group of 13-year-olds who were scheduled to be confirmed the next week. During that service Strange felt something special happen during the laying on of hands. “I felt more hands than were there,” she said. “I have carried that memory with me.”

When she returned to the university the next fall, she had several informal sessions with the campus chaplain, Tom Ferguson, to learn more about the Episcopal faith. St. Francis House, she noted, provided her and others a welcoming space “to make the Holy Spirit known.” Strange’s backward journey took her forward to a new place.



Hattie Strange celebrating life in Chicago

# Through the ages: 40s

By Sandra Montes

I was born into a faith-filled home in Trujillo, Perú. My dad was a pastor in the Christian Missionary Alliance Church; when I was 4, we moved to Guatemala so my dad could attend seminary. I grew up Evangelical, told that Roman Catholics were not going to heaven and that a lot of the things we did or liked were satanic or sinful. I was not supposed to dance because it was a sin. I remember my parents telling me that they were not allowed to go to the movies because it was seen as a sin.

My parents never taught hate. On the contrary, they always showed love to everyone and prayed, listened, and often took in people in need. When I was in high school, my parents moved to Houston and a few months later, my brother and I joined them. My dad, because he was not paid well as an assistant pastor, delivered pizzas on the side. One night after he was beaten and left for dead, he called his pastor who told him to call back when he was out of the hospital.

By chance, my dad found in his wallet a business card given to him years before at an ecumenical conference by an Episcopal bishop, Obispo Pina, who happened to live in Houston. Bishop Pina came to the hospital and the rest, as they say, is *EpiscoHistory*. My dad retired in March as the first Latino rector of Iglesia Episcopal San Mateo, the largest, and for many years only Latino self-sustained parish in the nation.

My family moved to San Mateo where my dad started working as a sexton, musician, and Bible study leader. When I saw the huge cross, the pastors dressed in long robes, people kneeling, and making the sign of the cross, I thought, "I am going to hell!" We had become Roman Catholic!

My dad always said we were called into the ministry as a family and if we did not feel comfortable in the Episcopal Church we could go. I am so happy that God intervened in our lives, although it was a sad, dramatic entrance into the Episcopal Church.

A couple of years later, it was time to get confirmed. I remember being told that when you get confirmed, the Holy Spirit may manifest herself in various ways and to be open to the Spirit. A Holy Spirit "moment" didn't happen,

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**"A couple of years later, it was time to get confirmed. I remember being told that when you get confirmed, the Holy Spirit may manifest herself in various ways and to be open to the Spirit."**

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but I did have a sense of peace and joy, which are part of the Spirit.

I also remember being so happy to get my own Book of Common Prayer, which I've never used because I have been in Spanish-speaking congregations my entire Episcopal life. St. Matthew's, the church that confirmed me, died out, became a Latino mission and then a parish again.



Sandra Montes, Ed.D.

I didn't know it then, but I entered a denomination that, with all its ups and downs and rights and wrongs, is the best one for me. I can also tell you that I have had many Holy Spirit experiences since I was confirmed.

I am proud to be a part of a Church that is accepting and allows for questions. I love when our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says that we are the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. Because of my parents' example, I know that being Episcopalian does not mean having all of the right answers or being a member of the only denomination going to heaven. Rather, it is being part of something larger, a family, that encourages me to be the Christian that I am, just like my own family encourages me to be exactly who I am.

I was not born into the Episcopal Church but I got to it as fast as I could. It has been one of God's greatest gifts and has given me many Holy Spirit moments. Today, I pray what was prayed over me almost 30 years ago: "Strengthen, O Lord, your servant Sandra with your Holy Spirit; empower her for your service; and sustain her all the days of her life. Amen." (Book of Common Prayer, 418)

*Sandra Montes, Ed.D., lives and works in Houston.*

# A través de los años: 40s

Por Sandra Montes

Nací en un hogar de fe en Trujillo, Perú. Mi papi era pastor en la Iglesia Alianza Cristiana y Misionera; cuando tenía 4 años, nos mudamos a Guatemala para que mi papi pudiera ir al seminario. Crecí evangélica, me decían que las personas católicas romanas no iban a ir al cielo y que mucho de lo que hacíamos o nos gustaba era pecado o cosas satánicas. No podía bailar porque era pecado. Recuerdo que mi mami y papi me contaron que no podían ir al cine porque la iglesia lo veía como pecado.

Ellos nunca me enseñaron a odiar. Al contrario, siempre mostraban amor a todo el mundo, oraban por ellos, les escuchaban, y les ayudaban. Cuando estaba en la secundaria, mis padres se mudaron a Houston y unos meses después, mi hermano y yo también. Mi papi, porque no ganaba mucho como pastor asistente, entregaba pizzas. Una noche después de haber sido golpeado y dejado por muerto, llamó a su pastor quien le dijo que le llamara cuando salía del hospital.

Por casualidad, mi papi encontró en su billetera la información que le había dado un obispo episcopal que vivía en Houston, el Obispo Pina, años antes en una conferencia ecuménica. El Obispo Pina fue al hospital y el resto, como dicen, es *EpiscoHistory*. Mi papi se jubiló en marzo como el primer rector Latino de la Iglesia Episcopal San Mateo, en ese tiempo, la iglesia latina más grande y por muchos años la única autónoma en la nación.

Mi familia comenzó a ir a San Mateo donde mi papi trabajó limpiando, como músico, y líder de estudios bíblicos. Cuando vi la cruz inmensa, los pastores vestidos con largas batas, la gente de rodillas, y haciendo la señal de la cruz, pensé, "¡Me voy a ir al infierno!" ¡Nos habíamos convertido en Católicos Romanos!

Mi papi siempre decía que habíamos sido llamados al ministerio como familia y si no nos sentíamos bien en la Iglesia Episcopal nos podíamos ir. Estoy tan feliz que Dios intervino en nuestras vidas, aunque fue una entrada triste y dramática a la Iglesia Episcopal.

Unos años después, me iba a confirmar. Recuerdo que me habían dicho que cuando te confirmas, el Espíritu Santo se puede manifestar de varias maneras y debíamos estar abiertos al Espíritu. No tuve un "momento" en el Espíritu, pero sí sentí paz y gozo, que son parte del Espíritu.

