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# TAKING SELFIES TOGETHER UMC Confirmation Camp at Lake Tahoe

Elk Grove United Methodist Church, Elk Grove, CA  
First United Methodist Church, Loomis, CA

The United Methodist Church

BY *Jacob Sorenson*

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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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).

### CO-DIRECTORS

Katherine M. Douglass | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Richard R. Osmer | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### PROJECT MANAGER

Kristie Finley | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### STEERING COMMITTEE

Reginald Blount | Garret Evangelical Seminary, AME  
Kenda Dean | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Terri Martinson Elton | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Lisa Kimball | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Gordon Mikoski | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)

### GRADUATE RESEARCH ASSISTANTS

Joy L. Arroyo | Princeton Theological Seminary, Wesleyan Church  
Peter Bauck | Luther Seminary, ELCA  
Sylvia Bull | Princeton Theological Seminary, PC(USA)  
Shonda Gladden | Garrett Evangelical Seminary, AME  
Kate Obermueller Unruh | Princeton Theological Seminary, UMC  
Kate Siberine | Virginia Theological Seminary, Episcopal Church  
Jacob Sorenson | Luther Seminary, ELCA, Camp Consultant

### SPECIALISTS

Michael Gewecke | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, [www.smartchurchproject.com](http://www.smartchurchproject.com)  
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, [www.designbysarah.net](http://www.designbysarah.net)  
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

## ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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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 SELFIE -----

“Do you want to take a *selfie* together in the morning?”

It was an hour after lights-out time, and the whisper came from across the room (that is, five feet away). I smiled, in spite of my exhaustion. I did not want him to get into trouble, but the significance of the request was not lost on me. Talking after lights-out could mean less pool time the next day. I remembered back to his response earlier that day when I asked what it feels like to be at camp. “It’s almost like having siblings,” he had said, going on to describe how much he valued the camp community.<sup>1</sup> For an only child living with a single parent, there is great meaning to a selfie that is not alone. A *selfie* is when a person takes a picture of him or herself. It has become a way for young people to tell their own stories, on their own terms. I felt like he was inviting me into that story, and my eyes started to tear up.

To be fair, this may have been due to the odor. We had three men and four teenage boys crammed into a room the size of a walk-in closet, and it was the sixth night of camp. That is where new smells are invented. Next door, there were eight girls and one adult woman in a significantly larger room. The two pastors were living in comparative luxury, sleeping on air mattresses in the large gathering room (through which everyone had to walk on midnight bathroom journeys). I had spent three days with this confirmation camp group on the shores of beautiful Lake Tahoe, and they had welcomed me into their community. I had to leave at five o’clock in the morning to catch my flight, however, and that was a little early for selfies.

He voiced a melancholy “Oh...” when I whispered my departure time, but I assured him that I would send a copy of the picture from our kayaking adventure of the night before. It had been a gorgeous evening, warm for that early in summer, and a full moon rose low in the sky as we meandered along the coast of the lake just after sunset. A rare conjunction of Venus and Jupiter, believed by some to be the star that led the magi to Bethlehem, shined forth through a light cloud cover. The bulk of the

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<sup>1</sup> Camper focus group A, facilitated by author, July 2015.

group was weaving back and forth, occasionally ramming into each other, but we hung back with the other two men and one of the guides. We soaked in the beauty of it all, enjoying some idle conversation about the meaning of life and the cosmos. Our guide offered to take the picture as the moon shone behind us. It was not a selfie, but it would have to suffice.



Kayaking under the full moon.

Confirmation training is a period of Christian education and intentional wondering about the life of faith. It is for many young Christians a coming of age opportunity during which they are asked to make a decision about continued engagement in the church and take ownership of their faith. They have, in effect, been asked to pose for various pictures throughout their lives with little say in the setting or companions pictured with them. Now, they are being encouraged to take a selfie. There are many models of confirmation training that attempt to impress on young Christians the responsibility they are being handed. An innovative form of confirmation training was modeled on the shores of Lake Tahoe using the camp experience. This model has important implications for other ministry professionals. It proved very successful for strengthening discipleship in the youth participants, particularly in their engagement with congregational ministries. The key themes contributing to this success included intentional community building, extended separation from the home environment, and a recreational environment that prioritized experiential learning.

