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PEACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Tacoma, Washington | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

BY *Peter Bauck*

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.

INTRODUCTION

We are a family. It is an awesome church. Everyone is really nice. I feel like this church is a really big thing to most of our lives because we are not just people who have to come. Most of us choose to come. We believe in God and God is part of our family. It is a great priority to give back to the community because we do not live in the best place and we have a lot of homeless.¹

Peace Lutheran Church (PLC), in the Hilltop neighborhood, truly believes all lives are precious. The Hilltop neighborhood has been PLC's home since 1909, the beginning of the congregation. As the climate of the neighborhood has changed, PLC's identity as a church that cares for the neighborhood has not changed. One way PLC embodies this identity is through its supporting families in transition. In 2014 PLC purchased the two houses in the Hilltop neighborhood and church members rehabbed them so they could be used for affordable housing for families connected to the church and community center. Another way is through PLC's Feet to Faith confirmation ministry where students learn "about the tools of Christian faith as a gift...so they're grounded in Scripture and have what they need to grow and serve as followers of Jesus their whole life long."²



Peace Lutheran Church,
in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma, WA

CONTEXT

Having been to the greater Seattle-Tacoma area to visit family, I had some preconceived ideas about Tacoma before my visit. It is more industrial than Seattle (thirty miles north) and primarily lower and middle class. Tacoma is located along the south end of Puget Sound with a population of around 198,397; it is primarily Caucasian (around 65 percent), with small African American (11 percent) and Asian

¹ Cindy, interview by Peter Bauck, video file, April 2015.

² "Letter to Feet to Faith Confirmation Parents," drafted September 9, 2014 by Pr. John.

(8 percent) populations.³ Tacoma also houses a military base, Washington public schools, numerous universities, and hospitals. Driving from Sea-Tac airport at night, I noticed the industrial portion of the city. In fact, my hotel was located right next to something that felt like an oil refinery alongside the Sound. Yet there was more to Tacoma than my pre-conceived notions of its industrial character, as I soon discovered.

As I explored Port Defiance Park and the surrounding area, I got to see the Sound close-up, get a feel for the people, and have lunch at a local restaurant, the Antique Sandwich Shop. Strip malls, townhomes, apartment complexes, and single-family houses filled the streets. The neighborhood was tired and many homes needed paint or siding repairs. Though rough around the edges, I sensed a comfort with not needing to be polished and just being whoever they are. That sense was also present as I entered the Antique Sandwich Shop. The shop was very busy. It had a down to earth, unassuming neighborhood feel to it that, from my experience, is fairly common in the non-metro waterfront parts of Washington. I joined people of all ages and diverse races. Some were there with children, others were old elderly friends meeting for conversation, and others (like myself) were there alone. There were Tibetan peace flags on the wall, Celtic music playing in the background, and people dressed casually. The owner, who was working the register, embodied the feel of the shop. She was talkative and enjoyed people. She had long gray braided hair and wore a cotton dress with an apron. She did everything from working the register and making sandwiches and espresso drinks, to cleaning up in the kitchen in the back room.

After my lunch, I drove to Port Defiance Park, a densely wooded area with moss on the trees along the water. It was rainy with a slight breeze, very indicative of the Pacific Northwest. This open space for weekend picnicking is, at least according to tourist signs, “where Tacoma comes to play.” From the park I drove up the coast and past some shipyards. There was a fog and mist over the water, as well as a tanker

³ “Tacoma (City), Washington,” <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/5370000.html>. Accessed August 21, 2015.

sitting out on the water. Tacoma is a port town, a working town with a comfortable feel.

