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# TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH

Owatonna, Minnesota | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

BY *Terri Martinson Elton*<sup>1</sup>

A portrait completed as part of



Research through Princeton Theological Seminary  
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<sup>1</sup> Tashina Good served as a research partner in this visit. Her participation, insights, and notes were extremely helpful and contributed to this portrait.

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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

## INTRODUCTION

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*Young people participate in confirmation at Trinity because they want to learn about God and grow in their faith, according to half of the students surveyed.*<sup>1</sup>

One confirmation student said,

*“I think confirmation is like a beginning of a journey learning ... what you're going to do and how God is going to be involved in your life.”*<sup>2</sup>

*One-fourth of students surveyed viewed confirmation as a bridge into full participation in the life of Trinity and the larger body of Christ.*<sup>3</sup> In an era when congregational participation is losing significance, the young people of Trinity Lutheran Church believe learning about God, growing in faith, and being part of a faith community matters.

## CONTEXT

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Even early in the morning, the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul have a city hum in the air. It is cloudy and rainy driving south on Interstate 35. The hum soon disappears, traffic thins, and suburban sprawl fades into farmlands. It is mid-May in southern Minnesota and the fields are turning green. An hour passes and the rain stops. Exiting the freeway and entering Owatonna, the sun peaks out as I turn toward downtown. The city is quiet on this Sunday morning.

A river runs through the center of Owatonna, alongside it several businesses, a regional park, and *the* power plant. Main Street, a few blocks away, is lined with well-kept brick buildings; old architecture with an inviting feel. Continuing toward the church I pass a fire station, elementary school, and older, two-story homes built

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<sup>1</sup> Anonymous, student notecards, May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.tlcowatonna.org/vision>. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Anonymous, student notecards, May 2015.

in the early 1900s. As I make my final turn toward the church, I enter a neighborhood with homes built in the 1950s. Cared for with manicured yards and bright spring flowers, the homes look fresh. As a guest, it appears Owatonna is a vibrant community with a rich history.

Located at the intersection of three highways, Owatonna, MN is a regional hub within a primarily agricultural community. With top notched schools, nationally renowned businesses, excellent health care, and the Steele County Fairgrounds, there are many reasons people live, work, and/or frequent this community. Owatonna is the Dakota name for the river that runs through town and a reminder of its history. Incorporated in 1865, Owatonna grew to 5,500 people in its first thirty-five years.<sup>4</sup> Now, almost one hundred and fifty years later, Owatonna has 25,599 people,<sup>5</sup> with a median age of 37.2 and 26.9 percent of the population under 18.<sup>6</sup> Primarily Caucasian<sup>7</sup> with a notable Latino population<sup>8</sup> Owatonna's median household income of \$53,342 falls right in line with the United States median.<sup>9</sup> Set within a county where 72 percent of the population claims a religious affiliation, Mainline Protestant (33 percent) and Roman Catholic (25 percent) affiliates make up the majority of the county's religious population. In fact, of the 51 faith communities in the county, eleven are ELCA<sup>10</sup> and seven are Roman Catholic.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>4</sup><http://mnplaces.mnhs.org/upham/OtherLanguage.cfm?PlaceNameID=2312&OPNameID=686&County=74&SendingPage=Results.cfm>. Accessed June 6, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> According to the 2010 census. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/2749300.html>. Accessed June 6, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Slightly higher than the US 23.3 percent. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html> Accessed August 21, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> 91.2 percent is Caucasian. Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> 7.3 percent is Hispanic/Latino, which is higher than Minnesota at 4.7%. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/2749300.html>. Accessed June 6, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> \$53,046 is the US media income. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/27/2749300.html>. Accessed June 6, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church of America

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/27/rcms2010\\_27147\\_county\\_name\\_2010.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/27/rcms2010_27147_county_name_2010.asp). Accessed August 21, 2015.