## CONTEXT

Signs of the drought were everywhere on the drive through the mountains. The pine trees were dry, and Smokey the Bear proclaimed from the forest service signs that the fire danger was *extreme*. The Lake Tahoe basin came into view just over a

7,000-foot pass. Majestic mountains surround the nearly 200 square-mile lake, highlighting its role as a sanctuary for wildlife and more than four million annual visitors. The lake is a geologic marvel, situated at over 6,000 feet of elevation with a depth of over 1,600 feet and boasting some of the cleanest water on earth. The natural beauty and mild summer temperature, which usually hovers in the 70s, make it a refuge for the city-dwellers of northern California and Nevada. The basin is not immune to the drought, however. The lake was a shocking seven feet below normal levels, and campfires were banned.

The confirmation camp participants were staying at a United Methodist Church in the town of King's Beach, which hugs the northern shore of the lake. The church is several blocks up the hill from the lake and situated in a residential area. The churchyard is adorned with a campfire ring, an outdoor worship area, and enormous Ponderosa pine trees, which give off a distinctive, welcoming aroma. The small indoor sanctuary seats about fifty and is largely unadorned. The rest of the building is used as a retreat center for much of the year. It has a large meeting room, a kitchen, and two sleeping rooms that can accommodate groups of around twenty. A specially appointed minister serves the small congregation, which averages fifteen for weekly worship in September through May and thirty during the summer months.

The camp participants came from three churches in the Sacramento metro, about two hours west of Lake Tahoe. They left California's Central Valley in a time of historic drought, with the temperature an oppressive 115 degrees. The churches are part of the California-Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church (UMC). The conference has around 350 congregations and three camps and conference centers. The area is racially and culturally diverse, and some of this diversity was represented in the participants. Less than 37 percent of Sacramento residents are religiously affiliated, and UMC adherents account for less than 1 percent of the population.<sup>2</sup> This religious climate means that young people raised

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<sup>2</sup> These data come from the 2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations and Membership Study and can be found at <http://rcms2010.org>.

in the church recognize religion as an optional lifestyle chosen by a minority of their peers. This has tremendous implications for confirmation training, when young people are often asked to decide whether or not to continue religious instruction and participation in church. Whereas in religiously homogenous communities the decision might be largely *pro forma*, the young camp participants understood that they had a legitimate choice.

The confirmation camp program is a partnership between two congregations, whose pastors have been friends and colleagues for many years. They have been serving in their respective congregations for ten years and eighteen years, unusually long tenures for pastors in the UMC. In addition to being long-time colleagues in the same conference, they are both women who were ordained in the 1980s, and they both serve Reconciling Congregations, a designation that refers to UMC ministries that are openly welcoming to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. The two congregations are actively working for change in their conference and the UMC as a whole, which currently does not ordain practicing LGBT people or officially bless same-sex marriages. The two colleagues have faced similar challenges throughout their careers in ministry, and they share many of the same theological convictions. They are also willing to question established norms and propose new ideas, characteristics that helped lead to their innovative form of confirmation ministry.

## THE LOGIC OF CAMP .....

The congregations had a history of operating what might be considered typical confirmation training programs in the UMC. Both churches had six or less confirmation students in a typical year and began training when students were eleven or twelve.<sup>3</sup> One church met with confirmation students for about an hour every week for four months.<sup>4</sup> The other met with students periodically for four

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<sup>3</sup> Confirmation Project data indicate that 62 percent of UMC confirmation programs have six or less students, and 80 percent have ten or less. 86 percent begin confirmation training when youth are ages 11 to 13.

<sup>4</sup> Two-thirds of confirmation programs in the UMC last between two and six months; 78 percent have regular classes that meet for 31-90 minutes.

hours at a time over six months to supplement a series of retreats, during which the bulk of the instruction took place in an interactive format.<sup>5</sup> Attendance was a problem in both cases. Absence from multiple weekly classes left sizeable gaps in confirmation instruction, and missing a single retreat presented an even greater challenge because it represented an enormous portion of the instruction time. The pastoral colleagues discussed their frustrations and noted that many parents place a low priority on getting their children to confirmation classes or retreats. Both pastors had considerable experience in various forms of camping ministries, so it felt natural to shift confirmation training into a camp experience.

