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RIVER OF HOPE LUTHERAN CHURCH

Hutchinson, Minnesota | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

BY *Peter Bauck¹*

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¹ Tashina Good served as research partner for this site visit. Her participation and insights were extremely helpful and contributed to this portrait.

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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

Confirmation ministry at River of Hope (ROH) Lutheran church is a *river of hope*. A ministry that encourages and cultivates growth and is a source of life for youth and adults in the congregation and the community of Hutchinson, Minnesota; a ministry willing to risk and create a community where asking hard questions and dealing with the practical and messy aspects of faith and life is possible; and a ministry where young people are not separated, but integrated into the life and mission of the whole congregation. Not only is there community within the congregation, ROH also gushes into the life of Hutchinson through their ability to gather out in the community. In what follows, the reader will be taken on a guided tour of this river to see how it is cultivating faith and disciples of Christ.

METAPHOR

Rivers are ever flowing, ever changing, and ever a source of life to all that they touch. The hope that a river provides is one that encourages and cultivates growth and life everywhere it goes. Thus here we have an ever flowing, ever-changing source of life. There is risk in opening up and allowing people of all ages to build relationships, to ask the hard questions and live their faith out in practical ways that allows them to grow together as a community. The risk of being willing to live into the ambiguity and live into their identity as a part of the body of the ELCA takes courage.

The flow of the Confirmation Ministry invites the young people to be actively part of their community of faith. It provides all ages of the congregation to course into intentional relationships with one another. There is also a large “greater-community” component where the congregation gushes into the life of Hutchinson through their ability to gather out in the community (e.g. provide root beer floats during community events and participating as active volunteers at a local senior living space). This is an active part of the confirmation ministry attending these events with their families or mentors.

The pastor has worked the past few years changing the confirmation ministry to be fluid yet stable within the guidelines that the congregation is seeking—like a river bed that holds a true course, yet is able to branch out or overflow into different areas. Thus this ministry is becoming defined and fluid as it is formed into being. One mentor I talked with emphasized her desire for young people to know that faith is always changing as well, even though there are specifics that must be stable (such as the landscape through which your faith flows). This creates lasting changes in the lives of these young people, many of whom might not be able to specifically articulate what it means in their own life or how the purpose of confirmation is lived out. An environment of community and hope in every bend and pooling of the river is a hope for the future of what it means to do confirmation.

CONTEXT

River of Hope is located in Hutchinson, Minnesota. The southwest corner of Minnesota is largely rural and composed of cities around the size of Hutchinson (population 14,000) and smaller farming communities. As is true of other cities the size of Hutchinson, it acts as a hub for many of these communities with its forty local and chain businesses: restaurants and bars, some coffee shops, several churches (Lutheran, Baptist, Catholic, and non-denominational), and retail stores. Hutchinson also has a thriving hospital that provides health care services to the surrounding area, and good public and private schools.

Hutchinson is about fifty-eight miles west of the Minneapolis and St. Paul (the twin cities). The twin cities have a combined population of 694,943. The nineteen counties that include and surround the twin cities boast a population of 7,095,411 as of 2012.¹ Given the proximity of Hutchison to the twin cities area, some people commute to twin cities for work. Others are, however, able to live and work in town. The major employer in Hutchinson is 3M, and the current company branch has been there for sixty-three years.

¹ “Annual Estimates of the Population of Combined Statistical Areas,” United States Census Bureau, accessed August 18, 2015. <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/metro/totals/2012/tables/CBSA-EST2012-02.csv>

The political climate in and around Hutchinson is important for the specific story of ROH. Hutchinson is located in a politically conservative area of Minnesota. Though not necessarily the case when looking at individuals and specific communities, there is a political divide in Minnesota between the more liberal twin cities metro area and the more conservative rural Minnesota. One can see this divide in the 2012 marriage amendment vote; rural Minnesota largely voted to amend the state constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman.²