## CONGREGATION

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*“Trinity is old and modern” one young person said. And it “is for everyone.”<sup>12</sup>*

Trinity Lutheran Church, like Owatonna, has a rich history. It “was organized in 1919 in order that Owatonna might have a Lutheran church in which English was the predominant language for worship.”<sup>13</sup> Since its inception Trinity has sought to grow and change as Owatonna has grown and changed. For example, to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary Trinity began the process of rethinking its location. Moving into a developing area two blocks from Owatonna’s only high school, Trinity relocated and made a commit to be in the midst of the people, creating the foundation for their future and making for themselves a place in the neighborhood where they still reside.

Today at 609 Lincoln Ave. stands a building that blends an honoring of tradition and being contemporary. Approach from the west and Trinity is a large, Gothic stone building with a steeple reaching to the sky and a spacious, groomed lawn; approach from the east and Trinity is a clean, 21<sup>st</sup> century structure with lots of windows and ample parking. Approach from the south and Trinity welcomes children and their families with a colorful playground and from the north Trinity makes ministry accessible for all people with a circular, handicap friendly driveway. The weathered stone of the Sanctuary is a reminder Trinity has a long history and the open, modern fellowship space points to its bright future. As a large congregation “of 4,000+ Christ followers” Trinity continues to discover what it means to be “A Community of Believers Growing Disciples for Christ”<sup>14</sup> in Owatonna, a mission it has carried on for almost a hundred years.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.tlcowatonna.org/about/trinity-history/> accessed June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Discipleship is defined by six marks of discipleship”; worshiping weekly, praying daily, reading scripture, giving generously, serving others, and building spiritual friendships. <http://www.tlcowatonna.org> accessed June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2015.

<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that even though Trinity’s membership does not reside only in Owatonna, a faith community of over 4,000 people in a city of 25,599 is noted in the community. Trinity is also noticed with the 11 ELCA congregations in Steele County. With 10,000 ELCA affiliates, Trinity represents 40 percent. [http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/27/rcms2010\\_27147\\_county\\_name\\_2010.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/27/rcms2010_27147_county_name_2010.asp). Accessed August 21, 2015.

Worship and the assembled community embody Trinity’s commitments of honoring the past and keeping an eye to the future. With four worship services each weekend, grounded in Word and sacrament, seasoned Lutherans and new churchgoers find meaningful worship. Services with traditional Lutheran hymns and liturgy are held in the long, narrow Sanctuary lined with wooden pews and stained glass windows. Services with band-led songs and a less formal liturgy are held in the open space of the new addition with its high ceilings, big screens, and movable table and chairs. In both worship spaces the clergy, musicians, and lay leaders create a relaxed environment. All worship is liturgical as it also offers a range across the “traditional” and “contemporary” continuum. All services are intergenerational and with the gathering area connecting the two worship spaces worship style does not seem to divide this congregation. In fact, people seem to like being together, given the amount of time they linger after services.



Top: The Sanctuary located in the Gothic stone building.  
Bottom: The gathering place used for contemporary worship and fellowship events in the new building.



The space at the end of their building, connecting the old and new buildings.

One student noted,

*Trinity is “A comforting place to worship God.”<sup>16</sup>*

While worship is central to Trinity’s mission, growing in faith and learning about God is also important. Learning takes place in an environment where people are welcomed, cared for, engaged,<sup>17</sup> and young people are valued. Trinity’s commitment to learning and growing in faith has cultivated a spirit of openness to each other, God’s movement in their lives, and what lies ahead. With an abundance of ministry opportunities for

<sup>16</sup> Anonymous, student notecards, May 2015.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

people of all ages, the church is active and has energy. The activities, however, are not the point; the point is cultivating relationships and growing in faith. One student recognized,

there are fun activities but then there's also more faith formation activities and mission trips. There's just lots of variety of things to get kids involved around the church and in the community.<sup>18</sup>

And being a part of activities makes “you feel like you're part of everything.”<sup>19</sup> And these relationships and the sense of community nurtured within Trinity's ministries overflows into Owatonna.