Tacoma is also a university town. I got a beer at a pub downtown Tacoma near the glass museum and University of Washington. This part of Tacoma felt much more MBA-business class. With mostly young college students and business people out and about, the climate changed. One college student parked an Audi A6 next to me. The Museum of Glass, housing contemporary and colorful designs, brings tourism to the waterfront. The top of the museum was a series of waterfalls surrounded by steps that went down to the museum. My drive surprised me, and reminded me of the many neighborhoods that come together to make up any community. The diversity of neighborhoods I visited deconstructed my pre-conceived notions of Tacoma as *only* industrial and blue-collar. The industrial feel of my hotel neighborhood, the rural-cozy-rugged feel of the sandwich shop and Port Defiance Park, and the white-collar aesthetic of the pub I visited speak to the diversity of people and places in Tacoma. And I had yet to visit the Hilltop neighborhood in which PLC is located.

The Hilltop neighborhood provides another perspective on Tacoma. Home to German and Russian immigrants in the 19th century, followed by African American war veterans in the 1940s and 1950s, and riddled with gang activity, violence, and drugs in the 1980s and 1990s, this has been a neighborhood that has experienced many changes. And this is the part of Tacoma PLC Lutheran also calls home.

CONGREGATION

The Hilltop neighborhood has been the church home since the beginning of the congregation. The people of PLC “believe God’s vision for PLC is to be a diverse community of faith in the Hilltop where all are welcome—a community that is ***Spirit-Filled, Compassionate, Healthy, Reconciled, and Just.***”⁴ PLC’s roots and current cultural make-up are a testimony to this vision. Founded by Lutheran

⁴ 2015 Ministry Plan for PLC Lutheran Church, Tacoma, WA, page 3.

German-Russian immigrants from Volga River in Russia, PLC served the working class of the early 1900s. Today, PLC Lutheran is a community of 260 people with about 48 percent African American and Latino/African and 52 percent Caucasian. They are attentive to the physical, social, and spiritual needs of the neighborhood in 2015.

A pivotal time for PLC was in the 1970s. Denominational leaders from the American Lutheran Church (one of the predecessor bodies of the ELCA) wondered if it was time for the church to close. Pastor Holle Plaehn, called to PLC in 1971, met with denominational leaders in 1972-73 and church leaders went through a visioning process. What resulted was the birth of a vision for more work in the community. This vision began the commitment to having the make-up of the congregation reflect the diversity of the neighborhood. Part of this process was to call an African American pastor, since a large percentage of the neighborhood was African American. Sadly, in the 1970's many of the council members quit as a result of this decision, leaving only a handful of families to attend PLC for a period.

Added to this commitment to reach out to the neighborhood was the economic struggle in the 1980's and 1990's. Drugs, gangs, and violence took over the neighborhood. Gang members came up to Tacoma from Los Angeles bringing the drug trade. There used to be a bullet hole in the window behind the pulpit. Pastor John tells a story about two young ladies, who sold drugs near a member's home, and set the member's house on fire because they thought she was "ratting them out." Her house was fixed up again and the church repainted it. One congregational leader saw his or her sister get in a fight and get stabbed. This same leader's brother had friends who had guns pulled on them, and as a kid this leader was hanging out on the front porch and there was a drive-by shooting during which his brother's friend was shot. These are all very present stories in the congregation, and a reminder of what it means to be committed to the neighborhood.

Through their struggles, PLC discerned its response was to be a quiet presence, a place of hope and prayer and spiritual connection. PLC was a place of relationship—with God and with the community. In the 1970's, Pastor Plaehn walked the

neighborhood and knew everybody by name. PLC also became a place of action. PLC was part of a feeding and community meal program with an emphasis on meeting people's physical and social needs through food, clothing, and fellowship. Ms. Ruby, a seminal figure in the history of PLC, was a key part of the Feeding Program—a partnership between New Covenant Pentecostal Church, Ms. Ruby, and PLC. Starting the Feeding Program over 20 years ago, Ms. Ruby participated on many leadership boards, attended conventions of the larger church, and served as council president. Her legacy continues to live on through the active membership of her daughter and the memory of her impact on the community.

