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# ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Oakland, California | The Episcopal Church

BY *Lisa Kimball*

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).

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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.

“The title is everything. It makes it way easier to say, ‘I’m confirming what I feel and I’m not conforming to what you say. I’m going to stop and think, and say what I honestly believe, not just regurgitate what has been handed down.’”<sup>1</sup>

## CONTEXT

St. John’s Episcopal Church is nestled in a canyon of the Oakland Hills, a region more generally referred to as the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area. It is technically in the City of Oakland but nothing about the church or its immediate neighborhood evokes the stereotypical images of Oakland as a gritty, low income, high crime city. In fact until recently the parish was better known as St. John’s, Montclair distinctly locating it within a desirable neighborhood known for its easy access to San Francisco, high ranking public schools, and property values that ensure household incomes well above the American median. The former Mayor of Oakland, now Governor of California, Jerry Brown, is a resident of Montclair.

The church property is shadowed by the canyon ridge and surrounded by single-family homes – historic bungalows in the glens and contemporary mansions clinging precariously to the hillsides with decks protruding on spindly stilts, reaching for a glimpse of the Bay. Tall redwoods, grand oaks, and scrawny, eucalyptus trees with their ever-peeling



Patio at St. John’s

bark provide a tangled canopy that insulates life beneath it. 1707 Gouldin Road is well-hidden. With an unassuming, matchbox-like lathe and stucco church connected to the property’s original two-story house (now expanded into an education wing) the complex hints of Frank Lloyd Wright.

<sup>1</sup> Lilly (10<sup>th</sup> grade), interview, Lisa Kimball, April 24, 2015.

## CONGREGATION

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It is clearly not the facilities that draw people to St. John's, it is the community. I heard that over and over again during my visit. St. John's is known throughout the East Bay for its generous hospitality, exceptional music, intergenerational involvement, and passion for social justice. But more than anything else, St. John's is recognized for an enduring commitment to the faith formation of children and youth. Where else has a youth minister celebrated thirty years of service and the congregation still begs her to stay? How often does a senior pastor of twenty-one years prioritize youth mission trips and teaching confirmation over adult committee work? The parish is unapologetically liberal politically and theologically reflected in this statement from the website:

St. John's Welcomes You! Through invitation, inclusion, faith and action we welcome all people just as God created them. No matter where you are on your journey of faith, and whether you are single, married, divorced, separated, or partnered, our welcome knows no boundaries of age, race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, economic condition, physical or mental ability. We believe that God delights in the diversity of creation and so do we. If you are young or old, single or with a family (traditional or nontraditional), if you are secure in your faith or not sure if you can ever be secure in such things ... we welcome you.<sup>2</sup>

It was true. I never found a locked door. Genuine smiles greeted me and invited connection, but I did not feel conspicuous or obligated. Children moved confidently and independently throughout the buildings. Adults knew their names and stopped to listen when a child wanted to talk. There is a well-maintained playground tucked behind the kitchen and teenagers were glad to supervise small children at play. While physical access can be challenging because of the naturally hilly terrain, this congregation has (with the help of several Eagle Scout projects) made level access to the sanctuary, kitchen, parish hall, and ground-floor bathrooms a priority. Seniors serve in vital roles throughout the congregation, including in worship and as confirmation sponsors. One 83-year old widow told me how "useful" she feels in her parish, despite demonstrating very real cognitive failure.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.stjohnsoakland.org/>. Retrieved August 2, 2015.

The St. John's total membership of 600 (250 households) is predominantly European-American. The Minister of Music and approximately five percent of the congregation is Asian-American, and I saw two African American families the weekend I visited. The staff of six is highly collaborative and playful. It includes two full-time clergy (58 year old male Rector, and 40 year old female Associate), three full-time lay professionals – a male Minister of Music, female Youth and Family Services Director, and male Office Administrator. The part-time Church School Director is the Associate's husband. The parish relies on volunteer leadership and generous giving to sustain extensive programming and community outreach. The annual \$375,000 budget is intentionally divided between in-reach and outreach ministries.