One young woman said,

*“a lot of us are friends outside of here which is really great but I think the reason we are friends outside of church is because of church.”<sup>20</sup>*

Just like its twenty-fifth anniversary was an occasion to dream about the future, the departure of Trinity's Senior Pastor in 2012 provided another. Having led the congregation for over twenty years, Trinity used his leaving as a chance to step back, ask questions, assess current strengths, and think about their next chapter. With the addition almost completed, Trinity drew on the gifts of an interim leader and engaged in an intentional time of listening and reimagining. This reimagining period resulted in calling a new lead pastor in 2014 and laying out a five-year strategic plan with eight goals for ministry.<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of this larger work, Trinity's children, youth and family ministry (CYF) team<sup>22</sup> discerned it was time to do their own assessing. After a period of listening, the leadership creatively reconfigured confirmation. Now, two years later, the staff, families, and students see the fruits of this new approach. Encouraged and excited they move ahead, anticipating the future.

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<sup>18</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The eight ministry goals are biblical depth, gracious hospitality, deep relationships, a serving community, leadership development, sharing God's love, being a caring community, and having a culture of generosity. <http://www.tlcowatonna.org/vision>. Accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> The CYF ministry team includes four staff – a full-time pastor and three CYF staff. This staffing reflects a commitment of the congregation to this ministry and speaks to the number of children and youth. Yet staff does not lead apart from lay leaders. This team demonstrated significant leadership in a time of transition.

## OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

In 2011, the people at Trinity would not have considered confirmation broken. In fact from the perspective of the congregation confirmation ministry was doing well. Yet the environments around confirmation were shifting. Cultural shifts that once occurred over decades now were noticeable in years. Parents and youth desired to partner with the church in faith formation, yet many expressed their struggle with fitting all of their family commitments into their personal schedules. Pastors and staff wondered, “What do these realities mean for confirmation?” And now Trinity was actively asking questions about its future. Could this be the time to rethink confirmation?

With the departure of the Senior Pastor and in the final stages of a building project, rational thinkers might have said no. But given multiple levels of discernment taking place and an openness within the congregation, it seemed the right time to move forward and discern new possibilities for confirmation.

Back in 2007, the CYF ministry team refocused all of their ministries around the idea that “each of us was made on purpose, for a purpose by a loving God, and we should live our lives with our eyes looking toward the purposes which we have been called.”<sup>23</sup> That idea provided their ministry anchor, and gave leadership the freedom to explore new possibilities. Willing to put their current work on the table, the staff hosted a Summit for rethinking confirmation in the spring of 2012.

Led by Associate Pastor Smith, a trusted leader having served Trinity for thirteen years, and the CYF team thirty youth and adults attended the Summit to explore critical questions<sup>24</sup> that impacted confirmation. The ideas that surfaced from the Summit, in conversation with the new CYF ministry philosophy and Trinity’s mission, helped the CYF team understand the expectations for confirmation. The

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<sup>23</sup> 2014-15 Trinity U Student Information Book and Course Guide, Trinity Lutheran Church, Owatonna, MN, 2.

<sup>24</sup> The key questions included: How would people recognize someone who has participated in Trinity’s ministry? If you were to design a final exam for Trinity’s youth ministry, what would you put on it? How can we use this building to be a tool for sharing the Good News (evangelism)? Youth Ministry Summit PowerPoint, Trinity Lutheran Church, Owatonna, MN.



expectations fell into four areas: **to know, do, be, and become**. Explicitly attending to these areas meant looking at both the **learning environments** and **content** of confirmation.

Discerning what was essential and what was optional, for learning environments and content, was hard. It meant reviewing their assets, facing current and potential hurdles, claiming their desire for intergenerational learning, valuing families desire for flexibility, recommitting to shared leadership, and naming their aspiration for expanding the teaching faculty. The CYF team started with placing the content into two categories: *standard* and *optional*.<sup>25</sup> With regard to the learning environments they decided to keep all five (Sunday morning classes, Tuesday morning classes, retreats, service and worship), discerning all were important, but remained open to rethinking what content best fit with each environment *and* how each fit into the whole. The length (three years) and age (7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade) were left alone.