CONGREGATION

A large part of ROH's beginnings centered on the issue of same sex marriage. There were the two ELCA Lutheran churches in Hutchinson.³ These two Lutheran churches—one founded in 1895 and the other an offshoot of this in 1962 because of the former's growth—voted to disassociate from the ELCA because of the sexuality statement put forth by the denomination in August of 2009. These churches are now part of the LCMC (Lutheran Church in Mission for Christ). There were, however, people who wanted to maintain connection to ELCA. ROH is made up of the people from the two Lutheran churches that wanted to maintain ties to the ELCA. The history of ROH church began on April 30, 2010 when a small group of people gathered for conversation, support, and refreshment. In July of 2010, ROH began with a few worship services. There was a Methodist congregation that let them use their building. In September of 2010, they started weekly services at the Methodist church, getting leadership help from a retired pastor. Rev. Laura Aase started at ROH in January of 2011, her first call as an ELCA pastor. The church

² When looking at a state map divided by House and Senate district, there is a clear divide between the urban and rural parts of Minnesota. "Maps: Same Sex Marriage Vote Compared," Minnesota Public Radio, accessed August 18, 2015,

http://minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2013/05/map_marriage_votes_compared/

³ One of these churches is Faith Lutheran Church. Danish Lutherans built their own church in 1895. This structure continued to serve as the place of worship until 1938, when the present structure was erected on the same site. The continuing growth in membership and program necessitated the building of a parish education unit, which was completed in 1957. In 1958, the congregation decided to change its name from Main Street Lutheran Church to Faith Lutheran Church. "About," Faith Lutheran Church, accessed August 30, 2015, <http://www.faithlc.com/about/>. The other church is Christ the King Lutheran Church. In 1961, the church council at Faith Lutheran Church discussed the need for starting another American Lutheran Church (ALC) in Hutchinson. The mission board of the ALC came and surveyed the city. After the survey, the decision was to start a new ALC church in Hutchinson and its name would be Christ the King Lutheran Church. "Christ the King's 50th Anniversary Celebration: The beginnings," Christ the King Lutheran Church, accessed August 30, 2015, <http://ctkhutch.com/index.php/about-us/ctk-history>.



eventually moved to Hutchinson Event Center and out of the Methodist building in October of 2013. ROH, one could say, is part of the ever-changing river of the church (specifically Lutheranism) in Hutchinson that goes back to the founding of the city itself. ROH is

connected to this history and the Lutheran roots in Hutchinson, but is also adapting and changing depending on the needs of its context.

The process of moving out of the Methodist church started with the ELCA church wide office. They realized they had sixty new mission starts and hired a consultant to help these churches identify their mission and vision. Since ROH was worshipping in a Methodist church and had come together as a result of breaking away from other Lutheran churches, the congregation was struggling with questions of identity. ROH started to grow after they left the Methodist congregation and set a morning time for worship. There was initially an evening time for worship, but the morning time seemed to help. ROH currently worships in the Hutchinson Event Center. Though they are not tied to the event center, it is a major piece of how they have started to cultivate their identity independent of the Methodist congregation. I will take a moment to describe my experience in worship at ROH at the event center.

The event center is a standard business room with padded chairs and partitions. The chairs are set up in a row facing the front. For me, this was a different feel than the intimacy of the confirmation time. Seeing this space was helpful for me as a researcher because I had started to associate ROH with the space they use in a United Church of Christ for their confirmation program—as in “this is the ROH building, sanctuary, and education wing.” Participating in worship at the event center helped me realize that ROH is a mission start. Without religious symbols on the walls, stained-glass windows for the light to enter, or pews for the gathered

congregants, I felt a bit uncomfortable. Initially, this was not my ideal worship space. Yet, as I looked around, the people gathered were comfortable in this space, an altar had been created. All the "parts" of a worship space were present, but the form was flexible, mobile, and, frankly, less important than the interaction of the people with each other and God.

There was a back table with crosses of all sorts laying on it. Next to the crosses was a laptop for people to sign up for volunteer opportunities. There was also a folded board standing on the table with general information about the church and places to sign up for being a hospitality volunteer, and information about camp Amicon. In front of the worship space there were pillars with white lights wrapped up around them to the top providing softer lighting. Half of the worship space was lit with just the soft white lights and half had the florescent overhead lights turned on. In the front was a piano off to the left with three music stands for the singers during worship. To the left of the piano were coffee and sweets for after worship. In order to help people unfamiliar with worship service there was a screen displayed.

