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# KINGSTON UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Kingston, New Jersey | The United Methodist Church

BY *Kenda Creasy Dean*

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](http://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 | Garret Evangelical Seminary, AME  
Kenda Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Gordon Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Shonda Gladden | Garrett Evangelical 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](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, [www.designbysarah.net](http://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.

## INTRODUCTION

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The benediction is over, but no one is in a hurry to leave. The small sanctuary is abuzz with worshippers greeting each other. Babies are happy centers of attention, and visitors who failed to escape quickly enough are swarmed by curious congregants. The middle aisle is clogged with conversation and good-natured jostling as people work their way to the coffee in the fellowship hall, and eventually to the parking lot.

In the center aisle stands a young woman holding her phone in front of her, alternately speaking to the screen and holding it out for others to do the same. “Is that Shelby?!” one woman says excitedly, waving frantically at the screen as she passes by. “Yo, Shelby!” waves a seminarian, navigating a small traffic jam. Another woman stops and smiles at the screen. “I love the messy bun,” she remarks, as Shelby touches her hair. “Baby William got baptized today—we miss you!”

Fourteen-year-old Shelby Cole beams from the screen, self-conscious from the attention but pleased. She is wearing sweats and is sitting in her bedroom in Switzerland. This is the beginning of her weekly confirmation class.

## CONTEXT

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The Coles began attending Kingston a year ago, embracing the church’s relational culture enthusiastically. Kingston has the feel of a village church (the municipality of Kingston, population 1,423,<sup>1</sup> is literally classified as a village by the U.S. Census). In many ways, the town of Kingston still feels like the mill town and stagecoach stop that was situated at the head of an Indian trail in 1776, when prominent colonists ate at “The Sign of the Mermaid” tavern, and George Washington marched his weary troops through town on their way to Washington’s headquarters in Rockingham, two miles north. Today, Kingston is the working class neighbor of Princeton, and benefits from the nearby presence of three major universities, a

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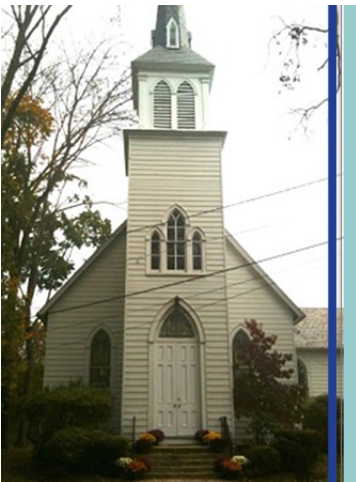
<sup>1</sup> U.S. Census (2010).

theological school, and 54,000 college students who swell the county's population. Each February on "the church's birthday," the pastor re-tells the congregation's origin story: how in 1877, a group of Kingstonians attended a tent revival led by Methodist evangelist Lizzie Sharpe, and convicted by the Holy Spirit, they walked home and founded a church, thanks to a woman's preaching.



I met Shelby's family because I, too, worship at Kingston—a tiny congregation where, six years ago, a new mission statement (*"Feed More Sheep"*) and a lucky succession of gifted student pastors gave a floundering congregation new momentum. "If you love me, feed my sheep," Jesus told Peter in the resurrection appearance on the beach (John 21:17). Kingston may be unique in the fact that every man, woman

and child in the congregation knows the church mission statement by heart. Not surprisingly, food and food issues are major emphases at Kingston, where potlucks and a food truck ministry serve as signature forms of outreach.



Yet the congregation is most known for its strong sense of community, for "doing ministry out of friendship," as the pastor says regularly during worship. It is not lost on visitors that even finding the church is an accomplishment. Unseen from the main roads, on a dead-end street, across from a cemetery, with limited parking and no room for expansion, Kingston's location is a church-growth expert's nightmare. Yet the church has been in "growth mode" for the past five years, with

attendance nearly quadrupling (about 75 worshippers reliably fill the pews on Sundays--which is about all that will fit). Most of the newcomers are young adults, many of whom attend the local seminary.