Today, the PLC Community Center is another key way this commitment finds expression and cares for youth. This commitment to youth started by tutoring young people in PLC's basement and with children programs at the parish house. With many teachers and educators in the congregation, it seemed natural to have an emphasis on education. In 1991 at a church council retreat, leadership recognized the need for an additional facility, and formed a committee to discern a way forward. With the sanctuary falling apart, paint peeling from the walls, and stained glass windows bent and broken, the congregation decided to put energy and investment into youth with a gym/multipurpose room instead of their worship space. The groundbreaking for the PLC Community Center was May 23, 1999 and completed in 2000. PLC Community Center focuses on tutoring, mentoring young people, and serving Hilltop families.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION

Confirmation is an extension of this service to the young people in the neighborhood. With Pastor John and Brendan the youth director, it is also a time of learning, mentoring, and building relationship with the young people. The students come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of them have parents who grew up Lutheran and others have parents who have no particular tradition; some of them live in the Hilltop neighborhood and others commute by car or bus to get to church. Pastor John believes this is because, “the culture of our place and families is that

they are in transition...living over here, renting over here. Then they are living in south Tacoma which is an hour bus drive [because they do not own a car.]”⁵ Because of the transitions and stressors in the families of the confirmation youth, consistency in attendance is hard to maintain. Pastor John is okay with this and knows it is part of the people’s lives at PLC. In response to this, “the program is trying to be flexible and because of the living situations but they have to set down some accountability. Otherwise people, the confirmation students, cannot come regularly or at all...We try to hold accountability measures but is very flexible knowing people are going through a lot of stuff.”⁶

Pr. John calls the confirmation program Feet to Faith Confirmation Ministry. Feet to Faith is a two-year program of study and service with fun and challenging ways to help students grow in faith in God. The youth spend one year studying the Bible and one year studying the tools of faith: the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, 10 Commandments, Lord’s Prayer, and Apostles’ Creed. After two years of study, on a special Confirmation Sunday, students publicly affirm their Baptism and are confirmed in their faith by God. Below are the details about the program that the parents and confirmands get prior to starting confirmation.

Learning/Memorization

Prior to Confirmation Sunday, each student is expected to learn and demonstrate understanding of:

- The Lord’s Prayer, Apostle’s Creed, 10 Commandments, Baptism, Holy Communion
- Books of the Bible
- 23rd Psalm

Feet to Faith Class Session Attendance

2nd and 4th Saturday sessions from 11 am – 1:30 pm begin October 11, 2014 and end May 9, 2015. Lunch is always provided. See the schedule sheet. Some activities are scheduled for dates other than Saturdays. Regular attendance is expected for all Feet to Faith sessions. Students are expected to come to class with their Bible, prepared to learn and grow in faith. Students will sign in on a Sign In sheet or they will not be counted as present. During this school year, there are 14 Feet to Faith class sessions. If students attend four of the first five sessions (Oct-Dec), they will receive a prize. If students attend five of the next six sessions (Jan-

⁵ Pastor John Stroeh, interview with Peter Bauck, audio file, April 2015

⁶ Pastor John Stroeh, interview.

Mar), they will receive a prize. If students attend 11 of the 14 sessions for the year and complete all expectations for the year, they will receive a free movie pass.⁷



Students attending class with Pastor John (bottom left) as part of the Feet to Faith Confirmation Ministry

In each of the Saturday sessions, the Pr. John and the students learn about one of the components under the “learning and memorization” section. They do this by reading the particular text together, discussing what they have read, and playing games that help elucidate the text in a way the youth can understand. Pr. John says the movie pass is important for the kids, and they know about the prize and ask him if they get it. If students miss class, there may be make-up questions to answer and return to Pastor John. These tactics go back to the accountability mentioned above; it is hard to get consistent attendance and this is one way he can get the kids to come. In addition to the class sessions, there are two requirements related to Sunday worship and a final conference with the pastor:

Worship Notes

Each student will complete *two Worship Notes each month* in November through April (12 Worship Notes in total for the year). Students may attend any worship service, including midweek services, to fulfill this expectation. Worship Notes forms are on the table outside the worship space.