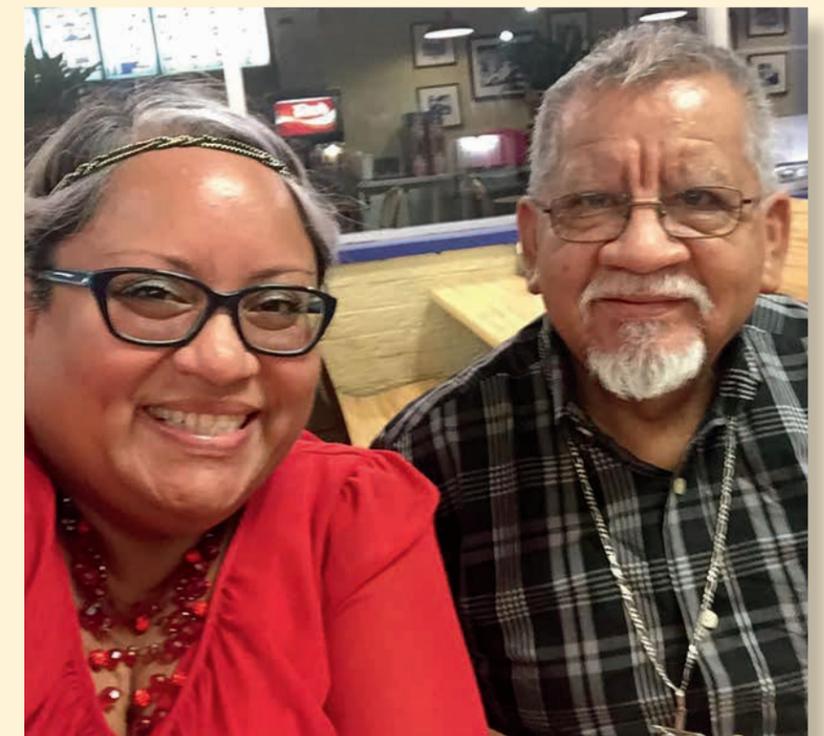
También recuerdo que estaba tan feliz de recibir mi propio Libro de Oración Común en inglés (que nunca usé porque he estado en congregaciones de habla hispana toda mi vida episcopal). St. Matthew's, la iglesia donde me confirmé, se convirtió en una misión Latina y después en parroquia otra vez.

No lo sabía en ese entonces, pero entré a una denominación que, con todas sus altas y bajas y buenas y malas, es la mejor para mí. Puedo decirte que he tenido muchas experiencias en el Espíritu Santo desde mi confirmación.

Estoy orgullosa de ser parte de una Iglesia tolerante, y que permite las preguntas. Me encanta cuando nuestro Obispo Presidente Michael Curry dice que somos la rama Episcopal del Movimiento de Jesús. Por el ejemplo de mis padres, sé que el ser Episcopal no significa que tenemos todas las respuestas ni que somos la única denominación que va a ir al cielo. Más bien, es ser parte de algo más grande, una familia, que me anima a ser la cristiana que soy, así como mi propia familia me anima a ser exactamente quien soy.

No nací en la Iglesia Episcopal pero corrí hacia ella lo más pronto posible. Ha sido uno de los regalos de Dios más grandes y me ha dado muchos momentos en el Espíritu Santo. Hoy, oro lo que oraron sobre mí hace casi 30 años: Fortalece, oh Señor, a tu sierva Sandra, con tu Espíritu Santo; dale poder para servirte; y susténtala todos los días de su vida. Amén. (Libro de Oración Común, 340).

*Sandra Montes, Ed.D., vive y trabaja en Houston.*



Sandra Montes with her father, the Rev. Alejandro S. Montes, Diocese of Texas

# Mentors Key to Successful Youth Confirmation Program

*“I just hope that it will help me start to build a personal relationship with Jesus and God because it’s just a really hard thing to start if you’re just thinking about it by yourself and it’s really good to connect with people and to try to build on that throughout your life. So I feel like it’s really a start or more deep thinking about religion. Like not just go to class, get confirmed, and be done, but it’s really the start of making your religion the center of your life and really helping it drive you.”*

—Teen Confirmand, St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church, Colorado Springs

By Kate Harmon Siberine

While the question I get asked most frequently about confirmation relates to curricula, resources are rarely the key to effective programs. What I have found in listening to the stories of teens, parents, and program leaders from congregations around the country that are providing powerful ministry with young people is the importance of relationships. It is most often the relationships rather than the content that equip young people to claim their own call to follow Jesus.

Confirmation – when a Christian claims their relationship with God and place in the community of the church with the help of the Holy Spirit – is perhaps best expressed through relationship, in walking with and learning from each other. As we take a fresh look at the confirmation process in the Episcopal Church, intergenerational mentoring relationships can help young people to claim their full participation in the body of Christ and enrich the faith lives of entire congregations.

When Jesus teaches his disciples about their task as Christians in the parable of the Good Samaritan, he does not present a theological treatise but instead he shares a story of a person who cared for a hurting and neglected neighbor and then tells his followers to “go and do likewise.” While our default thinking about confirmation preparation typically involves questions of content and curriculum, social science research backs up Jesus’ teaching methods. That research shows that learned spiritual behaviors, such as compassion, forgiveness, or devotion, come from seeing those behaviors

modeled by trusted people with whom they have a lasting relationship. This modeling of care for the other, illustrated by mentors in their care for confirmands, also teaches confirmands that we are not independent Christians, but part of an interdependent body of Christ. Christians cannot be followers of Jesus alone.

As a model of incarnational discipleship, which is supported by both our scriptural tradition and social science research, mentoring allows adult members of the congregation to live more fully into their own baptismal call. They are given the time and space to share their lives, their stories and their brokenness with young people who are in the process learning to claim their own embodied faith and identity. The passing down of faith from one generation to the next enriches the faith-lives of both the confirmand and the mentor, which then enriches the whole church.

Mentoring embodies the spiritual practices and teachings of faith traditions and, as part of confirmation preparation, helps equip young people to “go and do likewise.” Before embarking on a mentoring program, churches need to explore the best practices suggested by secular mentoring research. One organization that has been doing this kind of research for 25 years is the National Mentoring Partnership. Its goal is providing mentoring programs the tools that “deliver on the promise of being a powerful driver of support and opportunity for young people of all ages.”