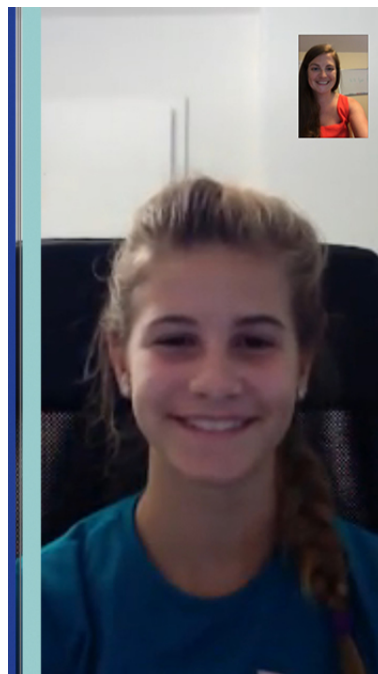
Drawn by this energy, and by the fact that their daughters were quickly known by name, Shelby's family decided to move from their current (United Methodist) congregation and make Kingston their church home. Shelby's dad Keith advised the finance committee and Shelby, her mom Jody, and two older sisters volunteered in the church nursery. The Coles quickly developed close relationships with the pastor's family, invited friends to church, and ardently supported the church's food truck ministry. Two months into this new rhythm, Keith Cole received a promotion - - to Zurich. "We'll be back," Keith and Jody assured their grief-stricken daughters, noting that the assignment was only for three years. Before they moved, Jody made a request of the pastor: that Shelby be confirmed at Kingston United Methodist Church.

### ***Customized Confirmation: The I.E.P. Approach***

Given the congregation's demographics, teenagers are scarce commodities at Kingston. Shelby and her sisters represent three-fifths of them. In the absence of a youth group, confirmation is the congregation's only formal "youth ministry," and it is offered on an as-needed basis, one teenager at a time. As a result, confirmation at Kingston functions much the way an I.E.P. ("individualized education program") functions at school. A student is paired with an instructor whose job it is to help her achieve learning objectives by creating a curriculum tailored to her individual learning challenges. In Shelby's case, the learning challenge was the fact that the student was located in Switzerland, and the instructor and learning community were not.

Annie Pasqua, the young woman holding the phone after worship, volunteered to teach confirmation under these circumstances. Annie had been a youth director at a large United Methodist church before moving to Kingston, and—like the church's 35-year-old pastor, Trey Wince—she was undaunted by the technical challenges posed by "virtual" confirmation. On the contrary, they both recognized the limits of such an arrangement, but chose to embrace its relational possibilities. Annie had not met Shelby prior to the Cole's move to Zurich, so Pastor Wince introduced everyone via FaceTime, and Annie went to work on the most grueling part of the

process: coordinating schedules to find a regular time to meet. (Shelby admitted, “Yeah, that was crazy.”<sup>2</sup>) Eventually they settled on Sundays—12:30 pm Eastern Time, 6:30 pm Central European time. Annie includes Shelby, by phone, in the “after church greeting” period as a way to help her feel connected to people at Kingston. She wants Shelby to feel like she knows this church when she comes back for twice-a-year visits—and she wants people in the congregation to feel like they know Shelby. As a result, Annie’s phone is a frequent visitor at worship. One month she used it to make a video for Shelby, asking congregants to finish the sentence, “I’m \_\_\_\_\_, and Jesus has made me more\_\_\_\_\_.” Annie later added Shelby’s own testimony to the video. Shelby’s mother reflected later:



The video Annie made was awesome! Shelby watched it many times and commented about how much she misses KUMC. She also mentioned how she is happy to be working with a young person [Annie]—I think it makes it less formal in her mind.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, when I spoke with Annie and Pastor Wince about confirmation, neither of them lifted up the “virtual” nature of Shelby’s confirmation as its most distinctive quality. “Kingston’s DNA is all over [this approach to confirmation],” Annie reflected. “Because we’re a small church, meeting one-on-one lets us meet youth where they are, when they are ready. It allows us to have confirmation when we should be having confirmation with them, instead of waiting for a mass of youth just so we can confirm them all together.”<sup>4</sup> Recalling their initial hiccups (i.e., needing to find time just to get acquainted, scheduling, the difficulty of finding a curriculum, adapting group activities for individual, online use, etc.), Pastor Wince