What resulted was a three-year multi-faceted program combining weekly learning sessions, worship, service, retreats/trips, and Trinity U classes. The standard content was trimmed down and offered in the 32 weekly learning sessions of the first two years.<sup>26</sup> These learning sessions are the backbone of confirmation. The optional content was placed in a new educational ministry called Trinity U. Trinity U was developed to offer “people of all ages the opportunity to gather for education, faith development, and mutual growth.”<sup>27</sup> Trinity U classes cover a variety of topics and utilize a variety of teaching faculty. Organized into seven categories,<sup>28</sup> classes are offered in one-month units September through May on Sunday mornings and Monday nights.<sup>29</sup> Over the course of three years, confirmation students complete twenty Trinity U courses (two in each of the seven categories and six of their

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<sup>25</sup> Some examples of the *standard* were: an overview of the Bible, an understanding of law and gospel, knowing about Martin Luther, and connecting faith and life. Some examples of the *optional*: focused on the details of Martin Luther, in-depth study of scripture, and pop culture.

<sup>26</sup> There are 32 lessons, 16 each of the first two years, offered in Tuesday morning sessions between September to March. Currently these sessions are held before school and led by staff with adult small group guides to facilitate discussion.

<sup>27</sup> 2014-15 Trinity U Student Information Book and Course Guide, 1.

<sup>28</sup> Old Testament, New Testament, Jesus, Church History, Lutheran Theology, Faith and Life, and Personal Faith Development.

<sup>29</sup> This replaced the Sunday morning element of confirmation and added a new Monday night option.

choosing). The Trinity U sessions offer flexibility in content and scheduling, with the requirements serving as guidelines.

Today Trinity's confirmation ministry balances student-driven learning (optional) and learning the basics of the Christian faith (standard). This approach was well received by students and families and bridged Sunday School learning and being an adult learner.

One girl who moved from the old model said,  
*“with Trinity U you chose what you want to learn about. I mean yes there are requirements but it’s in a way that it’s really flexible which is really helpful with somebody like me that’s so busy all the time ... Going through confirmation, ... I remember more of the spiritual stuff ... You remember those moments and then in 10<sup>th</sup> grade I could stand up and ... be my own member of the church. I was baptized but now this is for me.”<sup>30</sup>*

With many dimensions and requirements to confirmation, committing to participate is no small undertaking. Yet families commit because they see the purpose of each dimension and find the overall ministry meaningful. Retreats and trips, the dimensions most cited by students as their favorite,<sup>31</sup> happen each year and offer holistic learning in an immersion setting. Weekly learning sessions with their peers in the first two years and choice classes in Trinity U balance standard content and flexible learning around diverse topics with diverse groups of learners from the congregation. Attending worship and serving (10 hours in the community and 10 hours at Trinity in their third year) are aspects students are responsible for on their own and integrate confirmation into the life of the congregation and into the greater Owatonna community.

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<sup>30</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>31</sup> One-third of students surveyed. Anonymous, student notecards, May 2015.

One confirmation boy said,  
*“I’ve talked with other people at other churches and they say in their confirmation class they don’t have to do much to get confirmed. And they’re like well its kind of weird that you guys have to take 36 worship notes and 20 hours of community service and all these things. But it is because you do those things that confirmation works and that it helps you grow in your faith. If you don’t have to do those things you’re just like well I’m confirmed now because I went to Sunday school and it doesn’t do anything because you don’t learn how to use your faith.”<sup>32</sup>*

A high school girl reflecting on her experience said,  
*“I recall the classes [Trinity U] and worship notes and RE [weekly classes] in the morning and I got a lot from that... not so much because of the information but because of the way it helped me see God and the way it was present in my life and how his [Jesus’] life effects me. It’s more of the relational things than the factual things I guess.”<sup>33</sup>*

One high school girl said,  
*“looking back it was so helpful because there were things that made me think even when I didn’t want to. I think coming into confirmation I was like this is my faith and I don’t want to share it. But after confirmation it was like what is your faith without spreading it? And that’s like a big thing for me. They taught me how to share my faith because faith without spreading is nothing.”<sup>34</sup>*

One confirmation parent said,  
*“at least part of the reason I buy into teaching confirmation is that I think its helping our youth understand and make some decisions for themselves on what they believe and it helps them go out into the world, hopefully, with some feeling that God is with you.”<sup>35</sup>*

He understands the encounters people of faith have in their everyday lives, as well

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<sup>32</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

as the work these 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> graders are doing developmentally.