Leeds Episcopal Church, Markham, Virginia

The partnership suggests the following six best practices for any mentoring program involving youth to maximize positive outcomes:

**RECRUITMENT:** Recruit appropriate mentors and mentees by realistically describing the program’s aims and expected outcomes.

**SCREENING:** Screen prospective mentors to determine whether they have the time, commitment, and personal qualities to be a safe and effective mentor. Similarly, screen prospective mentees and their parents or guardians about whether they have the time, commitment, and desire to be effectively mentored.

**TRAINING:** Train prospective mentors, mentees, and mentees’ parents (or legal guardians or responsible adult) in the basic knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to build an effective and safe mentoring relationship using culturally appropriate language and tools.

**MATCHING AND INITIATING:** Match mentors and mentees, and initiate the mentoring relationship using strategies likely to increase the likelihood that mentoring relationships will endure and be effective.

**MONITORING AND SUPPORT:** Monitor mentoring relationship milestones and child safety and support matches through ongoing advice, problem-solving,

training, and access to resources for the duration of each relationship.

**CLOSURE:** Facilitate bringing the match to closure in a way that affirms the contributions of the mentor and mentee and offers them the opportunity to prepare for closure and process the experience. (National Mentoring Partnership, 2015)

Several commonly-used confirmation curricula, such as *My Faith, My Life, Making Disciples*, and *Confirm not Conform*, already incorporate mentoring and offer a sturdy structure that follows these best practices for holistic and embodied teaching of faith and discipleship.

Intergenerational mentoring makes sense of confirmation, this “rite without a theology,” empowering young people to claim their full participation in the body of Christ and enriching the faith lives of all who participate in them. As mentors and mentees walk together on the journey toward the owned discipleship of confirmation, they invite the whole church, from generation to generation, into the understanding that confirmation is an invitation into a fuller relationship with God and each other. 🏛️

## Endnotes

Quotes from youth come from focus groups led by Kate Siberine.

Book citation: *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring*. 4th ed. MENTOR/National Mentoring Partnership, 2015.

## Through the ages: 50s

Rt. Rev. James Mathes, Diocese of San Diego

Bishop James Mathes described his experience with confirmation as being “one of those folks who went through confirmation in the sixth grade,” completing a necessary “walk to the communion rail.” It was 1970, and he and his family were attending the Church of the Incarnation, a large, traditional church in Dallas.

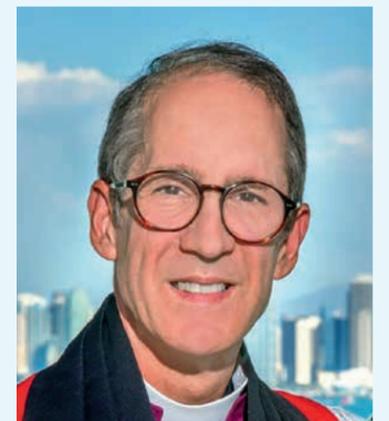
The premise of the confirmation program centered on memorization. Each student was expected to learn, for example, the Nicene Creed, the Apostle’s Creed, the General Thanksgiving, and other parts of the prayer book. After a student could successfully recite one of these items, he or she received points. After earning a set number of points, the student was eligible to be confirmed. Prizes could be earned by those getting more than the minimum number of points.

Mathes doesn’t remember a lot about confirmation classes. “I do not remember a single person I was in class with,” he said. “I do not remember if there was a curriculum.” What remains clear in his mind is the attentiveness and kindness of the confirmation leader, the Rev. Brice Cox. This mentor strongly influenced Mathes and started his movement toward his vocation.

Mathes’ only regret from his confirmation experience is not telling Cox about the important role that he played in his life. “I don’t think we often understand the impact we make with people,” Mathes said.

Although the pedagogy of his confirmation preparation seems questionable, Mathes noted that “those things I memorized I still keep with me.” And he will never forget the kindness of Cox, who helped him begin his journey toward the priesthood.

DSL



The Rt. Rev. James R. Mathes, Bishop, Diocese of San Diego

# Confirmation Gives Youth a Voice

As *The Confirmation Project* traveled to different congregations around the country listening to stories about confirmation programs, the most important voices we heard were from the youth themselves. Despite coming from very different backgrounds, several clear themes emerged when they described their experiences. Their descriptions of the most important parts of confirmation created a picture of what the process currently is and what it could be.

On these pages are the voices of middle and high school students from four Episcopal congregations. The congregations are:

- Leeds Episcopal Church, Markham, Virginia
- St. John's Episcopal Church, Oakland, California
- Church of St. Michael the Archangel, Colorado Springs, Colorado
- Church of St. James the Apostle, Oakland, California

Four themes emerged from our conversations with them. Confirmation is:

- claiming the inherited faith for one's own,
- developing a deeper understanding of the tradition,
- creating a safe place to really be oneself without judgment, and
- discovering God's presence in one's life.

Kate Harmon Siberine

## OWNING OUR FAITH

"I would describe confirmation as the reaffirmation of the Christian faith. I wanted to reaffirm my faith and strengthen my devotion to Christ."

Leeds Episcopal Church

"Before, religion was given to me by my family and my church. Now I want to say that it's my religion too."

St. John's Church

"My mother recommended the confirmation class. As a final decision I chose to join to make my own decision of faith."

Leeds Episcopal Church

## FINDING DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

"Since I was a kid I feel you go to church and you say these words. It doesn't matter what faith or congregation you're in – you just say the words. I guess during confirmation you learn what the words mean and how to really be part of the church rather than just someone who comes to a building every day."

St. Michael the Archangel

"I feel more educated about faith. I don't know what way I'll go, but I'll go there because I want to."

St. John's Church

"I just hope that it will help me start to build a personal relationship with Jesus and God because it's just a really hard thing to start if you're just thinking about it by yourself. It's really good to connect with people and to try to build on that throughout your life. So I feel like it's really a start toward more deep thinking about religion. Like not just go to class, get confirmed, and be done – it's really the start of making your religion the center of your life and really helping it drive you."