<sup>2</sup> Shelby Cole, informal conversation with Kenda Creasy Dean, notes, September 20, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Jody Cole, interview with Kenda Creasy Dean, transcript, September 22, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview with Kenda Creasy Dean, notes, September 10, 2015.

reflected: “Once it actually happened, I think [Shelby’s experience] was probably better than most confirmation experiences: personalized, relational, interactive. The problem is that it felt like we were reinventing the confirmation process from scratch.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Curriculum: Curated and Collaborative***

#### The Explicit Curriculum

Eventually, Annie created a curricular cocktail that blended the United Methodist confirmation curriculum *Credo* with teen-friendly videos on John Wesley created by sparkhouse, supplemented by Annie’s own curated contributions.<sup>6</sup> The process involved ten formal sessions that spanned spring, summer, and fall, supplemented by personal visits during the summer and numerous homework activities. Annie explained:

We settled on a virtual structure where I meet with my confirmand for about 30-45 minutes on a schedule we’ve determined. It’s not entirely week-by-week—we adapt based on both of our schedules. . . .What I do prior [to meeting] is send Shelby activities to do with her family, and we talk about them during our sessions. Those activities [include] looking at different Scriptures based on the topic for the week, and having Shelby reflect on what those Scriptures are trying to tell us. But they also include videos, music, and songs to supplement the Scriptural message. . . .Gifts discernment is part of this too. She has to do a service project for school, and I want her to be able to discuss that and her passions, like dance club, in terms of gifts God has given her, you know, to connect faith and ministry. At the moment, it’s more like, “Here’s a requirement, let’s do it.”

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<sup>5</sup> Trey Wince, personal conversation with Kenda Creasy Dean, notes, October 21, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The *Credo* curriculum is divided into eight sessions, organized around three themes: “Know Your Story” (a basic knowledge and understanding of the Christian story, as contained in the Old and New Testaments and the history of the church); “Confirm Your Faith” (core beliefs, practices, and emphases of United Methodist Christians); and “Live Your Commitment” (the vows that they will take if they choose to be confirmed so that they understand the commitment they will be making and the expectations that come with being confirmed as a professing member of The United Methodist Church.) See <https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=1070776> (accessed October 21, 2015). Sparkhouse’s confirmation curriculum had not been published at the time of Shelby’s confirmation.



Annie gave Shelby considerable agency in designing the structure of the program “by leaving the door open,” as Annie put it, for a change of pace. “I say, ‘Let’s try this, and if it doesn’t work, we’ll check back in.’”<sup>7</sup> In addition to helping determine the schedule, Shelby also chose her own service project and had veto power on certain activities that did not translate well into the online format—and frequently the results, in Annie’s words, “are kind of messy.” Annie admires Shelby’s flexibility in this regard. “She’s always prepared. She’ll answer the questions, draw out different correlations, and the homework is working well. It’s surprising, though. I asked her to draw a picture for one exercise from the workbook, and she spoke to me, rather than drawing it.” Meanwhile, there’s an “artificial distance” created by the use of a screen, Annie noted, mostly because “it’s really intense one-on-one; there’s no input from anyone else.”<sup>8</sup>

Annie freely adapted the curriculum as Shelby progressed, adding items to keep the conversation relevant to Shelby’s experience, and inserting activities designed to give Shelby a vocabulary to discuss faith and vocation with her family. For example, Annie sent Shelby a set of questions for “interviewing” her sisters and her parents about their own faith journeys. She also had Shelby fill out a spiritual gifts inventory designed for youth. At the time we talked, Annie was waiting for Shelby to choose a school service project in hopes that this could be platform to talk about vocation. “She’s also done a lot of traveling,” Annie noted, unsure how to draw these trips into the conversation as well. “She went to Spain with her school, and her family just went to the Galapagos Islands,” Annie said. “These just happened—I need to look at the future.”<sup>9</sup>

As it turned out, however, Shelby liked the curriculum Annie offered (“It rocked!”)<sup>10</sup> While Shelby openly preferred the relational and vocational aspects of confirmation, she nonetheless thought of confirmation as primarily a cognitive exercise that was

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<sup>7</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview.