He continued saying, confirmation is important *“Because ... confirmation is the years that they’re self discovering and finding out who you are.”*<sup>36</sup>

Students viewed confirmation as inviting them into full participation in the congregation, igniting their agency in living their faith. Requirements and information are present, but they are not the focus. One example is the faith conversations students have with members of the congregation before they are confirmed. Students are given a worksheet with questions to think about before the interview.<sup>37</sup> In the interview youth have the opportunity to talk about what faith means to them, why they want to be confirmed, and how they intend to live their faith after confirmation. These conversations are not a test of students’ knowledge of faith, rather they are the opportunity for articulating where they are in their faith journey and how they hope to continue. Over the course of three years with different elements to stimulate learning around various aspects of faith and life, **confirmation seeks to engage student’s head, heart, and hands, connect them with God, lift up the communal nature of faith, and connect a life of faith with a dynamic faith community and world.**

*One of the concerns* some parents had with the shift to the new model, and in particular Trinity U’s monthly classes, was the negative impact it would have on students having different teachers for each class. The opposite is actually true. Students have a small group of students and an adult leader that serves as their “home base” on a weekly basis September through March for their first two years.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Here are the questions from the workshop: If a friend asked you what it means to be a Christian, what would you tell them? Tell about two people that have been important in helping you in your understanding of God. Why were they important? Tell about an experience when you really sensed God’s presence with you. If you could ask God any question, what would you ask? When people look at you, how can they see that you are a Christian? What do you think is the best way to learn and grow in your faith? What is something that you struggle with in your faith? Can you think of some ways that your life would be different if you weren’t a Christian? Complete the following sentence: Jesus died on the cross... How do you show God that you appreciate Jesus dying on the cross for you? Or do you? What story in the Bible means the most to you? (Be specific) On the average, how often do you read the Bible What special talents do you think God has given to you? Why do you think it is important to be involved in the Church? What do you like best about Trinity? What would you like to see changed at Trinity? Why do you want to be confirmed? After you are confirmed, how do you plan to be involved at Trinity? *2015 Faith Question worksheet, Trinity Lutheran Church, Owatonna, MN.*

But now students *also have* different leaders on Sundays/Mondays for Trinity U classes. These addition leaders have added a new dimension to the program, not only adding new teaching faculty, but also offering different teaching styles.

*One of the aspirations* in the new model was expanding the teaching faculty of confirmation. The four-week sessions of Trinity U have helped do that. These sessions offer a wide range of topics, the opportunity to go more in-depth, and creativity in approaches to learning. This creativity and diversity engages students in different ways and allows teachers to be imaginative. One current confirmation boy said, “you learn a week in Sunday School about Paul and Silas getting mocked in prison. And [then] you take a class on Paul’s journey [in Trinity U] and you learn more in detail about stuff like that. Or you take one [class] about Jesus and pop culture and you learn other aspects that you wouldn’t necessarily learn about in Sunday school.”<sup>38</sup> The week I attended Trinity U classes one of the teachers was dressed in full King David garb and taught his class in character. With videos, Wheel of Fortune style games, and telling the biblical story in first-person, the students at 8:15 am Sunday and 7:00 pm Monday were engaged in the learning process. (And it was fun and full of information!)

Trinity U started with primarily parents and staff teaching, but now other adults as well as high school students have been brought in. For example, a high school student had an interest in poverty issues after a mission trip, and turned around and offered a Trinity U course on it.<sup>39</sup> Trinity staff do teach, but they also recruit others with particular interests and/or passions and help them develop classes.

