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THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH OF LEEDS PARISH

Markham, Virginia | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

BY *Kate Siberine*

A portrait completed as part of



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

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

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ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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

“What you're saying, if you choose to be confirmed, is ‘I'm claiming my legacy... I'm claiming the inheritance of my baptism. Not only am I claiming it, but I'm offering it to God's world for God's purposes. I want to claim it in front of this church, in front of these Christians. I want to claim it. I want to be seen as a grownup in the church, not a kid, but a grownup. I want to own part of the life of this church.’”

- Rt. Rev. Edwin F. "Ted" Gulick Jr¹

CONTEXT

Markham is a small, rural community just off of Route 66 in Fauquier County, Virginia. The village is known for its apple orchards and wineries, and on beautiful fall days, like the September Sunday I visited the Episcopal Church of Leeds Parish, the community draws scores of day-tripping visitors from Washington DC, which is just about an hour away. Past the major attractions, the winding road becomes quieter and continues along a stream and up a hill until the church comes into view: the white stucco early-Gothic building framed by views of the Blue Ridge Mountains and neighboring cow pastures.

I had met some of the youth and the rector (senior pastor) of Leeds Church on a short-term mission in Philadelphia the previous year and had been impressed by the teens' dedication to prayerful service, both on this experience in the city far from home and the projects they described doing with their church in their own community. I was excited to learn that the Rt. Rev. Edwin F. "Ted" Gulick Jr., who has a reputation within the church for being a bishop who takes confirmation and the discipleship of young people seriously, would be visiting the church a few months later for confirmation. The Episcopal practice of confirmation is not only a parish process but is inextricably bound up in the role of the bishop. While all priests can baptize, only bishops can confirm and confirmation tends to be one of the central parts of a bishop's visit to a church within their diocese, or region. I wondered what confirmation might look like in a church that is seriously engaged in the formation of young people with a bishop who is dedicated to the same.

¹ Rt. Rev. Edwin F. "Ted" Gulick Jr, conversation with confirmands at Leeds Church, September 20, 2015 .

CONGREGATION

The Episcopal Church of Leeds Parish has been part of the landscape in Markham for centuries; the congregation was founded in 1769 and the present church sanctuary completed in 1842. During the Civil War, the church was held by both Union and Confederate troops and one of its walls



was pierced by an artillery shell from a nearby battle. Leeds' graveyard is also the final resting place of one of its more famous parishioners, Dr. James Markham Ambler, a physician on the ill-fated Jeanette Arctic Expedition, who died when he would not leave his sick and wounded crewmen behind. This dedication to faithful service is also embodied by the church's historical leadership, with three of the rectors of the last century serving a combined total of seventy-five years. The parish website reflects on what the church's history says about its commitment to service in the present:

These long tenures reflect their synergy with the people of Leeds Parish and our desire is to always seek a balance between the leadership and common goals. This spirit has brought the people of Leeds continuing success in their mission to serve our Lord and the needs of others. Today, Leeds Episcopal Church is an active and vibrant parish that cherishes its history of faith and community, while looking forward to the future in its fourth century of existence.²

Surrounded by the monuments and memories of those who have gone before, the past is very much present at Leeds. However, far from feeling like a museum, the church is alive with growth and possibility as they seek to follow the example of selfless service in a new age and with a new generation.

The church's current rector, The Rev. Justin Michael McIntosh, is a sign of this blending of new and old. Baptized at Leeds church as an infant, he and his young family returned to the community when he accepted the call to lead the parish five

² "Our History," Leeds Episcopal Church. www.leedschurch.org/our-history-leeds/ Accessed January 25, 2017.

years ago. Under Rev. McIntosh's leadership, the church has grown steadily with average Sunday attendance now hovering around one hundred. The church has also seen an increase in class, age, sexual orientation, and political diversity. According to Rev. McIntosh, "In the congregation, we have the very wealthy and blue collars workers. That's in the same church. Bringing these two worlds together can be challenging, but I think it's the church at its best."³



The growth in both numbers and inclusion was very apparent: On the day I visited, the bishop received six adults into the Episcopal Church, baptized the newly adopted son of a lesbian couple who had found a spiritual home at Leeds, and confirmed five teenagers. It

is also a church that is striving to acknowledge the painful parts of their past in an effort to be that "church at its best." If you visit Leeds Church today, there are lively young children playing in the balcony where slaves used to sit, and the predominantly white church is actively engaging in the work of reconciliation and relationship building with the black Baptist church down the road.