The primary motivation for shifting to the camp form was to prevent attendance problems, but there were other compelling reasons for the change. First, the camp form is highly relational, and the pastors recognized that facilitating strong relational bonds among the confirmands would help them feel more connected to their church community. One referred to camp as “intentional Christian community.”<sup>6</sup> Second, the pastors see great value in reflecting on Christian teachings and practices in a place that is removed from everyday influences, particularly those in the home environment. They recognize camp as an ideal place for confirmands to intentionally consider what they believe rather than, in one pastor’s words, “being told how to think.”<sup>7</sup> Third, the pastors saw the highly active camp environment as a chance to move from disembodied belief to active discipleship. One of them characterized this pedagogy as “praxis-reflection.”<sup>8</sup> These three benefits of the camp environment are nearly identical to what some camping professionals refer to as the *essential trinity of organized camping*: community living, away from home, and an outdoor interactive learning environment.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Over a third of confirmation programs in the UMC require attendance at one or more retreats.

<sup>6</sup> Pastor interview, conducted by author, May 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Sorenson, “The Summer Camp Experience and Faith Formation of Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 13:1 (Fall 2014), 28-36.

They held their first joint confirmation camp in the summer of 2013. The program was tremendously successful, despite initial push-back from parents. The youth participants went home feeling empowered as Christian servants, and they engaged more deeply in activities in their congregations. The pastors and congregation members noted this increased engagement, which was decidedly different from previous confirmation students who had set a pattern of largely disengaging from church activities following confirmation. The recent confirmands have led several initiatives in their congregations, including an effort that raised thousands of dollars for the UMC campaign to combat malaria. Some of the recent confirmands approached their pastors and strongly requested that they be included in the planning and implementation of the next confirmation camp. The pastors enthusiastically embraced the idea, and they adopted a title for the young leaders taken from their years of camp experience: *counselors in training*, or CITs for short.<sup>10</sup> The congregations conduct confirmation training bi-annually because of the small number of students in each age group, so the second camp program was scheduled for 2015 and opened to members of other congregations in their district.

The UMC operates roughly two hundred camps and conference centers in the United States, including three in the California-Nevada Annual Conference. However, very few UMC camps offer confirmation camp programs, and those that do are designed to be supplemental to congregational programs rather than replace them.<sup>11</sup> The pastors developed their own program, in part, because of this gap in the programming of the existing camps and conference centers. They also have the skills and experience to operate a successful camp program, along with the personal drive required for innovative ministry. They chose sites other than the conference camp properties primarily for financial reasons, though they also wanted to have opportunities for service in local communities. They are able to operate their own program at a lower cost to participants and with more scheduling freedom to

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<sup>10</sup> Confirmation Project data indicate that two-thirds of UMC camps offer this sort of leadership training program for high school participants.

<sup>11</sup> Confirmation Project data indicate that less than a quarter of UMC camps offer confirmation camp programs, and confirmation leader data suggest these programs are optional for students. Only 4 percent of UMC confirmation programs require camp, while 14 percent say it is optional.



facilitate their highly adaptive style of education. Their decision to operate their program on a site separate from established camps is not a repudiation of UMC camping, since both churches use conference camps for other ministries, but rather a testament to the innovative nature of their program and the tenacity of two ministry professionals who have blazed new territory throughout their careers.

I had the opportunity to participate in confirmation camp alongside the students and leaders during four days in the middle of the camp experience. In addition to participating in the ministries and conducting informal conversations, I sat down for formal interviews with participants. Three focus groups with the campers and CITs, an interview with the pastors, and copious field notes were transcribed for analysis. Direct quotes are taken from these transcripts. The confirmands also completed surveys at the beginning and the end of the camp experience. Together, these data provide a rich perspective of the ministries of an innovative confirmation camp program and offer insights for other ministry practitioners and Christian educators in congregations and camps.

## THE CONFIRMATION CAMP EXPERIENCE -----

Before attending camp, the confirmands had homework to complete. The students interviewed a chosen adult mentor, a parent, and another congregation member about their faith lives. In addition, they completed with their mentor a worksheet on reading the Bible and another on finding online resources related to UMC ministries. These activities were preparation for the highly relational environment of camp, in which the young people would hear about the faith stories of others and begin to articulate their own faith stories. The activities highlighted themes that were prominent throughout confirmation camp: engagement with the congregational community and connection with the wider church. The vast majority of confirmation instruction took place at camp.

