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ST. MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Colorado Springs, Colorado | The Episcopal Church

BY *Kate Siberine*

A portrait completed as part of



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ABOUT THIS REPORT

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

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ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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

INTRODUCTION

“I just hope that it will help me start to build a personal relationship with Jesus and God because it’s just a really hard thing to start if you’re just thinking about it by yourself and it’s really good to connect with people and to try to build on that throughout your life. So I feel like it’s really a start or more deep thinking about religion. Like not just go to class, get confirmed, and be done, but it’s really the start of making your religion the center of your life and really helping it drive you.” - Confirmand¹

“This is a really weird time in our lives, there’s a lot going on and this is a place to really ask the questions: ‘Why are we all here? What’s the world for?’ And if you build a real relationship with God it’s a lot easier to be comfortable with not knowing exactly why everything happens.”

- Confirmand²

CONTEXT

I first heard about the confirmation program at St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church in Colorado Springs when I was over a thousand miles away in Veracruz, Mexico. When I asked a group of Coloradan teens about where young people were best equipped for discipleship in their diocese, their eyes lit up and they nodded in unison while they told me about the incredible things a minister named Joe Hattick was doing at St. Mike’s. “This is where church is happening.”³ When I tried to bring this grand explanation down to earth and get at the nuts and bolts of what makes this confirmation program work well, they told me that I would have to go see this small but mighty ministry for myself.

¹ High school youth, focus group led by Kate Siberine, May 2015.

² Ibid.

³ Youth, conversation with author, June 2014.

Colorado Springs is a town of giants, an almost 450,000 person city in eastern Colorado, nestled in a valley below Pikes Peak which at 14,000 feet stands boldly above the surrounding Southern Rocky Mountains. With these soaring peaks to the west it is easy to imagine the city of Colorado Springs might be dwarfed and made insignificant by its surroundings, but the town stands its ground, drawing strength from the landscape and hosting a few giants of its own. The city itself is home to the Garden of the Gods, a grand landscape which anywhere else would be designated the purview of the National Park Service, but here remains in perpetuity a local city park. The Garden of the Gods hosts an expanse of nature trails winding around red rock behemoths with names like “Three Graces” and “Cathedral Spires,” which give the sense that this place is not just a site of casual recreation, but a spiritual heart of the community.

Another giant that looms large on the landscape is the extensive campus of the international headquarters of Focus on the Family, a socially conservative interdenominational organization founded by James Dobson that works towards "nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family and promoting biblical truths worldwide."⁴ The expansive and permeating campus embodies the evangelical Christian culture that has earned Colorado Springs the moniker “America’s Christian Mecca” by the media.⁵

In addition to the natural and ecclesiological pillars of the community, an additional significant feature of the community is the large military presence with Fort Carson Army Base, and Schriever and Peterson Air Force Bases, and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) surrounding the city. Colorado Springs is also home to the Air Force Academy, which, in addition to its commitment "to educate, train, and inspire men and women to become officers of character, motivated to lead the United States Air Force in service to our nation," is known for

⁴ "Focus on the Family's Foundational Values." Focus on the Family. Accessed June 17, 2015. http://www.focusonthefamily.com/about_us/guiding-principles.aspx.

⁵ Gonzalaz, Saul. "Colorado Springs Evangelicals." Religion and Ethics News Weekly. February 22, 2013. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2013/02/22/february-22-2013-colorado-springs-evangelicals/14792/>.

its most distinguished campus building: the chapel.⁶ The Air Force Academy Chapel, with its seventeen spires and beautiful stained glass, is an iconic symbol of service to God and Country that can be seen from miles away, standing out amid the concrete block rectangles that make up the majority of the Academy.