St. John's is not a congregation you find by accident, and faith formation in such a climate is equally deliberate. Everyone has a story of arriving, of having been invited or making a concerted effort to find a healthy congregation that would meet their needs. This is Bay Area California after all with the "least church going population" (61 percent) of any place in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Even the self-identified faithful attend church infrequently. "90 percent of our church school kids only come once every 6 weeks," Kellor told me as she explained the motivation for their well-resourced, one room Sunday schoolhouse. "The competition for time is fierce in our community. The scheduling demands on parents from work, schools, and sports are impossible. We don't want church to become a guilt-induced obligation. So we do everything we can to make the choice to be involved attractive without compromising quality. This means that I spend a lot of my time doing individual emotional therapy, helping kids and their parents work through tough choices about life priorities and time-management."<sup>4</sup>

Once people land at St. John's, the intimate, relaxed atmosphere seems to foster trust, commitment, and loyalty. Core families have belonged to the parish for two and three generations. There is no theological litmus test for belonging. If you show

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<sup>3</sup> "What Are the Least Churched Cities in the U.S.?" *Barna: Cities*. The Barna Group, 24 Apr. 2015. Web. 8 Aug. 2015. <<http://cities.barna.org/barna-cities-the-top-churchless-metro-areas/>>.

<sup>4</sup> Kellor Smith, conversation, Lisa Kimball, April 26, 2015.

up you are encouraged to engage as fully and authentically as you are able. The leadership clearly trusts God is big enough to handle profound uncertainty and existential doubt. Young adults return whenever they are in town. “I love to come back and test my latest ideas on Fr. Scott. I know he’ll listen,” said Terry, a college junior visiting for the weekend.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the modest facilities guard against pretense and favor relationships over performance? Whatever the underlying reasons, St. John’s proved to be an optimal environment for the genesis of a new youth confirmation program, *Confirm Not Conform*, colloquially known as “CnC.”

## OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

Eighteen years ago, teenagers in a confirmation class at St. John’s told their leaders (Youth Director, Kellor Smith, and the Rector, Scott Denman) that they were bored. They whined that their Jewish friends had it so much better because they “got presents” and had a huge party at their Bar/Bat Mitvahs. Their parents were equally concerned that a local non-denominational church’s popular spring break mission trip was syphoning youth out of St. John’s, in part because it satisfied the graduation service requirement for a local high school. Kids felt cheated, parents were anxiously competitive, no one had enough time, and church leaders saw an opportunity.

The CCC (Community Celebration Committee) organized a parish-wide party for that year’s youth confirmation class, and the staff went to work redesigning the entire confirmation program. According to CnC co-founder, the Rev. Molly Darling,

As we worked with youth, we realized we needed a new message and a distinct methodology. Our confirmation class had to be about respecting the growing empowerment of the youth and the onset of more adult responsibilities. The class needed to show in content and form, that we believed young people are capable of making their own faith choices. Our task was to expose them to ideas, religious teaching, transformative experiences, and let the Holy Spirit and their own engagement do the rest. Our program needed to focus more on their questions than our answers, and

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<sup>5</sup> Terry, interview, Lisa Kimball, April 24, 2015.

put us in the role of companions and guides rather than [didactic] instructors.

The result was Confirm not Conform, a program that celebrates young people's spirituality, creativity, and responsibility.<sup>6</sup>

Today CnC is a hallmark of St. John's. It is an "all hands on deck!" eagerly anticipated, multi-generational program built on core strengths of the congregation: family (in its broadest, most inclusive form), food (generous hospitality and joyful fellowship), formation (proven commitment to lifelong Christian formation), and service (social justice local and global). There is broad agreement that CnC does not push religion down kids' throats. Instead it challenges teenagers to think for themselves, to ask real questions about life's most difficult issues, and to engage in regular service within and beyond the congregation.

I stepped off the sunken patio, into the church foyer. The walls were gone! The already dark, low-ceilinged hallway was down to the studs. On one side the first row of naked drywall provided just enough support to hang a line of parish nametag lanyards at pre-school height, with clouds of pink insulation rising behind. Paper signs were stuck on nails, rubber tubs, and in hinges to be sure people knew where to go and what was temporarily stored where. Orange extension cords were woven creatively overhead. St. John's was clearly under construction and no one (except me) seemed distracted by it. The resilient parish was well adjusted to a new normal.