St. Michael the Archangel

"I feel more educated about my faith now even though I'm not ready to be confirmed. Actually, I'm not even baptized ... yet."

St. John's Church

## A SAFE PLACE TO BE YOURSELF

"My friends don't really get it, but I feel safer at St. James than I do anywhere else."

St. James Church

"I started coming to *Confirm Not Conform* because my mother, um, well, sort of directed me here. At first I didn't like it because it was all new, and I didn't know anyone. Then I had to go on the retreat. I really liked cabin time. Once I realized the other kids were funny and nice, I wanted to hang out with them ... I started looking forward to *Confirm Not Conform* because I made friends, started talking to my mentor, and realized I didn't have to be nervous."

St. John's Church

"In a way it's really different because at school we're taught, 'Oh you have to go to a good college, you have to know what you're going to do with your life, you have to do all this.' Here it's just 'follow God and be a good person.' Sometimes that's good to hear instead of 'get good grades.'"

St. Michael the Archangel

## DISCOVERING GOD'S PRESENCE

"Honestly when I pray, for the most part, it's not about faith or about God or anything. It's always about school. It's always about my life or someone else's life. It's never actually about, 'I hope I get closer to You.' I really hope that with confirmation that that will happen. That during or after confirmation, I'll pray that we get closer."

St. Michael the Archangel

"When I started confirmation, my life was a little rocky. The meetings were quiet and peaceful by comparison. It kind of showed me there are going to be some hard times in your life – like mean sports coaches – and you can go to church and God is always there. It taught me that God is always by my side."

St. John's Church

"I hope that with confirmation I get closer to Jesus because I know that right now I don't have a complete and thorough understanding of him. I've always grown up just knowing that he's there and knowing all that he's done for us and for me, but I'm not 100 percent and I hope with confirmation it will help me get there."

St. Michael the Archangel

"When they started throwing the holy water, I got the chills. And then we walked around everyone and blessed them."

St. James Church

## Through the ages: 30s

The Rev. Annie Pierpoint Mertz, Hayward, California



The Rev. Annie Pierpoint Mertz, Hayward, California

Confirmation was a profound experience in Annie Pierpoint Mertz's life. It began at her home church, St. John's in Oakland, California, which has a history of strong youth ministry. Aply led by Kellor Smith, the director of youth and family services for over 35 years, the church also is the home of *Confirm Not Conform*, confirmation programs for youth and adults that are used by

Episcopal churches throughout the country. Annie describes herself as a "living guinea pig" for the curriculum that was just emerging as she reached adolescence.

When she reached the "right age," which was seventh grade, her mom announced that it was time for her to sign up for confirmation classes. Annie thought the whole idea was "kind of dumb," since she had no intention of being confirmed then or ever.

"But soon I started going to the classes each week, which were very intensive." They were led by the rector, with the underlying premise of "so you are getting confirmed," but Annie was not ready. By the end of the class, Annie was still not ready to be confirmed.

In her confirmation class and in the *Confirm Not Conform* curriculum, a ceremony marks the end of the year of study with student presentations of memorized scripture, a reflection of religious initiation ceremonies of bar and bat mitzvahs in the Jewish tradition.

Even though Annie refused to be confirmed, she was invited to be a part of the ceremony at St. John's and to select a passage of scripture to memorize. She chose a passage from the Book of Daniel—the section about his being in the lion's den—primarily because a boy she liked at the time was named Daniel.

"I was welcomed to be a part of the ceremony, even though I did not get confirmed," Annie said. "I was waiting for the church to reject me, but that did not happen at any level."

## CONFIRMATION REVISITED

Two years later, when the next confirmation class was being formed, Annie asked if she could come back to be a facilitator/student leader. "Here I was an unconfirmed heathen," she said, figuring that there was no way that she would be allowed to return as a leader. "I was testing my church community."

The adult confirmation leaders welcomed her into the group as a student leader, and Annie completed her second confirmation course. And again she did not want to be confirmed. "I was still not ready," she said.

Two years later when she was 17, she was invited to take part in the program in a planning role. She met weekly with other leaders to plan the class sessions. "That year was incredible," she said. "I felt a kinship with the class and knew that I had been helpful to them as a leader."

This time when the question was asked, "Do you want to be confirmed?" she said yes, and asked the entire class to be her presenters.

"That is when I made a lifelong commitment to the community that I loved. My commitment was not to a theology or a faith tradition, but to a community."

Annie is now an Episcopal priest. The commitment she made to her community of believers stays with her still.

DSL

# Confirmation Makes Disciples of the Included

By Edwin F. Gulick Jr.

Week after week I arrive at some Episcopal church and there they are seated in a semi-circle. Frequently, younger and older confirmands plus baptismal candidates are included. I usually begin with “Good morning. I am here because you are so important to God’s mission in God’s world. You are important and I am ‘significant.’ I am a sign of the reality that the faith you are claiming is the faith of the Apostles. I am a sign that the community you are claiming is larger than this local expression of it. And I am a sign that our baptismal life is so important to God’s world that the same minister who ordains deacons, priests and other bishops is here to empower your baptismal ministry in God’s world.”

Then I ask, “How many of you remember your baptism?” In the Virginia Diocese, few actually raise their hands, but some do. “For those of you who do not remember, I want to give you an analogy that might strengthen your understanding of what is about to happen.”

At this point, I usually select the youngest man or woman sitting closest to me as my living illustration. I then tell them that all I say, for the sake of the analogy, is true. I am an old bachelor with no family, and I am worth three million dollars! And Mary is so great; she is my next-door neighbor and she actually thinks I am worth talking to. When we had the big snow, she shoveled my sidewalk. She sees me struggling with groceries and is quickly at my side. I have made a decision, have gone to my attorney, and I have written a will and left my entire legacy of three million dollars to Mary. And then I died. This is so sad, but not for Mary!

Is she a millionaire? Right, but here is the stretch question. What if Mary does not know about my will? Would she still be a millionaire? (They squirm a bit.) She is a millionaire, but in order for my legacy to be operative, it has to be claimed! At this point, the implications of the analogy become clear.