CONGREGATION

In between these community giants, near the major arterial highway that runs through the city, and behind a series of chain hotels, the Episcopal Church of St. Michael the Archangel has made its home for the last sixty years, proclaiming the gospel in its own uniquely profound way. The church's stones and wood beams blend unassumingly into the surrounding forest, with large windows in the worship space looking out on the Rockies. There is a sense in which this place is rooted deeply not just into the local community, but also into the natural environment of the Front Range. Both geographically and ecclesially, this can be an intense (or high risk) environment,; the parish was featured on the local nightly news station while I was visiting, to honor the efforts of dozens of parish volunteers to mitigate the high fire danger by pruning trees and clearing brush on National Wildfire Preparedness Day, a practice necessary to prevent the harsh blazes that can level the landscape. The church has also proven a safe haven for those who have left the more conservative evangelical Christianity that dominates the community's culture, clearing the way for seekers to bring both their faith and their questions.



⁶ "Essence of USAFA." United States Air Force Academy. Accessed June 17, 2015. <http://www.usafa.af.mil/units/superintendent/essenceofusafa.asp>.

While it might be a small church compared to some of its non-denominational neighbors, St. Mike's 300 person average Sunday attendance is of moderate size for the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado and it certainly makes a mighty impact on the life of its parishioners. The church is experiencing a period of growth and expansion under the ordained leadership of the new Rector, the Rev. Peter Floyd. However, the incredible number of Sunday School teachers, lay readers, active vestry members, and even barbeque ministers make it clear that this community of faith is determined to be a church where all the baptized are ministers. As I stood in the bustling welcome area just inside the door of the church and watched excited children run around the space while their parents discussed the upcoming adult forum and greeted this strange newcomer in their midst. The refrain I had heard, that "St. Mike's was like a family," was clearly true.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION

The church places a strong emphasis on intergenerational faith formation for families and has a full-time staff person, Joe Hattick, who coordinates these programs, writes the curriculum, and trains the church's many volunteers. Joe worked for many years with the Roman Catholic diocese in Colorado Springs and is well-studied in systematic theology and relational ministry with young people. When you meet him, it is easy to see how Joe's reputation could extend all the way to Veracruz, Mexico. He has a big personality made visible by his trademark Hawaiian shirt which is oftentimes paired with brightly colored Crocs shoes and he likes to crack jokes during the announcements in the services. His deep care and concern for the youth is made evident by his attention to detail. He carefully crafts every single lesson plan, asks the volunteers to set up on the Thursday before Sunday services by pulling all the supplies from their precisely labeled bins, and stocks the fridge with drinks and delights so that every label is facing forward and every teen has a beverage that they like.

This attention and care is the backbone of the youth community and its effects are both dramatic and lasting. Melissa Kean, Joe's assistant and confirmation program

graduate, spoke about how a real strength of the confirmation program is the way that Joe connects with the kids and builds relationships that endure long past the youths' time at St. Michael's. She told the story of another young adult and confirmation program graduate who was struggling to make sense of her faith in college. Joe continued to be a person she could call and talk things out with when she was particularly challenged by the shortcomings of the church. Joe took this a step further: he described very intentionally writing the curriculum with an emphasis on the importance of relationships of support and respect that confirmands, catechists, and sponsors will take with them after the program is over. His hope is that, wherever the youth wind up after high school, these relationships will form the groundwork for further exploration of the youth's sense of vocation and discernment of where God is moving in their lives. In my own conversations with the youth, their parents, and the larger parish, it is clear that in the midst of difficult budgeting questions the parish is continually committed to investing in the lives of their young people by having a full-time professional youth minister.



In awe of Joe's incredible gifts for ministry, I struggled with a question that can shadow any charismatic church leader: what would happen if Joe were to leave St. Mike's? While Joe's relationship with the young people that he has ministered to is irreplaceable, a sign of his impressive leadership is the way he lifts up, trains, and empowers other staff and volunteers. Joe's intern, Melissa Kean, has acted as coordinator, teen mentor, and session leader as she discerns a calling to ordained ministry. Every confirmand gets to choose an adult mentor, who acts as their sponsor, is trained in Safeguarding God's People, attends all classes and retreats, and serves as a long-term companion on the teen's journey of faith. This relationship is not just beneficial to the youth, but also to their sponsors.