As people bustled in every direction, I found the first sign of the weekend's confirmation events. Two long tables were covered with simple white cotton stoles, handmade from high thread count sheets would be my guess. Each had a laundry pin clipped to it with a confirmand's name. Fabric pens were available and a handwritten sign said, "Please sign each stole (16) for our CnC class! You may sign on all sides of the stoles ... words of joy, blessings, prayers. They will be presented to them on April 25<sup>th</sup> at the Iconfirm service. Thank you!" Right next to the stoles I found stacks of Iconfirm bulletins with a cover picture of the 2015 CnC class. They looked younger than I had expected.

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<sup>6</sup> The Reverend Molly Darling, "Philosophy and Methodology," <http://www.confirmnotconform.com/philosophy-and-methodology>. Accessed August 2, 2015.





The Iconfirm service is the liturgical centerpiece of CnC and what distinguishes it from other youth confirmation programs. In a tradition that still relies on bishops for the act of confirmation itself, the Iconfirm liturgy affirms that confirmation preparation is a local, congregation-wide process equipping young people to choose a living, practiced faith of their own. At St. John's, the Iconfirm service traditionally takes place the day before the bishop's visitation for confirmation. It is an opportunity for each young person who has completed the confirmation program to make a prepared, personal statement of faith in response to a chosen portion of scripture. It is a time when a class of confirmands offers a shared statement of faith – a creed they have written together – in the trusted company of family, mentors, and friends. It is an intimate celebration of faithful exploration and discernment, a ritualized exchange between confirmands and congregation that occurs as a distinct event prior to a confirmation service. Originally known here at the CnC founding parish as the “Confirmitzvah Service,” it borrows heavily from the Jewish coming of age practices of Bar/Bat Mitzvah, at which boys and girls (typically 13 years old) take on responsibility for honoring Jewish tradition, demonstrating their readiness to participate in all areas of Jewish ritual life.

There is a simple reason an innovative and ambitious confirmation program continues to flourish at St. John's, and her name is Kellor. Kellor's remarkable 30-year tenure brings stability and credibility to her leadership. Her ability to engage children, youth, and parents in meaningful Christian formation is exceptional. She believes in each young person's potential, creates welcoming and creative learning environments, and knows when to get out of the way. Together, Kellor and Scott hold parents and parishioners-at-large accountable for the promises made at baptism. In doing so they are unapologetic about their expectation of adults to



support CnC with prayers, and to step up when asked to serve as confirmation sponsors, retreat leaders, drivers, dinner preparers and clean up specialists.

CnC is offered as a nine-month program every other year for youth in grades 7 and above. It complements the ongoing youth formation programming: weekly Sunday School and youth group (7<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> grades), annual youth retreat, and a mission trip in the years there is no CnC.

Young people register for CnC by the end of August. Kellor helps over-committed families prioritize the process with a detailed letter to parents that lays down the law on attendance, the promise of homework, and her expectation that they will volunteer regularly throughout the year. She emphasizes that the decision to be confirmed (or not) is a decision to be made by CnC participants themselves. “You can be confident that your son/daughter will be fully supported throughout this important discernment process.”<sup>7</sup>

CnC is a serious commitment: two classes per month, field trips, a weekend retreat, famine simulation fundraising retreat, community service project, active participation in the liturgies of Holy Week, and monthly meetings with a trained adult mentor assigned to them from the congregation. Class sizes have ranged from three to 20.

Kellor chooses the mentors carefully. They receive a letter of invitation describing the expectations and the year’s program calendar, a Mentors’ Manual, and are expected to attend a training session focused on Jenifer Gamber’s book, *My Faith, My Life*.<sup>8</sup> Mentors range from young adults (often graduates of CnC), to people in their 70s. This year there were three first-time mentors and thirteen returning, experienced mentors. Peter told me this was his fifth experience as a CnC mentor and that he continues to say, “yes!” because Kellor asks, and because he can be assured his own faith will be constructively challenged by the experience.

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<sup>7</sup> Confirm Not Conform Parent Letter, May 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Gamber, J. (2014). *My faith my life, revised edition: A teen’s guide to the Episcopal Church*. New York: Morehouse Publishing

I would like to have had a program like this when I was a teenager ... I think it's a wonderful process ... it makes teenagers take themselves and their authority seriously in the process of learning to notice and listen to God.<sup>9</sup>

Early in the fall the CnC class goes on retreat to build relationships and establish their CnC covenant. Even though they admitted being nervous, many of the teenagers told me the retreat was by far their favorite part of CnC.