<sup>9</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview.

<sup>10</sup> Shelby Cole, interview, October 23, 2015.



supposed to deepen her knowledge about God, rather than dramatically change her relationship to God. On a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 being “not close” and 5 being “very close”), Shelby rated her closeness to God before confirmation as a “3” and at the end of confirmation as a “4.” She explained the difference in terms of a better understanding of her faith, which in turn, she thought, helped her become closer to God:

I know more details of faith, more than I ever learned in Sunday School. I like that I know more about Methodism. It helps me understand the church that my family is part of. I feel like I learned how to have my own relationship with God.<sup>11</sup>

### The Implicit Curriculum

Underneath this explicit curriculum ran several implicit curricular streams that seemed to be funding Annie’s choice of topics and especially her homework exercises. One stream was “*making church a safe place to talk about God.*” I already mentioned the video in which parishioners shared a sentence about Jesus—which had the effect of making every person speaking into the camera articulate the name of Jesus Christ in some way. The theology of these statements may have been squishy, but the message was clear: “Kingston is a place people talk about Jesus, and what Jesus has done for them.”

Like most teenagers, Shelby struggles with explicit God-language and tends to avoid direct references to the supernatural. In one homework activity on the Holy Spirit, Annie asked Shelby to list words that “remind you of church.” Shelby listed *family, friends, community service, community, love, bonds, worship*—but no mention of God or any person of the Trinity. Annie pressed her, and Shelby dug a little deeper, wanting to correct the impression that she had not sensed God’s presence:

I feel like I have felt God’s presence in church –I can’t remember when, but it seems like sometimes it happens.

*Do you sense God’s presence in other places?*

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<sup>11</sup> Shelby Cole, interview, October 23, 2015.

It depends...When we moved, things went smoothly, and when our dog came back and was okay, I think that felt like God [was present].<sup>12</sup>

Annie asked Shelby what she thought the Scripture they had read this week meant. Shelby paused, and then went for it: “God and the Holy Spirit have special powers. What the Holy Spirit means is that God loves us, no matter what.”<sup>13</sup>



Another implicit stream of the curriculum announced that, “*Shelby is a person of value to our congregation.*” Much of this message was conveyed through Annie herself, who Jody described as a “warm and calm presence” whom Shelby admired, and who faithfully showed up at the appointed time with no other agenda besides listening to and conversing with Shelby. This message was also conveyed by a carefully cultivated “ministry of noticing,” brokered through Annie’s phone and computer. During the informal chatter after church, Annie used her phone to make Shelby visibly present, and

noticed by, the congregation. Pastor Wince made it a point to stop and chat with Shelby whenever he passed through a room (a regular occurrence) where Annie and Shelby were engaged in a confirmation session. The Wince’s also made a point of inviting the Coles and Annie to dinner when they were all in town over the summer. In other words, Shelby’s experience of Kingston UMC—even from afar—was that it was place where people valued her and her presence, even virtually.

Less developed was a third implicit curricular stream, but one frequently mentioned by Annie in her reflections about the confirmation experience: “*You are gifted by God in ways that will bring hope and healing to the world.*” My observation was that the vocational thrust of confirmation was muted in Kingston’s curriculum,

<sup>12</sup> Shelby Cole, informal conversation.

<sup>13</sup> Shelby Cole, informal conversation.

except for what Annie herself added (notably the discussion of the spiritual gifts inventory). But the emphasis on service, articulated by Jody and Annie, and Shelby's own growing interest in service activities, made vocation a theme that simmered beneath the service of confirmation in multiple ways. "My favorite [part of confirmation] for now," Shelby told me in an email, "is the [Jesus] video that Annie made, and added me to. But I think I'm going to really enjoy my community service hours the best because I like to help people."<sup>14</sup> The connection between faith, mission, vocation, and service remained largely unexplored, but the tacit assumption that Shelby had gifts to be leveraged on behalf of others—gifts presumably given to her by God—remained a motivator for Shelby and Annie alike.