In a conversation over burritos in the parish hall, over half of the parents of confirmands had also mentored other teens and emphasized that this relationship provided a safe space for confirmands to bring questions – and to have a positive, long-term relationship with an adult who was not their parent. “Confirmation is so important because right now the kids are starting to ask really hard questions. I have my kid in confirmation because I don’t have all the answers to those questions.”⁷ The group of parents who mentored each other’s children over the years had a sense that together as a community with the structures and lessons of confirmation they could better raise up their teens who had the skills and relationships to thrive as young adults. If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a whole church to raise up a confirmand.

We all want our kids to make the right choices but we have to give them the tools. We have to give them the information in ways they can hear it and that’s not always from their parents. Confirmation really provides that foundation for when they go off into the world after graduation. My son, who is a freshman in college and went through the program, it really provides the grounding for our conversations now. Confirmation was like, “Here are the keys. Now *you’re* driving.”⁸

And it’s not just the youth who appreciate having space to wrestle with questions, the parents and mentors also are learning from participating in the program with their teens: “There is always something to learn. More Bible to learn, more angles to look at things with. My faith has been enhanced by being a mentor and by having a child in confirmation.”⁹ This was clear later in the day when I listened to the adults and youth wrestle together with challenging questions of theodicy around the earthquake in Nepal and the killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore. What does it mean when bad things happen? Where is God in these things? In the midst of a broader Colorado Springs religious community, which at times seems to have all the answers, there is a real gift in having space to ask questions.

⁷ Parent of confirmand, focus group led by Kate Siberine, May 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

After lunch, I gathered with the confirmands in a small but beautiful chapel in the oldest part of the church. While the large leather office chairs we sat in looked as though they would be more at home in a boardroom than a chapel full of teenagers, the youth clearly felt comfortable in this space that they used regularly for class. They rolled around in their chairs casually debating the relative merits of sitting in an ellipse versus a circle. As I observed the close relationships between this group of confirmands, made apparent by both shared laughter and welcoming hugs, the youth talked very vulnerably about their hope for closer relationships with Christ, God, and the church by the end of their confirmation process.

I hope that with confirmation, I get closer to Jesus because I know that right now I don't have a complete and thorough understanding of him. I've always grown up just knowing that he's there and knowing all that he's done for us and for me, but I just... I'm not 100% and I hope with confirmation it will help me get there.¹⁰

Another student echoed the importance of having a close group of peers in the confirmation class as she strove to become closer to God through the confirmation process:

I just hope that it will help me start to build a personal relationship with Jesus and God because it's just a really hard thing to start if you're just thinking about it by yourself and it's really good to connect with people and to try to build on that throughout your life. So I feel like it's really a start or more deep thinking about religion. Like not just go to class, get confirmed, and be done, but it's really the start of making your religion the center of your life and really helping it drive you.¹¹

For several of the youth, part of growing closer to God is tied to better understanding the tradition of the church- its prayers, creeds, Scripture, and theology- and in making them their own.

¹⁰ High school youth, focus group led by Kate Siberine, May 2015.

¹¹ Ibid.

Since I was a kid I feel you go to church and you say these words and it doesn't matter what faith or congregation you're in you just say the words. I guess for confirmation you learn what the words mean and how to really be part of the church rather than just someone who comes to a building every day.¹²

However, an equally significant piece for them is not just confirming the teachings of the church, but also having space to ask questions. "This is a really weird time in our lives, there's a lot going on and this is a place to really ask the questions: 'Why are we all here? What's the world for?' And if you build a real relationship with God it's a lot easier to be comfortable with not knowing exactly why everything happens." This space for questioning their relationship with God is what the teens described as the main difference between the Episcopal Church and the other faith traditions that many of their school friends belong to. "We can have our own opinions, and you don't have to go to church every Sunday, and people aren't going to judge you if you say you miss a couple weeks or something. You're free to think and do basically what you want to do."¹³ Confirmation at St. Mike's works for these teens because it is about relationship- with each other, with God, and with the church- and as in all healthy relationships there is love and space to grow.