⁷ “Expectations for Feet to Faith Confirmation Ministry Students, October 2014-May 2015.”

Worship Service

Attending and participating in worship is very important. In worship we hear God's Word, receive God's Supper, and share in the community of faith. Attending worship is our active service to God. Beyond attending worship, each student is expected to participate in a serving capacity for worship each month; for example, as an acolyte, assisting minister, usher/greeter, reader, Communion server, musician, nursery attendant, actor, dancer, choir participant, or any other service opportunity pertaining to worship.

Conference with Pastor

At the end of the second year of Confirmation Ministry, each student will have a personal conference with Pastor John prior to Confirmation Sunday.⁸

The confirmation program is also something the parents of the confirmands support and have to “sign onto.” Before the beginning of confirmation, in addition to explaining the logistics of confirmation, PLC sends out a letter to the parents of the confirmands asking for their participation and commitment to the program as well. Here is an excerpt:

“Feet to Faith Confirmation Ministry” is a commitment. PLC Lutheran Church wants both students and parents to promise to make it a priority in your life, since it is about something very important – your relationship with God. We see this year of learning about the tools of Christian faith as a gift for your children, so they're grounded in Scripture and have what they need to grow and serve as followers of Jesus their whole lives long. Parents, please help your children see the value of this gift and make a commitment to regular attendance. We will be asking for your help in other ways, too, on the journey toward Confirmation.⁹

The commitment and energy expected from the youth and the parents, expressed in the curriculum and written material of confirmation, is also evident in the voices of the youth, pastor, and parents. There were three main themes in my conversations about confirmation with all the members of PLC: relationships with each other, relationship with God, and relationship and care for God's community.

Life Together: Relationships with Each Other

True to their nature as youth, one of the important things for many of the confirmation students was being able to see their friends and hang out. When I

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Letter to Feet to Faith Confirmation Parents.”

asked them what their favorite part about confirmation was, they all responded at once: “learning more about God”, “*friends*”; “singing,” “safe,” “I can see *my friends*,” “almost everything,” and “stuff.”¹⁰ Note that multiple kids stated “friends” multiple times in the same response to the question. However, the relationships the youth had with each other was more than simply hanging out and doing fun things together. Though they stated it in this way, they experienced these relationships on a much deeper level. One confirmand noted how there is a strong sense of community and intimacy within PLC: “it is like a family here. We are a family here. It is fun. Because it is a family...a church family,”¹¹ and another stated, “it is a great place to stay connected and meet new people.”¹² This sentiment was also echoed in one of the parent’s responses on what the confirmation program offers: “The foundation of knowledge, the foundation of faith formation, but even just the foundation of how to do life together. I have seen past confirmation classes that have built those community bonds...there are still those connections there that have been built.”¹³ As one will see below, the youth move beyond understanding how PLC creates caring relationships within its own walls, and they will broaden this to how PLC and the Hilltop neighbor are part of the same community that cares for each other.

The way in which the youth feel part of the family of PLC is due to its members and the work of the leaders. For example, Pr. John and I looked at the list of all the current confirmation kids. He could tell me detailed history about each of the kids: where they were born, where they have lived, what was going on at home, what were their struggles, what they liked about confirmation, what was unique about their personalities, and what he hoped for each of them. This is a leader who loves his confirmation students.

¹⁰ Multiple youth, interview by Peter Bauck, video recording, April, 2015. Because these phrases were stated by more than one confirmand, I did not assign a name of a confirmand to each phrase.

¹¹ Crystal, interview by Peter Bauck, video file, April 2015.

¹² Ashley, interview by Peter Bauck, video file, April 2015.

¹³ John, interview by Peter Bauck, audio file, April 2015.