I started coming to CnC because my mother, um, well sort of directed me here. And at first I didn't like it because it was all new and I didn't know anyone. Then I had to go on the retreat. I really liked cabin time. Once I realized the other kids were funny and nice, I wanted to hang out with them ... I started looking forward to CnC because I made friends, started talking to my mentor and realized I didn't have to be nervous ... I feel more educated about my faith now even though I'm not ready to be confirmed. Actually, I'm not even baptized ... yet.<sup>10</sup>

Returning from the retreat, each confirmand signs the CnC covenant during a Sunday service, echoing the process by which early church inquirers were admitted to the catechumenate. CnC classes or activities such as field trips and service projects are then scheduled on Sundays following the 10 o'clock service. When asked what would be lost if CnC disappeared, several mentors admitted there would be very few teenagers at church.

The night I showed up, sixteen confirmands were being cajoled into the sanctuary for the Iconfirm service rehearsal. Most were juggling a piece of pizza in one hand and a candle of their choice in the other. During the actual service, the candle would be lit from the Paschal candle to affirm their uniqueness and to acknowledge the light that is in them as a baptized child of God. They would hold their lit candles while addressing the congregation. At 6:30 p.m. Friday the teenagers sat restlessly on their assigned seats, folding chairs in front of the altar facing the nave, while clusters of parents chatted in the pews. Kellor pointed out that the Iconfirm service does not include a traditional Eucharist because there will be a celebration banquet, a shared feast of Eucharistic proportion (a.k.a. a taco truck and sheet cake).

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<sup>9</sup> Beth (first year mentor), interview, Lisa Kimball, April 24, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Joey, (8<sup>th</sup> grade), interview, Lisa Kimball, April 24, 2015.



Then one by one, each teenager was invited by Fr. Scott to “come and teach.” They walked forward, pretended to light their candles and moved to the center aisle, just in front of the first pews. I saw a lot of awkward slouching, hair twisting, and baseball cap adjusting. With patient coaching by Kellor and their individual mentors, the confirmands eventually introduced themselves, named the scripture portions they had chosen, and began to recite their verses from memory. They were not required to give their full statement of faith at the rehearsal so hearing a well-dressed young woman deliver a passionate, polished speech on an unlikely passage from Leviticus caught everyone’s attention. For legitimate scheduling reasons, Katie, who at 16 was three years older than most of the group, was giving her actual testimony at the rehearsal.



The sanctuary fell silent as she described discovering a love for scripture and her deepening conviction that being a Christian predisposes her to stand with the oppressed. She was thanked by the priest, and presented with her stole, “May God’s blessing and the love of God’s people always embrace you.” Katie’s mentor then stepped forward to present a Book of Common Prayer<sup>11</sup> with the words, “Walk in love as Christ loves us.” We had witnessed a glimpse of what was possible. Fifteen other teenagers shifted into serious.

As we walked to our cars, Jamie told me,

When I started confirmation, my life was a little rocky and the meetings were quiet and peaceful by comparison. It kinda showed me there are going to be

<sup>11</sup> The Episcopal Church. (1976). *The Book of common prayer and administration of the sacraments and other rites and ceremonies of the Church*. New York: Church Hymnal Corporation.

some hard times in your life – like mean sports coaches – and you can go to church and God is always there. It taught me that God is always by my side.<sup>12</sup>

On Saturday the construction zone felt very different. Flowers were now in spectacular arrangements gracing unfinished window frames. The stoles were gone. The organ was playing in the sanctuary, and a plain classroom had been transformed with Mexican fiesta décor. By 9:45 a.m. the church was full and there were as many digital devices in sight as there were people.

After the processional hymn and opening sentences, Scott (serving as officiant) invited the congregation to be seated. He spoke with great solemnity, addressing the confirmands seated with their families throughout the nave, acknowledging that life as a Christian is very much a process under construction:

God's call to each of us is to engage in the exploration of faith with all our heart, mind and soul. Our call may take us down unimagined roads, yet at every step we are surrounded by God's love, guidance and the promise of an abundant life in Christ.