### ***Parental Involvement: The Crucial Ingredient***

Interestingly, for all of Kingston's emphasis on a relationship-rich confirmation, only Annie openly acknowledged the most important person in Shelby's confirmation experience: her mother. Annie was blunt: "Without the parent being super-involved, this virtual thing wouldn't work." Not only was Jody the impetus behind Shelby's "virtual confirmation," she was primarily responsible for helping Shelby carve out time to meet with Annie and complete the activities Annie sent. Jody clearly saw confirmation as a means for strengthening Shelby's faith, and for giving her the grace to become a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Annie interpreted the Coles' expectations for Shelby's confirmation this way:

They want Kingston to walk alongside Shelby in this process. It's assumed that Shelby will join the church, that she'll make a connection between church and faith. *Faith* is very important to Jody, because KUMC was the church that made faith come alive for her and Keith again. Both parents are very open to sharing their faith with Shelby.<sup>15</sup>

Jody was even more direct:

We think confirmation will help Shelby understand the importance of a relationship with God. She may not quite "get it" now but as time goes by I

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<sup>14</sup> Shelby Cole, interview by Kenda Creasy Dean, transcript, October 23, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview.

know she will. Our hope for Shelby is that as the relationship with God grows she will be inspired to follow the slogan “WWJD.” We hope that this attitude and relationship with God will comfort her in times of sorrow and times of celebration! Also [we’re] hopeful that her required community service will teach her that it is always important to give back.<sup>16</sup>

I asked Jody why she was so invested in having Shelby confirmed at Kingston UMC, rather than in Switzerland. Her response was honest: “Confirmation in Switzerland would have been difficult since we are struggling to get into a routine . . . . The girls are trying to adapt to the size of the new church here as well. We have tried to encourage youth group but there is much resistance.” In the end, it came down to timing: “Waiting until we move back would just be too long! I believe it’s good to pull young teens into a confirmation commitment before they start the teenage rebellion against many things.” Then she added, in a heartfelt way:

Unfortunately, neither Keith nor I was confirmed in the church. I was baptized and attended Sunday school until I was about eight; Keith was baptized with Shelby! He did this since his family did not practice religion and he felt it was important to become an “official member” of God’s family. Shelby does know these stories. I told her that part of the reason I ran the Sunday School program [at our former church] was to reunite with God as quickly as I could.

I have been talking to my girls about God for many years. . . .I ask for their opinions and ideas about religion. Shelby and I have had some quality time together working on her confirmation lessons. We have had so many changes in our lives over the past nine months that many of our discussions fall into that category [of religion].<sup>17</sup>

### ***Virtual I.E.P. Confirmation: Wave of the Future?***

For all of the benefits of an “individualized education program” approach to confirmation in small churches—its potential to foster intensive mentoring,

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<sup>16</sup> Jody Cole, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Jody Cole, interview.

personal engagement, and direct feedback to the instructor, its promise in helping small churches overcome the persistent problem of critical mass—the adults involved in Shelby’s confirmation worried that “virtual confirmation” robbed Shelby of the opportunity to grow in her faith alongside a group of peers. Significantly, the concern was not over the use of technology, but over the absence of a community with whom Shelby could share her confirmation experience. As Annie reflected on the process, she noted: “What’s lost in doing confirmation this way is your connection to peers in asking questions.”<sup>18</sup> Pastor Wince echoed her concern: “While I loved all the personal attention Shelby got, I think it would have been helpful for her to have had a class of students to go through the confirmation process with. Students her age benefit from having their peers as points of reference.”<sup>19</sup>

When asked what had been frustrating about the process, Jody also indicated that she looked forward to the “official ceremony and celebration” in the physical presence of a congregation. She admitted that scheduling and Shelby’s competing homework schedule were frustrating, but mostly Jody longed for the presence of people who would celebrate Shelby’s confirmation with her. “It will be hard to wait for the official ceremony and celebration,” Jody said. “We can do something online but we need to have a proper ceremony and celebration when we are back in the States!”<sup>20</sup>

While Shelby agreed that “sometimes it’s hard to get motivated” on a Sunday night,<sup>21</sup> she had a different view of the one-on-one model of confirmation. She recognized that meeting in person for one-on-one confirmation had benefits. “I did wish sometimes that Annie and I could have done class together in person,” Shelby said. “I would like to have met with her right after church when I wasn’t tired or

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<sup>18</sup> Annie Pasqua, interview.