Relationship with God

The youth spoke about their relationship with God in different layers. Some of their comments were about learning about God through the Bible and Luther's small catechism. Learning about God is way to get closer to God for them. When I simply asked them why they came to confirmation, they said, "learn about God," "get closer to God," "we learn what God did and about other people," "why he died for us and why he is so important," and "To learn about God at a young age."¹⁴ Confirmation is both about learning basic information and getting closer to God. The more they learn the more they understand the depths of their relationship with God and begin to realize that getting closer to God is also about God's unconditional acceptance. For example, when I asked them what it means to affirm their baptism when they are confirmed, one student said, "it means that you are with God and you know he will always be there for you and you are his child. Even if you knew that before it is just to confirm it."¹⁵ I asked a follow up question for more clarification, "What is baptism?" "You are accepted as a child of God," the student said.¹⁶ Knowing they are accepted as a child of God is one part learning about and one part actually experiencing it in their community. As the confirmands develop relationships with each other and members of PLC, this is also part of how they develop a relationship with God. Learning about God is about getting closer to God, confirmation is about being accepted as a child of God and God will always be there for you – and God becomes part of their family through PLC.

Sacred Community: Relationship and Care for God's Community and a Life Long Faith

One of the points the youth leader, the confirmands, and Pastor John stressed was how PLC is also a place that cares for the larger community. The confirmands emphasized this as well, but not as strongly as the leadership did. As previously quoted, one of the confirmands said it in the following way, "We believe in God and

¹⁴Multiple youth, interview.

¹⁵ Ashley, interview.

¹⁶ Ibid.

God is part of our family. It is a great priority to give back to the community because we do not live in the best place and we have a lot of homeless.”¹⁷ In addition to experiencing a relationship with God at PLC, the confirmands see the importance of helping the Hilltop community when their neighbors are in need. Some of the confirmands started coming to PLC because the church helped their families find housing, meals, and social services, and the family subsequently started attending. The leadership at PLC also sees this as a central calling of the community and part of their personal calling. Brendan, the youth ministry coordinator, stated it in the following way:

It became for me that I want to empower young people as much as possible. What I did need when I was young was someone to listen to me and not trying to give me all the answers, to listen to me and guide me.... We can love Jesus with all of our heart mind and soul but if we do not know how to apply the day-to-day things: how to write a check, fill out an application, go to an interview.... Sharing my story is the cornerstone of what I do. Kid from the Hilltop, studies show I would not make it out. Beating those odds has been a blessing to me.¹⁸

There is passion and compassion behind Brendan’s words. He is the youth leader because he deeply cares about the kids of the Hilltop community and PLC. He wants to be part of their faith formation, and he also wants to simply care for them and make sure they know how to get a good education and go to a job interview, for example.

METAPHORS

In 1989 when drugs, gang activity, and violence were real in the Hilltop, Army Rangers and gang members had a shootout. Three hundred shots were fired. The incident got national attention and sparked neighborhood block groups working closely with police to improve safety in neighborhood. People from the neighborhood reclaimed this property from violence. There is a rock in this spot. It

¹⁷ Cindy, interview.

¹⁸ Brendan, interview with Peter Bauck, audio file, April 2015.

is the All Lives Are Precious rock. The purpose of the rock was to remind people we all are part of the problem and solution.

Cultivating a confirmation ministry in a congregation that lifts up the holiness of life in a community where violence is real, people are hungry, and despair can drown out hope is a tricky endeavor. The rock is a metaphor for the confirmation program at PLC because of the ways in which its message reverberates within the ministry of the church. The confirmation program includes youth from wide range of income, class, race, denominational identity, and culture. Some of the students are from families who have been life-long Lutherans and other students come from



The "All Lives Are Precious" Rock

families of a different tradition, or no tradition. Regardless of how they came to be part of confirmation, they are cared for and are important to the community of PLC. Pastor John knows each of them by name and knows their personal story. Brendan wants to share his story and be vulnerable with them so they will open up to him and share their honest story. If the youth are hungry and need a place to find stable housing—regardless if they are members of PLC or not—the church provides this for them because the church cares. No matter what their history is or what they are going through, all lives are precious in the confirmation program and at PLC. Though they spend time learning the tools of faith, as Pastor John calls them, at the core of the confirmation experience is deep and abiding desire to see the youth thrive; the tools of faith are one part of how the youth can have the hope, stability, and courage to do just that. PLC is a rock in the Hilltop community because of its commitment to the holistic wellbeing of those in the community. Confirmation is one dimension of this rock, where youth are connected to something solid—both a community and a God—who has and continues to provide a strong and lasting presence in their lives.