While it is not an easy task, Leeds Episcopal Church is seeking to be and becoming a sacred meeting place of past and present, poor and rich, black and white, gay and straight, a place where the whole church can come together and be transformed.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION

Before the service, while the church was still quiet, I sat down with the Rev. McIntosh in his office to talk about confirmation, a flip chart from the class still in the corner of the room. While the church used to only have enough confirmands for a class every few years, as it has grown, there has been a teen confirmation class of between four and six students on a more regular basis. The classes generally meet twice a month between the two church services and are led Rev. McIntosh. The

³ Interview at Leeds Episcopal Church conducted by Kate Siberine, September 2015.

youth that were confirmed on the day of my visit received a copy of and were expected to read Jennifer Gamber's *My Faith, My Life*, a popular Episcopal confirmation curriculum. Each chapter acted as a starting point for conversation:

What I really try to do in our space here is talk more about what are the tools that kids need to be mature Christians, right? It's all about making [a] mature affirmation of faith, owning the promises that were made on your behalf and baptism. What do the kids need to really be mature Christians? I don't think that they need a ton of knowledge. I just think they can acquire that throughout their life. What I'd rather see is that they have an interest in learning about Christianity and digging deeper... That they have the tools to do that kind of work so they know where to look, they know to ask the right questions because often that's the most important thing.⁴

Rather than focusing on content that the youth must know in order to be confirmed, Leeds seeks to help them cultivate the scriptural, theological, and critical thinking tools they need to navigate the questions of a maturing faith. For example, the class's study of the Bible does not ask them to know all of scripture but instead focuses on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the story of salvation which is repeated each week in church in the Eucharistic prayer. They also learn to use genre as a lens of interpretation when they encounter new texts, something with which they are familiar from school. At the beginning of the year, the kids are asked to put all of their questions up on the flip chart and add more as the year goes on so that they can walk through them together as a group. When asked what they liked best about confirmation, many of them were grateful to have space to ask questions and investigate scripture.⁵

In addition to the exploration of questions rather than content, mentorship and service are the other pillars of this confirmation program. Each of the confirmands has an adult mentor from the congregation with whom they work on an in-reach project that benefits the church community and an outreach project which benefits the larger community, either in Fauquier county or on a short term mission, like the one in Philadelphia. Justin asserts, "It can be helpful to get to know other adults in the congregation who are good examples of adult Christianity and are modeling

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Survey of Confirmands, by Kate Siberine, September 2015.

that.”⁶ The mentors act as role models to the teens, showing with their own lives that a mature Christian faith is grounded in service to others. “We want them to see that being a mature Christian isn’t just how you think about the Bible, or how you think intellectually or theologically, but it’s also about how you live your life and your active involvement in the church. You’re both serving this community [and] also your neighbor outside of the church.”⁷ One teen recalled learning how to set up the church for worship from an older member of the congregation as a highlight of their process. This practice-oriented approach with intergenerational support has also helped make the class a welcoming space for teens with special needs or learning disabilities, including one confirmand this year with Down Syndrome. By helping each teen discover their own gifts for ministry through projects that connect with their passions, they are claiming a full Christian identity that is not just about believing in Jesus, but following Jesus.

The parish’s small size allows for a less structured mentoring program that relies primarily on natural mentoring within the parish because there are already strong relationships across generations within the congregation and to formalize the mentoring program would feel disruptive to the communal spirit of the place.