The people all seemed to enjoy the space and were very connected to the service, greeting each other during the "passing of the peace" and making announcements to the community from their seats. As people gathered, you could tell that most of them knew each other. People wore casual pants (jeans or khakis) and sweaters, sweatshirts, or blouses for a top. Laura involved youth of



all ages right away in the service. They carried crosses during the processional and paraded around the worship space with the crosses for the recessional. Laura carried a cross at the head of the line and danced to the music of the processional and recessional. Not only did her dancing get some of the youth to dance with her, the congregants started to sway and clap as they sang. Given what I had seen and heard when I visited confirmation sessions, there were less youth at the service than

I expected. However, this was one of the Sundays close to spring break and families were out of town. Overall, the worship service was very playful and relaxed, which may be something that attracts youth. In addition to the processional and recessional, Laura helped to create an environment that was comfortable and relaxed. She moved around the space connecting with people; the congregants and Laura laughed and were comfortable if things didn't go as planned; and people engaged with others around them.

The worship service I attended embodied the overall ministry of the church. Their mission statement is “We go out to transform lives through Jesus Christ.”⁴ They gather to worship at the event center, but just as naturally, they flow out into the city of Hutchinson as disciples transforming lives rooted in the following principles, which guide their entire ministry and are posted on their church website:

- 1 | (disciple = learner)
- 2 | God is God and we are not.
- 3 | We are called to grow together as disciples: to forgive, to teach, to love.
- 4 | Disciples are inspired by the Holy Spirit to take risks.
- 5 | Disciples seek God's justice.
- 6 | Disciples serve with no strings attached.
- 7 | Disciples invite and welcome through loving acceptance.
- 8 | We meet you where you are.⁵

ROH focuses on discipleship, and one of the ways they do this is through discipleship groups. This small group ministry helps the people of ROH grow together, learn together, and build community together in intimate groups. These discipleship groups follow a curriculum and get together to discuss what it means to be a disciple and transform their own lives and the lives of others in the community.

Overall, the people of ROH have a good idea of what it means to be ELCA Lutheran. They are recognized as “the gay” church in Hutchinson, but this has not eclipsed other elements of their identity. The pastor, mentors, and youth focused more on how ROH is intentional about building community within ROH and within

⁴ River of Hope Lutheran Church, accessed August 30, 2015, <http://riverofhopehutchinson.org>.

⁵ River of Hope Lutheran Church, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://riverofhopehutchinson.org>

Hutchinson. Even if they do not agree theologically with fellows members or citizens, they see a primary part of their work as contributing to the good of Hutchinson and building community. These congregation members are long-term ELCA members, which is quite different than many mission start churches. They are grounded in their understanding of Lutheran theology, but decided to start a new church in a denomination with which they have always been connected. This causes a unique dynamic. They had to fight and work through difficult situations in order to maintain their heritage, and define what it means for them to come together as a new church made of old friends. This context is theirs, they know their faith and they are not afraid to own what it means to live out their faith and help young people to catch it as well.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

“I didn’t know anything about church. We just started coming last year....

Confirmation was pretty fun last year...once a month we did a special *gathering* where we did fun activities.... I like being able to *meet people* because then you aren’t just sitting there awkwardly.”⁶

“Confirmation helps the kids see that being part of the church is *being part of the community*. Kids feel like part of the community already as opposed to only after they get confirmed.”⁷

Getting Started in a Mission Start

Because the church is so young, at first Laura did not have a consistent approach for confirmation. As a new pastor, the first full year was a reflective year for her. She was “carrying the mentality” of what confirmation should be.⁸ Should they have to learn, memorize, and test? What are the outcomes? “I was battling the old expectations,” Laura stated.⁹ She did not want to have these old expectations from her own confirmation days be part of ROH’s program, but the unconscious tape in

⁶ Samantha, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file, March 2015, emphasis mine.