The camp program lasted for eight days, with the bulk of the time spent inside or on the grounds of the UMC building in King's Beach. Participants travelled off site to swim in a pool at a local health club, to participate in several programs at the lake,

and once to participate in a hunger relief ministry in Reno. A typical day at camp began with group activities known as *energizers* and a brief devotion led by the youth. After breakfast, there was a series of educational sessions that took up most of the morning, followed by lunch. Afternoons included an hour of scheduled rest and relaxation time, a brief educational session, and a trip to the pool or lakefront for swimming. Evening activities after dinner typically included another hour of educational time, some free time, and some singing. Many of the games and activities were adapted from those the youth experienced in Sierra Service Project trips. Besides making use of creative resources, this had the added benefit of connecting the camp experience with other ministry experiences in which the young people were likely to engage. Each congregation has a tradition of doing *mystery trips*, youth outings in which the location and activity are kept secret from the youth. Adding a *mystery trip* to the camp schedule (our full moon kayaking adventure) directly connected the camp experience to the traditions of the congregations.

The pastors see the camp experience as a means of introducing confirmands to ministries outside of the congregation. Building relationships with youth from other congregations is part of their strategy in broadening the confirmands' understanding of the church. They used the camp experience to engage with multiple UMC ministries, such as the homelessness ministry in Reno. They also set aside time in the schedule to interact with a local UMC youth group, and they invited one of their district superintendents to join them for a morning to talk about UMC ministries.

The eight confirmation students made up less than half of the group, a testament to the level of commitment the congregations have to the program after the success of the 2013 camp. There were three boys and five girls ranging in age from eleven to fourteen. They represented multiple racial backgrounds, socio-economic groups, and family living situations, and they came from three different communities spread across the Sacramento metro. These factors combined to make it an unlikely group of adolescents to spend a week together. The first day surveys indicate that the

youth were not heavily motivated to attend camp because they had friends coming but rather because they wanted “to have fun” and “learn more about God.” The four CITs were high school students only slightly older than the confirmands, and they found themselves walking a fine line between peers and mentors. Their primary roles were facilitating small group discussions, leading games, and encouraging group building through various activities. One CIT described their role as “a bridge between being an actual confirmand and being an actual pastor,” indicating that the confirmation students might be more willing to talk about certain things with people their own age.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the confirmands connected very well with the CITs and looked up to them, one boy commenting on their strength of faith and maturity, adding that he aspired to their “*auraness*.”<sup>13</sup> The last day surveys indicate that what the confirmands enjoyed most about the experience was “my cabin counselor/group leader.” It is important to note that the CITs were actively trying to figure out their own faith, and they regarded the camp experience as a refresher of their own confirmation training or a chance to strengthen their personal faith. They were, in many respects, co-learners with the confirmation students as well as group facilitators.

In addition to the two pastors, there were three other adults. One was the father of a confirmation student who felt nervous about being away from home. He had a formative experience in his own confirmation training, and he wanted a good experience for his son. Another adult was the camp nurse and also a mother of a confirmation student. She had recently returned to the church after years of alienation stemming from undisclosed negative experiences, and she was wary of her daughter’s increasing interest in religious engagement during the course of the camp experience. The final adult was a retired member of one of the churches who came along as the camp cook, and he also played guitar for some of the group singing sessions. The adult volunteers mainly operated on the periphery and in the background, while the pastors and CITs led the sessions and activities.

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<sup>12</sup> CIT focus group, facilitated by author, July 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Camper focus group A.

The schedule included about sixteen hours of formal instruction time, during which the pastors used a highly interactive pedagogy. They drew from multiple curricular sources, with a series of short videos from Spark House serving as the framework for introducing topics related to confirmation training in the UMC tradition. Some of the topics covered were church history, Methodist theology, reading the Bible, prayer, UMC polity, and social engagement. There was very little in terms of didactic instruction. The lessons were instead highly participatory, incorporating art projects, activities, drama, and small group discussions. They also incorporated Methodist hymnody in lessons about the doctrine of God, the *Social Principles of the UMC* in a lesson about putting faith into action, and *Wesley's Quadrilateral* as a way to frame Christian theology. The students expressed the most interest in learning about Methodist teachings and heritage. Last day surveys indicated that the camp form proved an effective container for covering a wide range of Christian education topics. However, the educational experience went far beyond covering designated content.