This is such a small community that it would be really easy, I think, to over-structure things when it doesn’t need to be that complicated. Basically all of these kids are interacting with adults in this church all the time. Their real formation happens just in the informal structures, not the program.⁸

At Leeds confirmation does not and cannot function separately from the larger life of the church; confirmation is designed to fit into the larger formational work of the parish that is happening across programs and across generations. The program seeks to meet the young people where they are with the emerging questions of adolescence and use the support of the parish, priest, lay leaders, mentors, families, and wider community to walk alongside them. The rector reflected,

I think it’s a very useful tool for especially high schoolers who—or middle schoolers and high schoolers who are at this phase where they’re trying to figure out who am I, what’s my identity, what do I believe, what’s important

⁶ Interview at Leeds Episcopal Church conducted by Kate Siberine, September 2015.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

to me? It can be a really great opportunity to have a year with them to go through it and think about it and hopefully they learn a few things.⁹

Not long into my conversation with Justin, Bishop Ted knocked on the door, already having enough familiarity with the parish to know where the offices were located, and before we knew it the bishop was making a pot of coffee for us all to share. Bishop Ted served as the bishop of Kentucky from 1994 to 2010 before returning to his native Virginia as an assisting bishop. He grew up in Fauquier County, attended the same high school that many of the Leeds confirmands attend or will attend, and he shared that his wife continues to be amazed at just how many new distant relatives he discovers every time he visits a new congregation. He has a dynamic and engaging personality and his gift as a storyteller was apparent when he intentionally sat down with the confirmands for an hour before the service. After connecting with the teens about common roots in 4H and Fauquier schools, the bishop breaks into an excited, almost conspiratorial grin and asks them what they remember from their English classes about analogies and that he has an analogy about confirmation and baptism that he would like to share:

All right. Remember, everything I say in the analogy is true, for the sake of the analogy. Everything I say is true. Do we understand that? All right. Jake doesn't know this, but I'm an old widower, that means my wife died. I don't have any children. I'm alone in this world. Jake lives in my neighborhood. I notice Jake. He is the type of kid, he actually thinks old people are real. He'll talk to me. He'll come home from school and tell me what happened at school. I just love that about Jake. What's really neat about Jake is that when it snows, I wake up in the morning and he's already cleaned off my walk. When I am schlepping the garbage cans to the garbage truck, he's there helping me cuz my back kinda hurt cuz I'm getting on up there. The other thing Jake doesn't know is I've got \$3 million. I have no children. I have no grandchildren. How many of you find this story getting a little interesting now? Are you with me?

I have gone to a lawyer in Front Royal, Virginia and I have written a will and I have left my entire estate to Jake. Then I died. Dead Ted. So sad, except for Jake who is now what? He's a multi-millionaire, right? For the sake of the analogy, right? Everything I said in the analogy was true, remember? Is he a millionaire? Okay. Ready to be stretched? Let's assume Jake doesn't know about my will. Nobody told him. Is he still a millionaire?

⁹ Ibid.

Exactly. Wouldn't it also be true that if he didn't know about my will, he could actually be in line for a free dinner if his life circumstances change all the sudden? Say his parents got evicted. Say his father lost his job for no reason of his own. His parents got evicted. He could be in a family shelter somewhere. Happens all the time in America. If he didn't know about it, he could live as if he wasn't what he is, right? Now we're going to get to the point of the analogy. How many of you remember your baptism? How many of you remember it? You know what, I don't remember a thing about mine. Let me tell you about my baptism. Happened in Fauquier County in 1948 on Thanksgiving Day. I grew up in St. Stephen's down in Caplet. We were perpetually in search of a priest. People don't go to seminary to work in small rural parishes. This is a little better for you. They go to do exciting, engaging things. We were always looking for a priest, but my uncle was an Episcopal priest and he happened to be there for thanksgiving, which is why all my godparents are aunts and uncles. I think they just cleaned away the turkey carcass, got out the prayer book, got out some water, and I was baptized. I don't remember it. The most important thing that ever happened to me and I don't remember it. I believe at my baptism day and at your baptismal day the heavens were opened like they always are opened in baptisms and God said, "You are my beloved daughter. I am so pleased with you." We are held forever.