Today we honor such faithful exploration. We celebrate the continued growth and greater maturity of these students. We acknowledge their independence and we entrust them to God's loving care.

Young members of the body of Christ, we invite you to join us in the work of healing. We cannot give you a perfect world, but we can welcome you to the work of making it whole. We ask you to join us in a mature commitment to Christ, seeking to treat every person with dignity, to care for God's creation and to witness to the good news of Christ's love and forgiveness.

Will you join us?

With a measure of confidence I had not seen the night before, the students responded loudly,

Before God and this community, I stand ready to dedicate myself to a continued journey of faith, exploration and service to God.

And with that, the congregation offered its blessing,

May the Lord bless you. Come forward.

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<sup>12</sup> Jamie (10<sup>th</sup> grade, female), conversation with author, April 24, 2015.

The Iona Community hymn, “Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?” filled the air as the students made their way to their assigned individual seats. Once in place, the confirmands invited the congregation to join them in reciting the creed they had crafted,

We believe in God  
Who understands us all  
A Friend to everyone  
Inclusive and loving  
Giver and forgiver  
Never-ending

We believe in Jesus  
Human version of God  
Embodiment of kindness  
One of God’s children  
Teacher and preacher of God’s word and love  
Our God connection

We believe in the Holy Spirit  
The heart of God within us  
The connection between earth and God  
The mixture of God and Jesus and followers  
Activator of us all

We believe in the Church  
A community that believes together  
That communicates with God and aids us in our decisions  
That carries the will of God  
That does not judge others  
A place of unconditional love,  
filled with peace and grace that embraces equality.<sup>13</sup>

And so it continued, a service of exchange and covenant, conceived with care. Parents, mentors and congregation were asked,

Do you commit yourself to let these young adults grow with greater freedom and to pray to God for the perfect attitudes and strengths by which to parent and mentor them now and in the future?

And, reciprocally, the students were asked,

Do you embrace this growing freedom responsibly with a renewed commitment to the Church and the work of the church on earth?

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<sup>13</sup> A Creed, Iconfirm service bulletin, p.6, St. John’s Episcopal Church, Oakland, CA, April 25, 2015.

In both cases, the walls reverberated with an enthusiastic, “We do!”

It was time for the Lessons, for each student to step forward and become the teacher. Somehow, with God’s grace, fifteen young people recited memorized verses with minimal prompting and fifteen found their voices to explicate their passages. The “teachings” were not all profound, and certainly not all an expression of orthodox Christianity, but they were heartfelt. After the last stole and Prayer Book had been received, Scott turned to the congregation with a radiant smile saying, “I present to you the church’s future and present.”

Picking up the mantle of leadership and their renewed commitment to participate in healing the world, a representative described the group’s outreach project. They are working with a graphic designer to develop a Body Positive Magazine. Spontaneous applause, Prayers, the



Peace, Announcements, and Offertory followed and then the students formed a line down the aisle of the church as their families, mentors, friends and attending congregation laid hands on them for the final commissioning prayer.

A recessional hymn and dismissal ushered everyone into the celebration feast. I wondered whether the bishop’s visit and actual confirmation service the very next day would feel like a let down.

Sitting with the confirmands in a sunny upstairs classroom at 9 o’clock on Sunday morning, Bishop Marc Andrus said,

I see the ritual of confirmation having the same rhythm of dying and new life that baptism established, of affirming God’s desire to enter into our life choices. You know something about dying and coming to new life ... you are choosing to step forward with your naked self (a reference to the early church

baptismal rite) to die to childhood and begin configuring adulthood. So, what do you want to keep?<sup>14</sup>

Sleepy voices volunteered one word answers, “Playfulness, creativity, imagination, seriousness ...”

He continued, “What signs of maturity do you recognize emerging in your own life and in those of your peers?” Sarah began, “Living with integrity, not making impulsive decisions,” and her classmates chimed in, “Putting more care and thought into what I say, having more control over my mind and words.” “Independence – having responsibility for my own life and not depending on others as much.” One of the youngest confirmands, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader Adrian, simply said, “Choosing to be here today when it would be easier to sleep in.”

I was impressed by the speed with which the group seemed to establish consensus around the bishop’s next question, “What then are you letting go in the act of choosing to be confirmed?” Heads nodded and quiet voices affirmed, “Things that were good but we’ve outgrown,” and “Habits that were never good for me/us.”