I go on to say that on their baptismal day, the heavens opened and God said, “You are my beloved daughter. I am pleased with you.” God has stuck with you and cannot, and will not ever allow you to fall from God’s embrace. So, in one sense, you are not getting anything from God that you do not already have. But God is getting something from you. You are offering your baptismal life for the transforming of God’s world. You are putting your baptism to work and in the Episcopal family that is so important that we invite the

Bishop to come to be a sign of the Holy Spirit’s empowering your decision.

It is my privilege and joy to contextualize my visit in that way because I believe so strongly in the transformative impact of a clear theology of baptism and the claiming rite of confirmation for making intentional disciples.

## INTENTIONAL FORMATION

A part of the body of Christ that celebrates the baptism of infants must, I think, order its life towards the future claiming of such lavish unconditional grace. And so the sponsors and congregation promise to bring up the child in the Christian faith and life and to help her grow into the full stature of Christ. The congregation vows to do all in their power to create a nurturing community that supports life in Christ. It is my lived experience as a person confirmed in such a community and as a priest and bishop, I have always



The Rt. Rev. Edwin F. Gulick, Jr., Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Virginia



felt that the intentional formation of Christians was the deepest privilege and joy.

The elements of good catechesis involve an immersion in scriptural themes such as creation, covenant, the prophetic tradition, the humanity and divinity of Jesus, the expansion of the Church and that Church in the epochs of history. Elements of Church history should include the Church in the Book of Acts, the Church of the Martyrs, the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and the modern Anglican/Episcopal tradition.

Grounding in the sacraments, of Baptism, and Eucharist and the lesser five sacramental rites showing how they are related to those sacraments should be focused on enhancing the lives and commitments of the baptized. Catechesis must be enhanced by practice. Mission trips and pilgrimages made up of mature Christians and the confirmands ground the candidate in discipleship.

I also found in my own ministry that the deeply converted sponsor must be deeply invested in the confirmand’s life. I also feel that the liturgy of Baptism and/or confirmation in the presence of a chief pastor must also be an enhancing of each person’s discipleship in church that day. To that end, I ask everyone to take a long breath after saying the Nicene Creed, and then I begin to explicate each vow with these or similar words:

**“You have just professed faith in the Triune God and that’s great because once upon a time you were baptized into that Name. The Trinity shares with us their inner life of love and this has implications!”**

**“If you have ever grilled on a charcoal fire, you have observed what happens to the briquette that falls off the pile – it tends to go out!”**

**“We need to be rekindled by each other’s faith. After we get a hard diagnosis, have lost a partner, or a job, or had our faith ‘cool off’ in other ways, we need both to be rekindled and to rekindle each other. So will you continue in the Apostles’**

**teaching and fellowship in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?”**

When I was Bishop of Kentucky, I ran into folks who were so shocked by post-baptismal sin that they got baptized several times in their life. We Episcopalians are disappointed by our sins or even shocked, but like the Prodigal Son we never lose confidence in the Father’s love and mercy. This vow does not ask us to be perfect, but it asks us to be familiar with the pathway home.

**“Will you persevere in resisting evil and whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”**

Our third vow is so critical for a post-Christian world. Half of our friends and neighbors do not know the story – *your life* may be the first Gospel of Jesus Christ that they hear or read. So . . .

**“Will you proclaim by word and example the good news, God in Christ?”**

I find it easy to couple the last two vows. They are based on a large concept, spelled with three small letters: A-L-L.

These vows include your sister whom your mother always seemed to favor, the friend who broke your trust, the refugee, gay, straight, black, white, male, female, old, young.

**“Will you seek to serve Christ in ALL persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”**

**“Will you strive for justice and peace for ALL persons and respect the dignity of every human being?”**

When I administer the rite of confirmation I ask the candidates to meet me at the font. The candidate places their hand on the font and I place my hands on their head, repeat the prayer and have previously instructed the congregation to say a loud Amen at the conclusion of each confirmation. Frequently after the service folks say to me, that felt so real – it was like I was confirmed all over again!

In our Episcopal Church, we have been working so hard to include all within the saving embrace of Christ’s cross. Now it is time to disciple the included. Intentional confirmation, teaching and practice grounded in baptismal theology is the Church’s best opportunity to do that. 🏰

The Rt. Rev. Edwin “Ted” Gulick is Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Virginia



Church of St. James the Apostle, Oakland, California

# Congregational Involvement Is Key to Successful Confirmation Program

By Dorothy Linthicum

Too often churches only look at confirmation as part of their youth programs, siloed and necessary, but less significant than other ministries. Relegated to six or seven classes for young adolescents, it becomes an experience to be endured or a box to be checked. Even committed and creative leadership cannot make confirmation meaningful to most of those sitting in the pews if expectations are that low.

In their visits to successful programs in the country, the Lilly-funded Confirmation Project team discovered that congregational involvement was key to a successful confirmation program. As important was their discovery of confirmation's role in revitalizing and reenergizing congregations. Communities that were vitally involved in listening to, being with, and praying for young people in confirmation classes were better able to meet other challenges facing their churches.

Recent resources created for confirmation challenge congregations to be a part of this important ministry of helping young people to make baptismal vows their own that often were made for them as infants. The integration of these young people into a congregation calls for a community that is willing to travel the journey of confirmation liturgically, spiritually, and in person.

*Confirm Not Conform*, a resource for both youth and adults, includes a two-fold commitment from the confirmand and the faith community. The faith community commits to:

- Listening to my questions and concerns with open minds and hearts;
- Taking my contributions seriously and treating them with respect;
- Exposing me to the fundamental questions of faith and exploring them with me;
- Providing mentors who will share their own faith experiences and questions, and respond to mine;
- Offering help when I need it;
- Keeping me in their prayers. (*Confirm Not Conform 2016*, p. 28)

Confirmands make a commitment to fully participate in the confirmation program, bringing an open mind and heart to each gathering, and treating everyone in the program with respect. In addition, each confirmand is asked to commit to:

- Attending all confirmation sessions (within reason);
- Participating in all field trips (making up any that are missed);

- Attending Sunday School at least twice a month;
- Being involved with the service of Holy Week as much as possible;
- Participating in the community service project;
- Memorizing a passage of scripture of at least 10 verses in length;
- Attending the confirmation service, whether or not the person chooses to be confirmed, as a show of support for other members of the program;
- Participating in the final service, at which each person will recite the passage he or she memorized and explain what it means. (*Confirm Not Conform 2016*, p. 28)

Both parts of the “Commitment Pledge” are signed in the presence of the confirmand and the faith community. Choosing a resource such as *Confirm Not Conform* automatically brings the congregation into the process if it takes its commitment seriously. Mentors probably take the most active role in the program, but others who find ways to engage young confirmands by listening and through prayers, will also benefit from relationships that develop from the commitment pledge.