What's happening today is—you don't have to be confirmed. You absolutely do not have to be confirmed. Maybe your parents will be really upset if I say this. Maybe they'll be really upset if I say this, but I want you to hear it from Bishop Ted Gulick. You do not have to be confirmed because you're not getting anything that you don't already have. God adores you as if you were the only object of God's creation. You are loved to death by God and Jesus Christ. You're loved. You belong to God. You're not getting anything. What you're saying, if you choose to be confirmed, is I'm claiming my legacy. This gets back to the analogy. I'm claiming the inheritance of my baptism. Not only am I claiming it, but I'm offering it to God's world for God's purposes. I want to claim it in front of this church, in front of these Christians. I want to claim it. I want to be seen as a grownup in the church, not a kid, but a grownup. I want to own part of the life of this church.¹⁰

While the teen confirmands already had a strong grasp on their sense of the meaning of the rite, describing confirmation at a final preparation dinner the Thursday before the service as "...deciding to follow Jesus and spread the love of Christ once reaching adulthood," "becoming an adult in the church," and "the reaffirmation of the Christian faith," the bishop's reinforcement of what they had discussed in confirmation class over the last year seemed to reinforce their sense of

¹⁰ Ibid.

the commitment they would be making in that day's service.¹¹ At the news that he did not need to be confirmed, one of the teen boys who had been on the fence about confirmation visibly relaxed. While Justin had told him that he did not need to be confirmed now or ever if he did not want to be, the authority of the bishop's explanation seemed to lift a weight off of him.

Bishop Ted then asked them about their confirmation preparation, praising their service projects as part of claiming their adult faith and ministry. The youth shared about the mission trips where they had worked with other kids their age in Philadelphia, about volunteering with Special Olympics and helping other young people with special needs learn to play basketball, raising money for a pediatric brain tumor foundation, and assisting at a camp in near-by Culpepper that serves at-risk youth. When surveyed, several of the teens said they wished there had been even more opportunities for service and that their service projects were what they remembered most about their confirmation process. The bishop matched their enthusiasm for service as living out the Christian faith and mission:

This is amazing. I'm so moved by the outreach you've done. It's all about outreach. The whole Christian story's about outreach because our core understanding of God is that God is outreach. God is outreach in Jesus towards this world that God loves. Whenever we do outreach, we're simply extending the outreach of God.¹²



The bishop's theology of confirmation as a mature claiming of baptism was not just spoken as part of preparation, but enacted as part of the service. One by one the youth came forward to meet the bishop at the baptismal font, placing their hand on the font while Bishop Ted placed his hands on their heads to pray for them. This way of enacting the ritual was no accident, but rather an intentional connection between the font that many of them were baptized in as infants and the mature promises of discipleship they were now making before the congregation. The

¹¹ Survey of Confirmands, by Kate Siberine, September 2015.

¹² Interview at Leeds Episcopal Church conducted by Kate Siberine, September 2015.

physical actions of the bishop and the confirmands made the community's understanding of the connection between baptism and confirmation clear. The bishop had described this relationship as we gathered around the coffeepot with mismatched mugs earlier in the day:

It is not a supplicant kneeling at a potentate's feet. It is an exchange between two disciples, one of whom happens to be a symbolic person of the whole church. It's an adult to adult exchange, and an empowering exchange around the truth of her baptism, which she is claiming and putting to work for God's world. Particularly when you've just seen baptism occur in that very font, like we will have today, then the connection, at least to my mind, is so palpably clear as to what this rite is.¹³

METAPHOR AND AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS -----

As I considered the guiding metaphor for confirmation at Leeds Episcopal Church, it proved impossible to find one more insightful than Bishop Ted's: claiming a legacy. As a bishop who has a clear vision of confirmation as a full claiming of one's baptism, his metaphor guides and transforms the preparation for and performance of the rite. In everything from his story with the teens of the youth with an unknown inheritance to the confirmands' holding their hands over the baptismal font as the bishop prays that they will have the strength to live their faith, the metaphor is coded into thought, word, and deed. In its baptismal water, Leeds Church mirrors the bishop's call to live and claim one's baptism. Through its leadership, legacy, dedication to intergenerational ministry, service in the community, and radical hospitality across divides, the church invites confirmands to participate in what the church is already doing and to continue to shape it through their lives and ministries as baptized members of the Body of Christ.

¹³ Ibid.