⁷ Judy, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file, March 2015, emphasis mine.

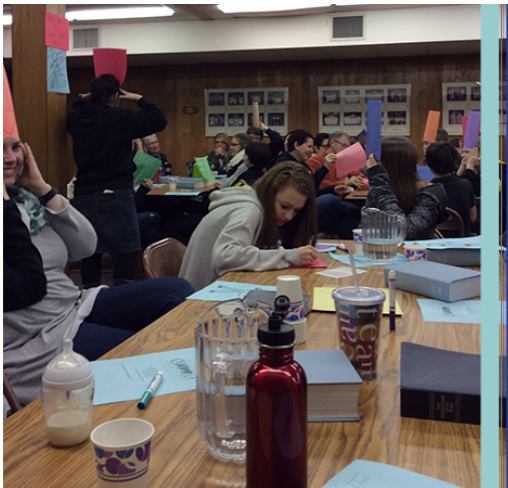
⁸ Rev. Laura Aase, interview with Peter Bauck, phone interview, September 2014.

⁹ Rev. Laura Aase, interview with Peter Bauck, phone interview, September, 2014.

her head was that memorizing and dispensing should be part of confirmation. In one particular moment of reflection on what confirmation should be, she realized she just had to show the confirmands she cared: “They know that I love them and we prayed together [that first year].” In addition to demonstrating that she cared about the kids, she realized that faith formation is a life-long process for them. Reflecting on her first year at ROH Laura said,

They are kids. They don’t give a damn [about memorizing and regurgitating]. They are trying to figure out who they are. Just relax....I was a new pastor and grappling what my responsibility was to them...feeling the weight of the responsibility. I pulled back [from feeling so much pressure]...this is a lifelong thing. I need to introduce it to them, and it will grow.¹⁰

Laura was a new pastor, ROH was a new church formed with both hope and loss, and both of these provided an opportunity to rethink confirmation. Rethinking confirmation can be challenging because of the time and energy it takes to come up with not only the mission and vision but also the details of the confirmation gatherings throughout the year. It is rewarding because it is not only an opportunity to build on the strengths of the history of confirmation but also to create something new that may resonate with youth today.



Where They Are Now

The confirmation program is in its fourth year and is beginning to develop a foundation of core components from year to year. The kids start confirmation in seventh grade and get confirmed in fall of tenth grade. Tenth grade is only about getting confirmed in the fall, so the core of the program is in grades 7-9. As the confirmands move through the program, she looks for them to become critical thinkers and verbalize more nuance in their responses and reflections than “right answers.” Currently, Laura defines the core

¹⁰ Rev. Laura Aase, interview.

components of confirmation as listed below. The fascinating piece of confirmation at ROH is that only one of the following components is just for confirmation students – the mentor program. The other components—discipleship groups, service project, worship, and summer activity—include the rest of the congregation. Therefore, confirmation is almost always intergenerational and communal at ROH.

1. **Mentor Program:** The confirmands and mentors meet once a month. According to Laura, this time is specifically designated as “confirmation” and does not overlap with other ministries at ROH. Confirmands and mentors meet the first Wednesday of the month from 6-7:30pm. The mentor programs begins with snacks and hanging out, then there is a skit or Re:form video, then small conversations in pairs or groups, and finally a time of blessing and sending.” Laura uses Re:form, Nooma, and Freaks and Geeks videos as her curriculum. The monthly Wednesday night meetings take place in the sanctuary and education building at a local United Church of Christ congregation.
2. **Discipleship Group:** There is a requirement to participate in a discipleship group for both the confirmands and the adults. These groups meet once a month and often focus on faith formation and faith in the daily lives of ROH’s members. According to Laura, these groups help the members of ROH answer the question, “What does this mean for y daily life?” To get at this question, the groups use a text of some kind: the Bible, a book, or a story. At each of the monthly meetings, the groups discuss the text for that month guided by a list of questions to help them engage with the text. Faith formation is very important at ROH, and through these groups, the youth know that this is important for the adult’s lives, as well as their own.
3. **Worship once a month:** The third component of confirmation is to attend worship at least once per month. This is the new norm for a lot of the families. Regular worship is less and less likely. Laura and a member of ROH recorded how many times people came to worship and most families came once or twice a month. “This is chipping away at community... you will have a

shot at being part of a community if you come to worship once a month to hear and interact.”¹¹