The resources also include an editable letter for vestries and other church committees or boards. The letter describes the program and expectations of congregational support that go beyond the commitment pledge. The letter outlines, for example, the perimeters of service projects, which might include the use of church buildings or financial support. The letter is a reminder that the confirmation program is “a chance to develop its leaders.” (*Confirm Not Conform 2016*, p. 35)

## PREPARING CONGREGATIONS

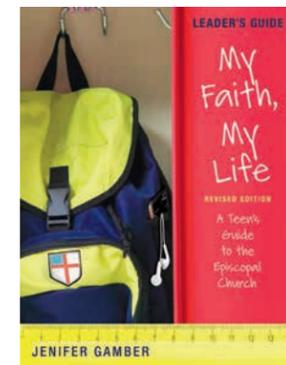
Another way to assess the readiness of congregations for a youth confirmation program is described in *My Faith, My Life: Leader's Guide*, by Jenifer Gamber (Morehouse Publishing, 2014). Gamber lays out steps that should be taken in designing a program of inquiry for your church. The guide is a resource companion for the book *My Faith, My Life: A Teen's Guide to the Episcopal Church* by Gamber (Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

Begin by inviting a group of people to be a part of a confirmation ministry team. Gamber suggests the team include a member of the clergy, a youth who will participate in the program, a parent, a youth who has been confirmed, a leader of the current youth program, and a potential mentor. At the initial meeting, ask group members to reflect on their own confirmation experiences, both positive and negative. The team will have a better sense of where they want to go by looking at the past to understand the future.

To the right is a list of basic questions Gamber suggests the group use to guide their conversation. More background about the questions is included in the Leader's Guide.

## RAISING EXPECTATIONS

Making mutual accountability explicit, raises expectations, improves communication, and deepens participants' experiences throughout a confirmation program. Research shows that congregations that fully embrace confirmation programs reap many positive benefits. The barriers among age groups are lowered, congregational identity is strengthened, the energy of youth infects the entire congregation, and faith in the Living Christ is renewed. Moving confirmation to the forefront of a faith community benefits everyone! 🏰



### Designing a Program of Inquiry for Your Church

Questions to consider in planning a confirmation program for your church

1. **What is your church's mission statement?**  
*Aligning confirmation with your church's mission statement will improve its authenticity.*
2. **What Christian formation programs are offered at your church?**  
*Confirmation should build on the past and prepare young people for the future.*
3. **What is confirmation?**  
*Read about confirmation in the "Pastoral Offices" section of the Book of Common Prayer, beginning on page 412.*
4. **What are the goals and purpose of your confirmation program?**  
*These should be informed by the mission statement and your church's unique perspective.*
5. **What actions fit your goals?**  
*List goals by priority and describe ways to meet each goal.*
6. **How does your confirmation program fit into overall formation programming?**  
*What are strengths and weaknesses of existing programs? What program comes next?*
7. **How will the program be structured?**  
*What age group is targeted? How long will the program last? When, where and how often will the group meet?*
8. **What practical matters need to be considered?**  
*What constraints of time, space, and people will affect the program?*

# Have You Considered Confirmation Camp?

There is nothing like a well-run Christian camp to infuse faith in daily life. Where else are we privileged to live within the reign of God 24/7? Done right, everything about camp is sacramental, and campers return home with memories and life skills to recognize God at work in the world.

The Confirmation Project is the first major youth ministry study to take seriously the role of the camp experience in Christian education and faith formation. Using survey data from Confirmation Program leaders and site visits to five camps that have a strong connection to ministries in their denominational traditions and an intentional emphasis on Christian education we can say with confidence that healthy camps:

- ▶ Are more than fun and games
- ▶ Lead to greater engagement in congregations
- ▶ Take Christian community seriously
- ▶ Are places to unplug
- ▶ Take young people seriously
- ▶ Take experience seriously

Camps invite growth, teach Christian discipleship, and form leaders. At present, less than 8% of all confirmation

programs require attendance at camp, and the majority of these programs are Lutheran. Of the Episcopal confirmands who responded to the Project survey, 59.5% say they have never participated in a Bible or church camp. At the same time roughly a third of all confirmation programs surveyed require

attendance at one or more overnight retreats. We're so close! What would it take to develop a confirmation camp in your diocese or region? How might the immersive formation experience of a well-designed week at camp offer your young people a life-shaping experience? What if the bishop were in residence? For more inspiration, read about the camp site visits in the Confirmation Project Portrait Gallery, <https://theconfirmationproject.com/gallery/>.

*Lisa Kimball*



*Church of St. Michael the Archangel, Colorado Springs, Colorado*

# Through the ages: 70s

Martin K. Austin, Ellicott City, Maryland

Two organizations prepared Martin Austin for confirmation formally and informally during his college years: Trinity Episcopal Church, Morgantown, West Virginia, and the Canterbury Club at the University of West Virginia. Austin was drawn to the Canterbury Club first through its Sunday evening program that included a meal. Its sponsoring church, Trinity, drew him with its music program and choir.

A lot of university faculty attended Trinity, said Austin, "and they would answer any question you asked them." But it was the Canterbury Club that gave students "respite, comfort, spiritual training, and help with finding themselves." He added, "These clubs did a lot for students' religious development and drew others who would be non-churched or non-episcopal to the Episcopal Church."

Austin was the only black person at Trinity, "but that did not seem to matter to them or to me," he said. The confirmation classes met in the evenings, with about 15 male and female students. It was not a quick program. The classes were carefully planned and laid out with a syllabus by church members, many of whom were university faculty members. Most confirmands had one mentor, but Austin had two. Dr. Stillwell, a member of the university faculty and blind, and his wife Mrs. Stillwell who accompanied her husband to most events.