Enacting Bible stories in front of the church

The experience itself became the primary curriculum in the camp environment, and it was critical to their engagement with the material that the youth found the experience enjoyable. On the last day survey, seven of the youth “strongly agreed” with the statement “I had a lot of fun,” and the other “somewhat agreed.”

The focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that the camp experience was fun, and they connected this fun with the three major themes of the experience itself: building relationships, individuation, and living out the faith. These three themes are explored below.

## BEYOND CONTEXT: TAKING A SELFIE

The first and most prominent theme in the educational experience at confirmation camp was the importance of **community building and relationships**. One interesting thing about selfies is that they are often not taken alone. People take selfies when they meet famous people or get together with good friends. These pictures are then almost always shared with others, typically on social media sites, making the selfie inherently relational. One question facing young people in confirmation training is how much they value Christian community. The reality is that young people will take selfies with those that matter to them. Will the church community be in the picture? Will Jesus?

The camp experience was highly relational. A significant portion of the time was devoted to group building activities, especially at the beginning of the week. The CITs led group mixer activities and spent intentional time in conversation with the confirmands. Informal settings and meal times provided opportunities for participants to engage with one another on their own terms, something that formal educational sessions seldom allow. The result was that the youth invited one another to participate in games, activities, and conversations that were important to them. A card game called *Shaft* became the most popular activity during free time, and it was the topic of conversations and jokes throughout the week. This free interaction also played out in the pool as the participants and CITs played games together, splashed one another, or floated off by themselves. As the week progressed, small group discussions about the educational sessions were no longer between strangers or casual acquaintances but rather between friends with shared experiences. “It’s nice because now, when I think of her, I have all these jokes and fun experiences with her,” one participant said of a friendship that was developing at camp. “I’ve always loved her, you know, because she’s part of the church, but I feel like now it’s easier to love her because I know so much about her now.”<sup>14</sup> The most common theme by far that the focus group participants said they would take away from the camp experience was new friendships and relationships. One said she

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<sup>14</sup> CIT focus group.

would take away the memories of the group as a community, particularly when they were all gathered together in a circle. This sense of community was intentionally connected to engagement in church. “You guys are all wonderful people,” one girl said as she looked around the circle. “You guys made me feel a lot better about church. You know, it’s not all a boring service.”<sup>15</sup>

The camp group was not some idyllic community. It was messy. Focus group members had two primary responses when asked the most challenging thing about the camp experience: separation from their technological devices and the struggles of living together. One camper noted that these go together. At camp, they were unable to escape the intensity of community living for the refuge of their phone, tablet, or computer. It was difficult living in cramped quarters, and they were unaccustomed to having to accommodate others, so they got on each other’s nerves sometimes. They were forced to step around or on other people’s belongings, and they even said hurtful things to each other on several occasions. Many of the campers were so accustomed to retreating into what several called “the technology world” that they felt disoriented having to interact with people face-to-face. “Usually when you’re at home, you’re spending time with technology,” one of them reflected. “Here, you’re spending time talking to each other and, like, not on screens.”<sup>16</sup> Living together in the camp environment meant that they could not simply *unfriend* someone or refuse to speak to each other. There was time and space for forgiveness and reconciliation. They worked through their differences, and the community helped them do so. One CIT did not understand that his words and actions were hurtful and even shaming towards one of the confirmands, but after this was brought to his attention, he immediately took steps toward reconciliation. Two campers that had an escalating personality conflict sat down face-to-face to discuss their differences, with an adult acting as mediator and providing interpretation of the reconciliation process through a Christian lens. In terms of education, participants were not learning about forgiveness as an intellectual concept but, rather, were faced with a human being and fellow Christian in need of forgiveness.