4. **Service Project:** Each summer the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade confirmands participate in a summer activity with their grade-level. For example, one of the grades may go on a canoe trip and another may make a trip to inner city to do service work.
5. **Summer Activity:** Each summer the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade confirmands participate in a summer activity with their grade. For example, one of the grades may go on a canoe trip and another may make a trip to inner city to do service work.

As the pastor, adults, and youth participate in confirmation, one of the clear themes in the data Tashina and I gathered was *community and relationships*. Laura, the youth, and the mentors all mentioned the theme of community and relationships in their interviews, though they mentioned it in different ways. Sometimes community was focused on their seeking of a community to call home and be part of for *their* faith life and faith formation, and other times community was about being a loving presence for other members of the church and also the community at large. I want to focus on the youth, however. The youth talked about a community that gave them a sense of belonging, a community that serves the city of Hutchinson, and a community that helps them learn surrounded by grace.

Community of Belonging

The youth felt like they belonged at ROH and they wanted to continue to belong. For the youth, the sense of belonging was described as having fun at confirmation. They enjoyed going and they were interested in talking with their mentors and peers about important faith and life issues. In other words, the relationships were important for them: “It is fun. You play all the games, play the video, talk about the video....that is my favorite part, when you get to talk about the video later [in the small and large groups].”¹² This youth liked the small group time spent reflecting on

¹¹ Rev. Laura Aase, interview.

¹² Sarah, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file , March 2015.

the discussion questions with the mentor and peers. These small group times reinforce and build relationships between the youth and mentors. During this time both the youth and mentors share their faith stories as equals who are trying to figure out how to be who they are and be a church. The youth like the small group times and mentor relationship so much they would want to be able to be a mentor once they are confirmed. We asked two youth if they would want to be involved at ROH after confirmation, and both said yes: “I will still come to worship for sure...[and] I would probably [want to be a mentor]. You could still go to confirmation and eat the food...being about to connect with the kids and help them through confirmation.”¹³ It is a testament to the strength of the confirmation program at ROH that these youth felt they belonged and wanted to keep participating in the community after they were confirmed.

Community of Service

Serving the community was also part of confirmation and something the youth enjoyed. The youth told us that going out into the community is part of confirmation, so they are getting the message that “being part of the church is being part of the community.” During various parts of the interview, the youth noted two main ways in which ROH is out in the community:

1. Meeting in different places at the end of church such as going out to eat at restaurants as a church group.
2. “Go[ing] to Harmony River [a nursing home] and play games and paint their nails and stuff.”¹⁴

We also asked them, “why is [being out in the community] important?” They said, “people know who you are and you can go and meet new people and talk about stuff with them,” and “It might bring more people into the church.”¹⁵ In these quotes, the youth emphasized how ROH is out in the city of Hutchinson by serving and reaching out.

¹³ Sarah, interview.

¹⁴ Sarah and Samantha, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file, March 2015.

¹⁵ Samantha, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file, March 2015.

Community of Learning

The youth noted how they see confirmation as a time to learn about the Bible and what baptism means. When asked what the Wednesday night confirmation time was for, they said, “pastor Laura says Wednesday night is to confirm your baptism and learn about the bible.”¹⁶ We followed up with, “What does it mean to confirm your baptism, would you be able to explain it to your friend?” One of them stated, “confirming you are a child of God.”¹⁷ The youth continued to emphasize learning when we asked them what was important about confirmation. They said confirmation was a time to, “teach teenagers about God, to help you understand the Bible more.”¹⁸ They also mentioned they learn how the stories impact them in everyday life – they stop and think about how God is involved. One of the most powerful (we asked the youth, “what is the most crazy thing you have learned?”) things one of the youth learned was how God will always love you as a child of God. Like many youth, the confirmands at ROH do not have all of their theological ideas figured out – but it is clear that they are wrestling with big concepts and questions.. For example, one youth told us,