"The university environment," said Austin, "was like a small town." He always felt welcomed, partly because of the support of the Stillwells who, said Austin, "probably ran some defense for me behind the scenes." They also invited him to their home for dinner and helped him complete confirmation assignments.

The confirmation curriculum was centered around interviews with people in the church. "We had a lot of dialogue with parishioners to discover which parts of the worship meant something to them." Trinity used a variety of services on Sunday and throughout the week to engage much of the liturgy in the prayer book. "This is the way we learned parts of the prayer book," he said.

Before he left Morgantown and the university, the Rev. Donald L. Rogan, Trinity's rector, talked openly with Austin about churches he would likely encounter in his life. The high church services that Austin enjoyed at Trinity along with the intellectualism of the congregation would rarely be available, especially in more rural areas or places of poverty.

In looking back at that time in his life, Austin noted that "there was not much else for me to participate in" at the university. But the Canterbury Club and Trinity Church "protected, supported, nurtured, and prepared me" for a life of faith. "They served me well."



*Martin Austin, Ellicott City, Maryland*

# Through the ages: 80s

Bonnie Lilley, Alexandria, Virginia

Although Bonnie Lilley doesn't remember very much about her confirmation experience, it led her to a lifetime within the Episcopal Church. Her long commitment to the Church and her activities in her current parish inspire many who are much younger than her 87 years.

Lilley was drawn to confirmation classes during high school as a way to leave the campus of her Wellesley, Massachusetts, boarding school. She and a friend attended classes faithfully, and she remembers enjoying being with others and learning about the Episcopal Church. She cannot remember too much about the confirmation teacher or the service itself, but she notes that

"I continued on ever since. It must have had some impact!"

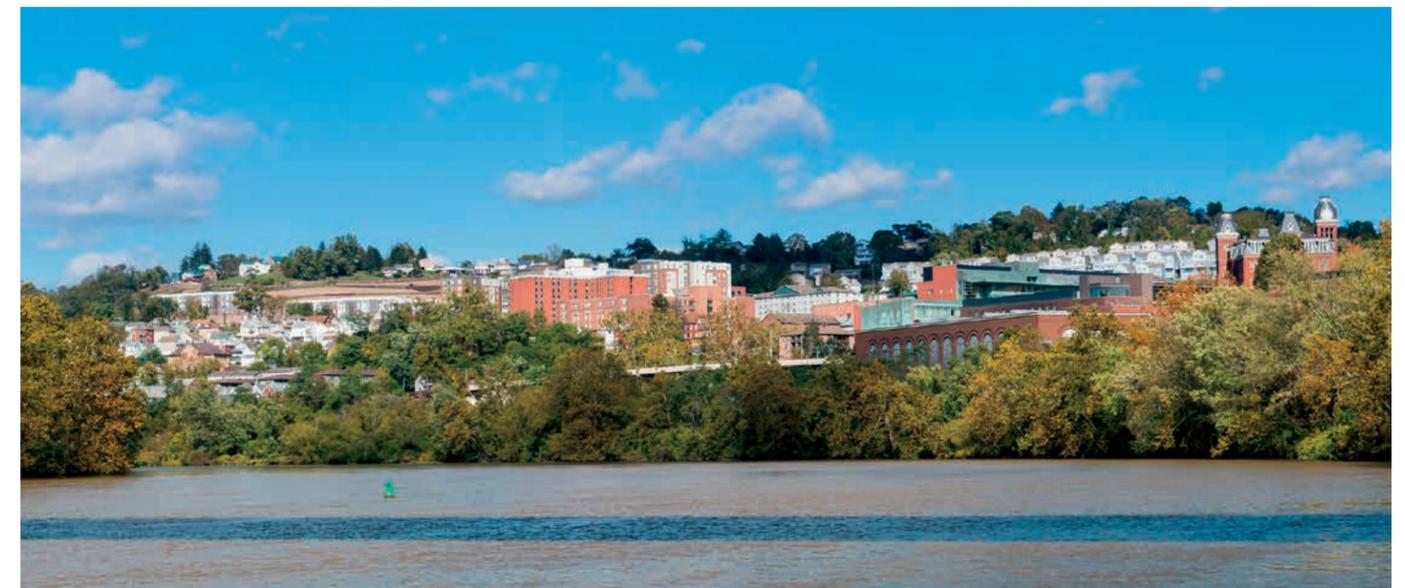
Later, as a military wife with three children, she found herself in new places almost every year. In each city she would find an Episcopal church for her family. "The one I remember most was in Las Vegas," she said, because of its beautiful liturgy.

Having been a part of Episcopal churches all over the country, Lilley said confirmation obviously "gave me an attachment to the Episcopal tradition." An attachment that continues today!

*DSL*



*Bonnie Lilley, Alexandria, Virginia*



*Morgantown, West Virginia*

# Robust Confirmation Can Be Part of Life-Long Formation of Baptism

By James W. Farwell

The words of Cyril our ancestor sound the Christians' deep reverence for baptism as initiation into the royal lineage of Jesus...a royal priesthood of believers anointed by the very Spirit who anointed Jesus himself. Nothing less is at stake in baptism, and nothing less flows from it than the call to become, by divine grace, who we are.

And who are we? Through baptism, we find ourselves beloved and redeemed; yet the powers of death persist for now, and so we turn toward the world, beloved too by God, to join ourselves to God's mission at work anywhere that mercy, justice, and healing is underway.

To consent to this mission, to be strengthened for participation in it, confessing our failings and returning to it again and again as it gets into our bones – this is the ongoing work of Christian formation, and it *belongs to every stage of Christian life*. But it is rooted in baptism, and in every stage it is to the call of discipleship and the grace to perform it *given fully in baptism, nourished at the Eucharistic table*, to which we return.

I am delighted at the development of robust “best practices” for formation of young adults, and the contributors to this issue offer fine reflections and resources to that end. We must, however, be crystal clear that this is one piece of the ongoing baptismal formation that the 1979 prayer book supports: a process of formation so fulsome and life-long that it might lead us any time, not just at young adulthood, to reaffirm our faith before a bishop who is not one charged with the completion of baptism (as if something is lacking there), but who presides over the ongoing life of the baptismal-eucharistic community *at every stage of its growth*.