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<sup>15</sup> Camper focus group B, facilitated by author, July 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The pastors were intentional about exposing the participants to many forms of diversity, both conceptually and relationally. They had the confirmands look through the Bible and the UMC hymnal to identify names of God, but they also showed them the traditional Jewish names for God and the 99 Muslim names for God. The group travelled to Reno for a service project as an example of living out the faith but also as a chance to encounter real people who were living in poverty. They spent a memorable evening with a predominantly Hispanic youth group from King’s Beach with no agenda other than genuine encounter. The pastors hoped that through interaction and conversation, relationships could be formed that would help the young people make sense of *otherness*. The confirmands and CITs spoke passionately about caring for others and intentionally including those who are different, but they really struggled when they were faced with actual people. The evening with the Hispanic youth group was illuminative. The confirmands quickly defaulted to going inside and playing cards, leaving their uncertain visitors outside. “We invited them to join us,” one said defensively when asked why they were not spending time with their guests.<sup>17</sup> It took time and encouragement from the adults, but the two groups eventually began interacting and having conversations. The camp experience provided a container for these relationships to play out.

A second theme of the educational experience at confirmation camp was ***individuation***. The fundamental characteristic of a selfie is that the person taking the picture is in the picture. The young confirmation students had posed for faith snapshots all their lives, but now they were being encouraged to take a faith selfie. One of the pastors told the students, “Confirmation is the beginning of your official wondering about God.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout the camp experience, participants and leaders adamantly insisted that confirmation is a choice. It was clear to participants that these comments about choice were not mere platitudes because they could identify people in previous confirmation classes who had chosen not to be confirmed. They reported that experiencing new things away from home was “thrilling,” a “break from everyday,” and a “change of pace” from being bored at home. This separation

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<sup>17</sup> Field notes, recorded by author, July 2015.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

from home was also difficult for many of the young people, and they reported being homesick. The interesting thing is that they were still having fun and valuing the new experiences, even as they were very conscious of the disorientation of being away from home. The homesickness actually emphasized the individuation for the confirmands, as they understood the experience as part of growing up and deciding what they believed.

One pastor said, “I love having the kids for a week so you can really help them explore *their* ideas without being told by their parents how to think.”<sup>19</sup> Camp was an environment in which questions were encouraged and affirmed. The students were observed asking difficult questions throughout the camp experience, and seven of the eight reported on the last day survey that they “somewhat agree” (2) or “strongly agree” (5) with the statement, “My questions concerning faith were taken seriously.” Being embedded in the trusted camp community helped facilitate their comfort with voicing questions and expressing doubts. The confirmands were wrestling with what they believed, and they were testing out their ideas in conversations with each other and through carefully observing the actions of the adults and CITs. They filled out spiritual gift inventories during one of the learning sessions, and they also paged through the *Social Principles of the UMC* to find a social justice issue about which they were passionate and wanted to add their voice. Negotiating their identity within the camp group provided a microcosm for considering what their unique contribution would be to the larger church.

The third prominent theme in the educational experience at confirmation camp was ***living out the faith***. Young people take selfies to remember an experience or to let their friends know where they have been and what they have done. Faith that does not matter to the young people is not worthy of a selfie, and faith as a disembodied idea or concept does not matter to them. They want an active faith. One of the key differences that the youth identified between camp and the home environment was that they are always doing something at camp rather than sitting around being bored. Significantly, they mentioned the same difference between

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<sup>19</sup> Pastor interview.



camp and the church environment, frequently associating worship services with sitting still and being bored. They contrasted this with the singing at camp, during which they were encouraged to move and dance. The interactive and recreational nature of the camp experience opened the young confirmands to the idea that faith matters.

The entire camp experience was structured around Christian faith practices, introducing the confirmands to a life that is caught up with and dependent upon the activity of God. Each day began and ended with prayer and devotions. They opened the Bible together every day. They participated in service activities for the poor multiple times during the week. Even the games and free time activities were interpreted through a Christian lens. As the confirmands began interacting with the King's Beach youth group, one of the CITs introduced an interactive circle game that

involved pointing imaginary guns at each other. The visiting youth leader gently reinterpreted the game, explaining that we do not want to be shooting each other but rather pointing in recognition to one another and calling each other by name, even as God identifies us and calls us by name. The message throughout the camp experience was



Circle games with a visiting youth group

clear: faith in God affects how a person lives. The campers were clearly internalizing this message of faith influencing actions. One articulated it when asked what she would take away from the camp experience: “More than just saying I’m going do that, I’m going to actually try to put my words into action.”<sup>20</sup>

The campers learned that the most important way that they could put their faith into action was through working for social justice. “This is one of the reasons that I am a United Methodist,” one of the pastors proclaimed to the confirmands,

<sup>20</sup> Camper focus group A.