God will always forgive you, and like right away. [ROH] would put it in the books [for worship]: ‘come as you are because God loves you for who you are.’ He loves you for what you are on the inside. Whatever you do he will still love you....You don’t have to worry what you look like on the outside just as long as you stay nice on the inside and not do anything too bad; he will still love you, but yeah, it’s not good to do bad things. If you do bad things on purpose, God will still love you. [“does that make sense?”] Yeah. kind of. I don’t know.¹⁹

The three themes noted in the discussions with the youth—community that gave them a *sense of belonging*, a community that *serves the city of Hutchinson*, and a community that *helps them learn surrounded by grace*—were also present in our

¹⁶ Samantha and Sarah, interview.

¹⁷ Samantha, interview.

¹⁸ Samantha, interview.

¹⁹ Sarah and Samantha, interview by Peter Bauck and Tashina Good, audio file, March 2015.

conversations with the pastor and adults. That is to say, the youth have a very good sense of what cultivates community at ROH and what is important for the church.

AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS -----

1. **Leadership plays a large role in setting the tone for the relational environment.** The depth of relationships at ROH comes in part from Laura. Laura is a very playful pastor and uses this to connect with the confirmation students, which is reflected in her use of games to get the kids moving. In my observations from the site visit, the confirmands are drawn to her playfulness, but this is not to say that all youth leaders must be “playful” in order to have a rich confirmation program. Laura’s playfulness comes out of a mature self-awareness and self-acceptance. Self-awareness includes being aware of the ways in which one brings hope and joy and love to oneself and others, as well as being aware of the ways in which one causes hurt, dysfunction, and anger in oneself and others. Self-acceptance is part of being able to hold all the aforementioned parts of oneself together as a cohesive whole. The more one can do this, the authentically one will be able to BE. I did not have time to learn the entirety of Laura’s story, but the time I spent with her and ROH I sensed authenticity in Laura. The people and youth of Hutchinson are drawn to this.

2. **A trusting and caring environment needs to be modeled and come with a set of practices.** More than playfulness, Laura creates an environment where questions, concerns, and hopes can be held with trust and care. There is an integrity and authenticity to who she is as person that she brings into her ministry at ROH. I had dinner with Laura at a local restaurant with one of the mentors. Laura talked to many of the customers at the restaurant while we ate. She was the same person at the restaurant that I saw lead worship on Sunday and facilitate the confirmation events. Therefore, not only do I get authenticity from Laura, but there is continuity and integrity in many parts of her life. When compared to other people in ministry in my experience, she does not wear a pastoral mask, friend mask, and a family mask depending on the crowd.

- 3. Confirmation needs to be integrated into ALL aspects of community life.** Confirmation practices are integrated into the faith lives of all active members. They may be new as a congregation, but they still have much to share in how they live out their faith through the confirmation ministry. The main purpose of ROH is to understand the needs of the greater community and live into that as a group of people in relationship to one another in faith. A passion for community—both at ROH and within Hutchinson—is what they pass on to their young people within their confirmation ministry. ROH takes this seriously in all areas of their ministry and it can be found as one of their overarching themes.
- 4. The relationships in the community—not the building, leader, or curriculum—are what create life-long disciples.** Relationships and a common passion are what brought this congregation together during a time of struggle and lack of stability. Relationships are what hold them together and cultivate their sense of belonging and place. They do not have a building that holds them together rather, the people of ROH united around a common purpose and continue to find purpose in living authentically in relationship, as their faith calls them to. Authenticity and relationship create a confirmation program where young people do not come to learn and regurgitate information, but instead where they come and learn what it means to live their faith out for the rest of their lives as a community. The mentor program at ROH is the central hub of this ministry. Built around the idea of providing a support system for the confirmands, as well as, an example of what it looks like to live out your faith after confirmation, the mentors are involved in all aspects of the confirmation ministry.