With the energy for best practices around confirmation described in this issue must come with as much energy, *or more*, for the process of evangelism, the catechumenate in preparing adults for baptism; forming sponsors of children and preparing them for their children's baptism in something more than a two-hour session on a Saturday; preparing the baptized, from ages 1 to 101, in well-crafted formational efforts over the long arc and in short intensives for the regular renewal of baptismal vows at principal feasts; and more.

*“Already the savour of bliss is upon you, who have come to be enlightened; you have begun to pluck spiritual flowers with which to weave heavenly crowns. Already you are redolent of the fragrance of the Holy Spirit. You have reached the royal vestibule. O may the King himself conduct you within.”*

Cyril of Jerusalem, to those about to be baptized at Easter, c. 350

Without this, the turn toward strong practices around confirmation may simply return us to a context in which confirmation is asked to bear too much; baptism to weigh too little; our capacity to imagine the ministry shared by every baptized person (even infants!) is made weak; and bishops envision their contact with parishes primarily through dispensing a particular sacramental rite reserved to them.

An emphasis on confirmation over all other formational stages and rituals would take us backward, and backward is not where we need to go. So, strength and blessing to those who work at the strong practices around confirmation for our young adults like those reflected in this issue. And may the same energy be put toward initial formation for baptism and the life-long formation of the baptized at every turn of life, to become who we are and take up our roles in the transforming mission of God.

*The Rev. James W. Farwell, Ph.D. is Professor of Theology and Liturgy at Virginia Theological Seminary.*



## Through the ages: 60s

Carol Lafley, retired, Alexandria, Virginia

Confirmation was a profound experience for Carol Lafley. “It was a special moment for me,” she said, “because my family has been at Christ Church (Alexandria) for so long.” Lafley was confirmed with her cousin John, making confirmation even more a family experience.

She shares a birthday with Robert E. Lee, whose history is closely entwined with Christ Church. Her position at the kneeling rail during the confirmation service was at the same place where Lee had been confirmed decades earlier, marked by a small plaque.

She was among the fifth generation in her family to be a part of Christ Church. During confirmation, she said, “I felt like I was in tune with the church.” That powerful sense of belonging “made me want to always stay in the Episcopal Church.” The service itself solidified in her mind who she was and what she wanted to be.

DSL



Carol Lafley and new generations at Christ Church

## The Role of Confirmation in Our Future

Last spring, during the seasons of Lent and Easter, Lisa Kimball and I taught a course at the seminary about discipleship. We focused on the rhythm of the catechumenate process. James Farwell was a guest speaker and made a compelling case for putting the church's energy “toward initial formation for baptism and the life-long formation of the baptized at every turn of life.”

About the same time, Kate Siberine and Lisa were enthusiastically reporting back from visits to churches around the country about the influence of dynamic confirmation programs on young people and their congregations. Done well, confirmation matters. What does “done well” mean? Lisa explains on page 9 that “youth confirmation is a culturally-sanctioned, developmentally ripe season of ‘faith intensification’ . . . that equips young people to discern their readiness to ‘stand up and be counted’ as followers of Jesus Christ.”

Kate found in her site visits that “it is most often the relationships rather than the content that equip young people to claim their own call to follow Jesus.” (See page 12.) She notes that youth and their mentors “invite the whole church, from generation to generation, into the understanding that confirmation is an invitation into a fuller relationship with God and each other.”

But perhaps it is the voices of youth (pages 14-15) and those who shared their memories of confirmation *Through the Ages* that speak the clearest. Annie, now in her 30s, said confirmation “is when I made a lifelong commitment to the community that I loved. My commitment was not to a theology or a faith tradition, but to a community.”

Now in his 70s, Martin said confirmation “protected, supported, nurtured, and prepared me” for a life of faith. Sandra, now middle-aged, said confirmation made her “part of something larger, a family, that encourages me to be the



Church of St. James the Apostle, Oakland, California

Christian that I am, just like my own family encourages me to be exactly who I am.”

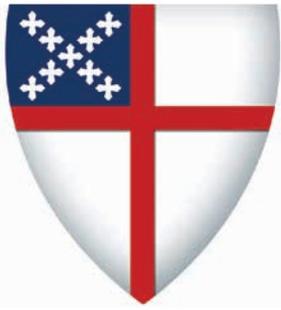
Preparing this special issue has made three truths very clear:

- Forming mature Christian disciples must begin before baptism and continue through each decade of life.
- The Rite of Confirmation provides an opportunity for intentional Christian formation at a developmentally critical time in young people's lives.
- Done well, confirmation shapes individual faith practices for life and challenges congregations to be vital faith-forming communities.

And there is more! A date will soon be announced for a Confirmation Summit, sponsored by Forma, the Center for the Ministry of Teaching, and other partners. We hope you will come join the conversation!

Dorothy Linthicum

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## A Word about Confirmation from Harry Potter



Along with his friends Harry Potter is asked in *Deathly Hallows* what he believes, what he renounces, and to what he will be faithful on their epic mission – similar questions asked in confirmation liturgy. Every minute and every year at Hogwarts school has formed Harry into the person who stands and declares his faith against his own doubts and the doubts of the adult world.

Harry decides that he doesn't need to know or completely understand the mission before he is ready to die for it. It takes years for Harry to understand his mother's gift to him – to realize that she was more than a victim. She was also a willing resistor and sacrifice for others. Harry develops a profound understanding of the agency of sacrifice.

Harry's confirmation, like any true confirmation, is not an act of certainty but rather an act of clarity. When we train teenagers in certainty, we betray our own experience of truth and lose credibility with most young adults who know through experience the limits of human understanding.

Our call is to prepare young people to respond to sacrificial love: to help them find clarity about the life and love of Christ. Then we help them find and articulate clarity about how they want to respond to Christ's invitation to abundant life and to resurrection from every death.

Through the readings in the confirmation liturgy, we are directed “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” (Romans 12: 1) We respond the rest of our lives.

*The Rev. Patricia Lyons, D.Min., in her upcoming book,  
Teaching Faith with Harry Potter, Morehouse, 2017*