“because we believe that our faith should be active in the world.”<sup>21</sup> They lived out this conviction during the camp experience by engaging in service projects in King’s Beach and in Reno. Being a confirmed member of one of these congregations means actively engaging in social justice ministries, and the CITs were outspoken examples of this commitment. In addition to ministries for the poor, the most prominent social justice concern of the congregations is full inclusion of LGBT people. The confirmands and CITs recognize that advocacy for the LGBT community is one important way that their congregations put faith into action.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS -----

The confirmation camp program at Lake Tahoe has valuable implications for those involved in educational ministries. The camp form is an effective setting for confirmation training, and other ministry professionals could emulate this program. It has a practical value in providing a large number of educational hours in a relatively short span of time, alleviating the attendance problems plaguing many confirmation programs. Educational sessions at camp can build off of one another very effectively, since previous sessions are still fresh in the minds of participants. The Lake Tahoe program also demonstrates the value of experiential education, which is an essential aspect of the camp form. Students were invested in the topics because they were participating bodily in their own learning. This experiential learning was incorporated into both the formal educational sessions and the informal processes of learning to live in community, getting along with people who are different, and forgiving one another.

The pastors’ choice to operate their own camp experience instead of using an established camp is instructive. Their camp model proved very effective for Christian education and faith formation because of their extensive knowledge of the camp form and their personal connection with the students, but there were many struggles, as well. The logistics of organizing the camp experience were incredibly taxing for the pastors, and they were clearly exhausted by the experience itself as the

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<sup>21</sup> Field notes.

week passed its midpoint. The majority of ministry leaders do not have the time, experience, or energy to operate an entire camp experience, and only congregations significantly larger than the Lake Tahoe participants have the support staff and volunteers necessary to take the burden off of the pastors. Their strategy of sharing the burden of organizing the experience is an example of how this model can work for small congregations. Their camping model is especially instructive for existing camp and retreat ministries that have the expertise and facilities to host an experience like the Lake Tahoe confirmation camp. There are tremendous opportunities for camps to partner with congregations for confirmation camp programs that use the unique talents and resources of camping ministries in combination with the educational expertise of clergy members and confirmation leaders.

This program most clearly demonstrates the importance of a trusted community to the Christian educational environment. Participants were invested in the learning sessions and engaged in the small group discussions in large part because they were embedded in community. It is important to note that they were not close friends before the camp experience. The leaders scheduled large blocks of time to engage in intentional group building activities and provide free time for informal community interaction. Intentional group building activities may be as important to the Christian education process as covering educational content, and community building may even be a prerequisite for an effective learning environment. The informal community time is difficult to replicate away from a camp or retreat setting, but programs outside the camp form could incorporate mealtimes or unstructured gathering time into confirmation programs as a way of providing space for this important interaction.

The Lake Tahoe experience also demonstrates the power of getting away from the home environment for Christian education. Many confirmation programs meet for classes after school or on weekends when students have many other things on their minds. Getting away from home removes them from schedules that are often very demanding, and the physical distance provides psychological space, as well. They

are open to new possibilities and ways of thinking that are simply not available to them when they are embedded in their normal routines. Christian education programs that are not able to get away for retreats or camp experiences can incorporate other means of providing physical and psychological separation from everyday routines. These may include special venues with a set-apart feel or multi-sensory tools like music and aromatics that can help provide the feeling of being away. Those who have learners with previous Christian summer camp experiences, whether with the congregational community or not, can evoke that experience of being away through the use of camp music, symbols, or traditions. An enormous Ponderosa pine cone, for example, may be evocative of the Lake Tahoe experience months after returning home.