WHAT OTHERS CAN LEARN

1. Relationships cultivate community and God is made real in community.

One of the ways this confirmation program excels is in relationship, as the All Lives Are Precious rock attests. Relationality is a popular topic in practical theology and more specifically youth ministry. The importance of relationship in ministry seems an obvious thing to cultivate. Cultivating relationships connects youth with a community, through which youth more deeply develop their relationship with God. What I saw at PLC was more than a desire to meet the confirmands for fun activities outside of regular church activities, have coffee with the high school students, and touch base with the college youth if/when they come back to church on breaks. The context of PLC—if they are to enrich the lives of the youth—does not call for such a superficial response, superficial in the sense of only having fun with the kids and hoping they experience the church as a fun place, there is much more at stake for this community. At PLC youth experience authentic relationships of care within a community of depth. The PLC cares deeply and authentically about the wellbeing of their students not only in the content that they teach, but also in the physical and emotional way they look after youth. Who are the caregivers for the youth? Do the youth have a community of friends and family they can trust? Are the youth doing okay or not with housing, food, and getting medical care? How are the youth doing in school? Are they able to imagine a future with hope in their hearts? Where are the youth feeling hopeless or distress? What brings them joy? These are the questions that guide the ministry of PLC exposing God's love for each person as they are cared for by this faithful community.

2. Faith formation and cultivating life-long disciples require tending to the needs of the whole person.

My second learning is also present in the first. Tending to the whole person is part of an authentic relationship and this care creates community. The pastor, the youth leader, and the parents noted how PLC begins, before anything else, with building a caring and open relationship. Before the Bible lessons, Sunday school, and confirmation memorization there is honesty, vulnerability, advocacy for the youth at home, meeting basic needs for

housing food, love, and care. This is exemplified through the community meal where people can come and get food and clothes with no questions asked, the transitional housing for families who need stability while the parents look for work and get support, and the social workers present at the community meal to help the families. The specifics of these would take different shapes at different congregations depending on the needs of the youth. PLC is in the Hilltop neighborhood of Tacoma with lower income housing, a history of violence, and is beginning the process of some gentrification. In other congregations there might be other psychosocial needs to which a congregation can respond. PLC also involves the post-confirmation students in the life of the church: high school youth are part of mentoring the confirmation students, youth become actively employed by the church, PLC sends care packages to the students who go to college and keeps track of them in college. The intentionality in their confirmation and post-confirmation programs can be seen in the way they tend to the whole person throughout the stages and transitions in their life.

3. PLC is living out the value of authentic neighbor love that creates hope.

Not only are all lives precious at PLC, all lives are welcomed, and all lives are sought after. PLC is incarnate in the lives of its members and in the lives of its neighborhood. This is a church that puts the love of neighbor first. At PLC one can see the dual love of the youth operating—love through emotional support in hearing their story and caring, as well as, love through social advocacy in meeting their housing needs and pursuing community building. If, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbor and our neighbor is hungry, we feed them; if our neighbor needs education, then we teach them; if the youth need mentors and role models, we step up and give them that time and attention; if there is violence in the neighborhood, we respond through community action groups and making safe space; if there is a shortage of housing for the mentally ill, then we gather community representatives together to create adequate housing. PLC embodies an incarnate neighbor love proclaiming that is God's love. Yes, the confirmands learn about the Bible, the creeds, the Lord's Prayer, and God's love, but they also experience God's love and this gives them hope.