<sup>19</sup> Trey Wince, interview.

<sup>20</sup> Jody Cole, interview.

<sup>21</sup> Shelby Cole, informal conversation by Kenda Creasy Dean, notes, October 4, 2015.

trying to get homework finished.”<sup>22</sup> But Shelby said she preferred meeting one-on-one, even virtually, to doing confirmation in a group.

I really liked being in a one to one situation. I don't think I would have been as open about things if my peers were involved. I don't talk much at regular school unless the teacher calls on me. But with Annie I could be myself and not feel embarrassed by not having the correct answer.<sup>23</sup>

Asked about her assessment of the online curriculum Annie used, Shelby said: “It rocked! It was easy to understand (most of the time) and the supporting videos helped me understand more of the history of Methodism and what faith really is.”<sup>24</sup>

Annie, Jody, and Pastor Wince all recognize that Shelby's relationship to Kingston cannot depend on either an online or an individual experience, however positive the outcome of confirmation itself. The next step will be figuring out how to continually involve Shelby and her family at Kingston, both from afar and especially while they are in town on visits; Annie anticipates inviting the Coles to read Scripture in worship, to help with Vacation Bible School, and to “hang out” with people from the church. While Jody is effusive in her thanks to Kingston's leadership for attempting confirmation from 5,000 miles away, Annie is circumspect about future efforts—less because of the technology than the demands of leading I.E.P. confirmation: “Think carefully about who is asked to do the ‘one-on-one,’ because relating to youth that way is a different ballgame. The strengths of being a mentor, of connecting to youth individually, not through a curriculum for twelve, is a different skill set [from being a traditional youth leader.]”<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, one-on-one confirmation, virtual or otherwise, raises questions about Shelby's future relationship to Kingston UMC and the gathered church generally. Where I.E.P. confirmation excels is in creating a mentoring relationship with a faithful adult, and a curriculum that is highly attuned to the student's learning style

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<sup>22</sup> Shelby Cole, interview by Kenda Creasy Dean, transcript, October 23, 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Shelby Cole, interview, October 23, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Shelby Cole, interview, October 23, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Interview, Annie Pasqua.

and context. At the same time, other questions arise: What will help Shelby transfer her sense of connection to Annie to the church as a whole? Annie’s careful attempts to link the curriculum to the practices of the Kingston congregation specifically were deft, as were her attempts to get congregants to talk about their faith in front of Shelby through the “Jesus” video.

Yet Shelby spends most of her time in a context where, so far, her church ties are weak. Despite encouragement from her family, the church in Zurich is not yet a place Shelby feels like she “belongs,” perhaps understandably given her temporary residency in Switzerland. Yet three years is an enormous span of time for a teenager. Without a significant local faith community, it is unclear where Shelby will find support for the practice of faith, or with whom she can have religious conversations, as she moves beyond the enclave of her Christian family. One gift that Kingston UMC can give Shelby is permission and encouragement to claim a church community in Zurich as her “borrowed” church home. Not only would participation in a local faith community expand Shelby’s networks to include similarly-committed peers, but would inevitably expand her vision of the church as well.

Of course, these are questions for every confirmand, not just Shelby. Yet for all the connections made possible by online technology, whether Facebook or FaceTime, what nourishes faith is communion, not merely connection.<sup>26</sup> If Shelby is going to “feed more sheep,” at some point she is going to need a flock.