The teenagers readily followed as the bishop made a deliberate theological turn, “So then, what difference might the presence of God with you at the point of dying and new life mean?” Multiple voices responded, “Not being alone, being comforted ... Peace from assurance ... God affirming our ability to make choices, and with the support of our church to help us discern when they are good ... God helping us make meaning out of those choices.”

Isabel quietly asked the bishop, “What if I fail?” His gentle response caught people’s attention, “The word perfection is better translated as complete ... so what would be the difference if I described you as a “complete person” rather than a “perfect person”? God is complete, God is whole and you as a child of God, made in God’s image are therefore whole.” She sighed, smiled and with discernable relief slid her Prayer Book toward him for an inscription.

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<sup>14</sup> Bishop Marc Andrus, conversation with confirmands, Lisa Kimball, April 26, 2015



This year's confirmands would not stand out for their ability to articulate a systematic Christian theology. Their descriptions of participating in CnC echoed those of many confirmation program participants at other congregations. They loved the retreat, were amazed by the humanity and wisdom of homeless individuals they met during a service project, had made lasting friends, enjoyed their mentors



more than they had expected to, and were still relatively inarticulate about basic Christian doctrine. What impressed me was their enthusiasm for their congregation, their certainty that they belong to a Christian community that takes them seriously, respects diverse views and expects them to continue being responsible for a faithful response to the gift of life.

One 7<sup>th</sup> grade boy from an interfaith household was grateful to CnC for clarifying his situation, “I feel more educated about faith. I don’t know what way I’ll go but I’ll go there because I want to.” His friend chimed in, “If you don’t understand it [faith], why should you believe it? CnC is education that helps us choose faith.”<sup>15</sup>

## METAPHOR

Confirmation has been a practice actively “under construction” in the Episcopal Church for decades as liturgical theologians and bishops continue to wrestle with the meaning of the rite and the appropriate role of bishops in it. Here at St. John’s dedicated leaders decided to commit resources to the development of a confirmation preparation program that intentionally addresses the “affluenza” of their secular context. Young people are invited to build a genuine faith of their own

<sup>15</sup> Two 7<sup>th</sup> grade boys, conversation with Lisa Kimball, April 25, 2015.

in response to the Christian tradition, and to consider confirming their baptism in a service of confirmation.

As one parent and mentor put it,

“I see them grow and recreate all the things we do ritually in the Church. It is just amazing! ... they go in and look at something, like the Nicene Creed, and go through it word by word, tear it apart, say what they like and don't like, and rewrite it. I was in the church with the group one evening ... they were celebrating Eucharist ... they had brownies for the bread ... it was way out ... and they were way into it!”<sup>16</sup>

The process toward making a decision, the physical building in which the process took place this year, the creeds written by the CnC participants, and the congregation's understanding of what it means to be confirmed are healthily “under construction.” As Kellor volunteered, “My favorite part of the CnC curriculum is that nothing is set in stone. We are updating and creating new ways to teach a lesson or creating a new lesson all the time. We want to meet our youth where they are, to engage them to think and grow spiritually.”<sup>17</sup>



## AUTHOR LEARNINGS

You have to want to scramble for holy ground from a world that reveres individual success, and CnC at St. John's makes that choice attractive. It offers a way toward engaged, personal faith that requires taking a risk and using muscles of self-differentiation. It nurtures a structured process of exploration, discernment, and decision-making. It encourages young people to exercise their God-given gifts, to find their voices of faith and commit their lives to living it out. When or if a young

<sup>16</sup> Mother of a confirmand, conversation, Lisa Kimball, April 24, 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Kellor Smith, email communication, Lisa Kimball, April 30, 2015.

person encounters doubt and struggle, or chooses not to continue toward a confirmed identity as a child of God walking in the way of Jesus, they are welcomed into the arms of a compassionate community. They are invited to explore new roles and to continue to participate in fellowship events with mentors and peers.

CnC lives up to its name. I did not observe resentment toward the Church or parents, or any pretense in the ways the teenagers were presenting themselves to the bishop. They were not faking it to please anyone. They knew the choice to be or not to be confirmed was theirs to make, and that the consequences would be different.