The different aspects of the confirmation camp experience operated together to provide a rich educational environment where young people felt free to take ownership of their faith. At the end of the week, five of the eight confirmands reported that they “somewhat” or “strongly agree” with, “I came to my own decision about my faith,” and six said the same about, “I was strengthened in my faith.” It is important to note that the experience does not function on its own but rather in conjunction with the faith formation of the congregation and the home. Some Christian camp experiences are largely disconnected from congregational ministries. One of the important strengths of the Lake Tahoe experience is the continuity between camp and congregation provided by the presence of pastoral leadership and other congregational faith mentors. Existing research indicates that the religious summer camp experience has a long-term impact on participants’ engagement in communal religious practices.<sup>22</sup> The confirmation camp experience has the added benefit of grounding that engagement in a specific congregational community in which trust is already built and can continue long after returning home. The confirmands rated seventeen identical items related to faith formation on the surveys at the beginning and end of the week. Growth varied widely among the confirmands on sixteen of the items, demonstrating that each participant

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<sup>22</sup> Sorenson, 28.

internalizes the experience very differently. The one item that showed consistent growth among the confirmands was the item, “It is important for me to belong to my church/congregation.” This is a hopeful sign that they intended to remain active in their church communities after confirmation, whether they experienced transformational growth at camp or not.

A follow-up survey after the camp experience offers more hopeful signs. Of the eight confirmands, three showed very significant growth across the seventeen measures of faith formation from the first day survey to the last day, while two remained essentially unchanged and three showed modest *negative* scores. Without the follow-up survey, we might simply conclude that the experience offered mixed results. But the experience did not end on the last day of camp. Six of the eight participants responded to the third survey between two and four months after the camp experience, including all three that had shown modest negative scores on the last day of camp. All three showed positive growth in the measures of faith formation since camp ended, and one of them had significantly higher scores than before the camp experience. In addition, one of the two that showed no gain after camp showed positive growth in the follow-up survey, and two that showed positive growth during camp showed continued growth in the follow-up. This provides strong evidence that the camp experience functioned in combination with ongoing engagement in congregational ministries and continued affecting the participants in the months after returning home. The active engagement of the 2013 confirmation camp class in their congregations over the past two years is another hopeful sign that the Lake Tahoe group will remain engaged. Time will tell.

## WHAT IS TO PREVENT ME? .....

“I am getting baptized tomorrow,” one of the confirmation students announced.<sup>23</sup> His father was one of the adult volunteers at camp, and he had given his enthusiastic blessing. It turned out that three of the eight confirmation students had not been baptized. The combination of intentional faith conversations over the

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<sup>23</sup> Camper focus group B.

course of several days and the presence of the sixth largest source of fresh water in the country (after the five Great Lakes), led one of them to ask, in effect, the question of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:36: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The conversation had mostly taken place with the pastors behind the scenes, but now the group started talking about the possibility. One girl had not been baptized as an infant because her mother had long been estranged from the church and had returned less than a year before camp. Her mother was now present as an adult volunteer, and she was hesitant about giving permission. Not only were other family members absent, but also she was alarmed with how excited her child was about the faith she had once left behind.

These conversations about baptism are testimony to the power of the confirmation camp experience for faith formation and Christian education. The young people were surrounded by intentional Christian community, empowered as individuals, and shown the power of an active faith. They now wanted to take faith selfies, and the setting they had chosen was the water of baptism. The people with whom they wanted to take the selfies were their fellow camp participants. The request was completely unexpected but perfectly in line with the theme of *individuation* that was so prevalent throughout the experience. If confirmation training was really about taking ownership of their faith journey, why not here? After all, they had to get baptized before confirmation anyway, and the camp experience held great meaning to them. The pastors did not want to quench their exuberant spirits, but they also wanted to ensure the integrity of their faith networks because they recognized that the camp experience does not stand on its own. So they started making phone calls.

We gathered on the beach later that evening, looking up to the sky as if for confirmation that this adventure was divinely ordained. The rain had let up, and there had not been a flash of lightning for quite some time, but the clouds looked threatening. It was now



Gathering for baptism in Lake Tahoe

or never. This was the night we were scheduled to gather with the King's Beach youth group, and they joined us as we waded into the shallow water. So it was that nearly forty Christians representing multiple congregations, ethnicities, and generations gathered around three shivering middle schoolers under a dark grey sky in the choppy waters of Lake Tahoe. Words were spoken that have been passed down through sacred scripture and Christian tradition, and each was immersed three times in the pristine water. The eclectic Christian community bore witness and laid hands on them as we proclaimed each of them, "Child of God!" Their hands were a little wet to take selfies, but I suspect they will include this experience when they tell their faith stories, nonetheless.