It was also clear that many of the youth felt some tension between participating in confirmation and maintaining high levels of academic and athletic performance (as well as many additional extracurricular activities). The confirmation program is a one to two-year commitment with monthly meetings on Sunday afternoons from 1:00p.m. to 3:00p.m., and additional time spent with mentors or in optional activities like retreats and service projects. One student confessed, "It takes almost too much time. I'm really busy, I'm a freshman in high school and sometimes I just feel overflowed,"¹⁴ a sentiment that other students echoed. However, while they may feel overwhelmed by having high expectations at church in addition to the general

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

busyness of the rest of their lives, many also embraced the time-intensive process as a necessary piece of their formation. “I feel like it’s a test because when you get home you have so much to do- studying for tests, catching up on projects- but you’re learning to put religion in front of academics and athletics.” “Yeah,” another teen agreed, “Five hours a week is really not that much time to give to God.” In an achievement-driven, broadly middle class community like Colorado Springs, confirmation at St. Mike’s also provides a space where teens can grow in ways that perhaps cannot be quantified by the college board, but are absolutely essential to cultivating health and wholeness. When I asked why she participated in the program, one confirmand talked about how confirmation reminded her that she was more than just the sum of her accomplishments:

In a way it’s really different because at school we’re taught, ‘Oh you have to go to a good college, you have to know what you’re going to do with your life, you have to do all this.’ And then here it’s just ‘Follow God and be a good person,’ and sometimes that’s good to hear instead of “Get good grades.”¹⁵

Several articulated the hope that confirmation’s emphasis on relationship over accomplishment would transform their prayer life for the better as well.

Honestly when I pray for the most part it’s not about faith it’s not about God or anything. It’s always about school. It’s always about my life or someone else’s life. It’s never actually about, “I hope I get closer to You” and I really hope that with confirmation that that will happen. That even during or after confirmation, I’ll pray that we get closer.¹⁶

As I looked at this group of nine high schoolers whose sense of connection was very apparent, I was struck by the innovative model St. Mike’s has piloted in the Diocese of Colorado. In a spirit of collaboration, following a period of bruising schism when area congregations and church members broke off from the Episcopal Church in favor of the more conservative Anglican Church of North America, St. Mike’s has partnered with another, neighboring Episcopal church for confirmation preparation

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

with plans to include two additional churches next year. This group effort with a few confirmands from each congregation not only ensures that there is a critical number of teens to form a viable community of peers, but also serves as a sign of hope and healing: the Episcopal Church in Colorado Springs chooses to be defined by community collaboration with the youth who are the church's future, rather than the divisions of the past. Joe is the primary organizer, but shares the leadership with the other congregations and each congregation sets its own expectations for its kids. Currently the two other parishes involved confirm students after one year of participation, while St. Michael's requires two, though there is conversation about all of the churches moving to a two-year model in the future.

METAPHOR

Working together as a team, Confirmation at St. Mikes is the ultimate expression of teamwork. Like a coach, Joe prepares and organizes everyone who then gets together with a common goal in mind. The youth, are able to articulate the goal “I want to pray to God, not just about school or my friends.”¹⁷ And Joe is there coaching everyone on the team – parents, youth, and mentors, with the goal of faithful discipleship. Similar to being on a team, youth are asked to commit to weekly meetings that are in real conflict with other commitments, but their shared goal and ability to articulate what the goal of a life of faith beautifully exposes that while they are still in “practice” mode, they are well on their way to achieving the goal of lifelong discipleship.

AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS

It is in relationships, between churches, mentors and confirmands, the care of a dedicated youth minister, and a parish that feels like family, that teenagers can bring their questions and confirm that they are dedicated to wrestling with them throughout the rest of their faith journeys. Surrounded by the giants of evangelical megachurches, towering mountain ranges, and military might, St. Michael the Archangel Episcopal Church and its confirmation program is a community dedicated to following a God of relationship by better learning to be in relationship with each other. It is in this work of coming together that this small confirmation program has grown to be a spiritual giant.

¹⁷ Ibid.