## AUTHOR’S LEARNINGS

There are countless lessons for ministry leaders in Kingston’s confirmation process, but let me highlight a few that emerge specifically from issues raised by one-on-one, virtual confirmation:

1. **It takes a village to do one-on-one confirmation.** Despite the fact that it is possible to do I.E.P. confirmation, one-on-one confirmation is difficult in

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<sup>26</sup> See Andrew Zirschky, *Beyond the Screen: Youth Ministry for the Connected but Alone Generation* (Nashville: Youth Ministry Partners and Abingdon Press), 2015.



part because it requires a team of advocates working together in different roles on behalf of the confirmand. Everyone involved in Shelby's confirmation affirmed the model but felt that it came at a cost to Shelby, particularly socially; faithful peers are important companions to have as one's religious beliefs and practices grow and change. One-on-one faith mentoring plays a crucial role when it is part of a larger educational ecology that includes significant adult mentors as well as communities of peers who are united in their desire for youth to grow in faith. In the absence of a committed team of people working on Shelby's behalf, this larger ecology could have broken down at several points: in the move away from a significant community of faith, in the "virtual" church relationship instead of a real one, and in the fact that a single adult (Annie) had to serve as the surrogate for an entire congregation's love, accountability, and affection.

If I learned one thing from Kingston confirmation model, it was that it "takes a village" to do one-on-one confirmation. Shelby may well remember her confirmation experience with Annie longer than many young people remember their confirmation "classes," but Shelby's confirmation was made possible by the great intentionality and investment of many people: her family's effort to stay connected to Kingston on visits home, Annie's efforts to connect Shelby to the Kingston congregation through creative curriculum design, Pastor Wince's efforts to maintain a relationship with the Coles after their move, and especially Jody's efforts to move mountains (or, perhaps, Alps) so that Shelby's confirmation "worked" against all odds. Without this village operating on her behalf, Shelby's confirmation process could easily have become an intellectual exercise rather than a communal rite of passage.

**2. Thou shalt not fear technology – but thou shalt not exalt it, either.**

Churches can take a page from millennials on this one: technology is a tool—more fun than a pencil or a flashlight, with wider reach and impact—but at the end of the day, it is a way we get things done, a way we connect with others, a way we move from one point to another. It is telling that neither

Annie nor Shelby blinked at connecting online, and neither considered it the primary drawback to I.E.P. confirmation. Both use FaceTime regularly for other conversations with friends, so it offered a familiar and comfortable platform for conversations. (Getting several people on the screen at once proved to be more awkward, and eventually was dropped.)

For Annie and Shelby, virtual confirmation was neither “cool” nor “uncool”—it simply *was*. It was not a device to win young people over (often the reason given for introducing digital technology into worship); it was simply a way to make confirmation possible for a particular young person. It gave one congregation the means to try something new. It had advantages for confirmation’s one-on-one components and disadvantages for triads that tried to share in some sessions. Kingston’s “virtual” confirmation process provides a case study of the gifts and challenges associated with using a particular tool, which—like all tools—should be leveraged for what it makes simpler and avoided for what it makes harder.

- 3. Parents are crucial.** If the Word of God has a fertilizer, it is parents who are convinced that a relationship with God is a thing to be sought and treasured, whose vision of their children’s happiness includes an active, vital faith. The efforts of the “village” are often in vain apart from this. Shelby is blessed with parents who want to grow in their own faith, and who long for their daughters to do the same. The fact that both Keith and Jody assumed that they would directly and actively participate in Shelby’s confirmation process is highly significant, given the fact that parental religiosity is highly predictive of adolescent faith—and parents who invest deeply in their own religious faith while their children are in high school tend to have children whose own faith remains important into young adulthood.<sup>27</sup> The support, and active engagement, of Shelby’s parents throughout the confirmation

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<sup>27</sup> For a complex analysis of the religious trajectories of teens, including the role of parent religiosity, see Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 211 ff.

process made the distance learning experience three-dimensional and less abstract, which were critical factors in its success.

What lies ahead for Shelby now that her “individualized education program” is over is, as Jody put it, “a proper ceremony and celebration,” a confirmation service held in an actual Kingston worship service the next time Shelby and her family are in the United States. It matters that this service will be embodied—even more embodied than most—with the press of sweaty bodies and tearful family members surrounding Shelby during the “laying on of hands” in the ceremony. It matters that the hugs in the aisle will be real, and not just virtual waves into Annie’s phone. It matters that while Annie assists Pastor Wince in the liturgy, Shelby will read Scripture and take her place among the leaders of the congregation that day. And it matters that she will then return to Zurich—sent out to feed more sheep.



**Kingston United Methodist Church**  
| FEED MORE SHEEP |