The goal of each class within Trinity U is not to learn everything there is to know about a topic or biblical story. The goal is to combine an idea or two about faith (or

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<sup>38</sup> Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

<sup>39</sup> One high school girl’s experience. “It was so cool because you can just be like hey Kate I want to teach a class and we, as confirmed or just being in the program, we’re teaching our peers about something we are passionate about and something we go on mission trips, like we went to Minneapolis and talked about poverty the whole time and we spent time bringing it back to our congregation. So that was really cool. The class in itself we learn about how to apply our faith and actually apply it by teaching a class about applying your faith. Its really exciting and I taught a acts class with Kate that was just stemmed on hey this book is really cool I want to do something with this and teach other people about it and it doesn’t have to be a different theme every week, lets dive into this book and really get the meaning of it. It was so much fun to teach and learn yourself. You learn so much from teaching yourself.” Focus group, led by Terri Elton, audio recording, May 2015.

what we believe as Christians) and connect it to everyday life. One teacher said, “I always want them to have a walk away.”<sup>40</sup> And the high school student who had taught agreed adding, “we’re learning about this [topic] but also why it matters.”<sup>41</sup> And so far most teachers have had a positive experience and one course usually develops into more.

There is energy and excitement around the new approach Trinity has to confirmation ministry. This model is a blend of old and new approaches to learning, a balance between the basics of faith and learning about contemporary issues, and is placed within a structure that has requirements and flexibility. Confirmation ministry at Trinity is by no means perfect, and in the eyes of leadership will never be perfected. But the shift has created a movement in the right direction and is propelling youth and adults alike to wrestle with faith and life in a way that is meaningful. For a congregation that is commitment to being “A Community of Believers Growing Disciples for Christ” confirmation ministry is contributing to living out that mission. One high school girl has caught the spirit of being a disciple, and a life-long learner, in her confirmation experience. She confessed, “I still take classes and I’m no longer in confirmation. I was already confirmed. [But Trinity U] gives the chance to learn more because you can always learn more.”<sup>42</sup>

One high school student said,

*“The congregation extends past just the church. The amount of people I have met at church is huge, people that I probably wouldn’t have ever met outside of church. I see them all the time and I’ll say, ‘Hi.’ There are people I have conversations with that I would have never had outside of church. That’s been developed further because of Trinity U because you meet so many people and you get to know them on different levels based on what you’re learning.”<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

## METAPHOR

Confirmation at Trinity, like their building, is old, modern, and open to everyone. As I explored Trinity's building for the first time, I noticed something odd. Above the open space connecting the Sanctuary and the new fellowship area are various educational spaces. This lofted area (part of the new addition) forms a semi-circle and then connects to classrooms in the old, Gothic church building. As I was moving from the new addition into the old it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. And then I looked down at the floor. The tile, from the old and the new, didn't match.



Flooring at the intersection of the two buildings.

Trinity has worked hard to connect the past and the future. In fact, many times, and in many places, it is hard to know what's been true for years and what's new and exciting. Why? Because what you see is a vibrant present; a people working out faith, life, and community together.

The way this young person described Trinity not only sums up their building, but also their ministry and confirmation:

*"Trinity is old and modern" and it "is for everyone."*<sup>44</sup>

## AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS

There are two key learnings around the practice of confirmation and one key learning around how to approach changing a ministry that come from studying Trinity Lutheran Church. First, *the multi-layered thinking about confirmation ministry that serves as the foundation for their model is very insightful*. Trinity discovered language to think about the multiple ways they want students to learn. **To know, do, be and become** highlights a holistic view of faith formation and involves various senses and learning styles. It also takes time seriously— time in the

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

sense of past, present, and future. The knowing, for example, builds on previous learning with the expectation that this knowing expands and deepens. Some elements focus on the present, like forming relationships in this place and at this time. New people can enter into this ministry, people can offer the gifts and passions they are currently discovering, and young people are valued as people “on their way” (or not done forming and learning). But there is also an eye to the future, including expectations of more learning and growing. In fact, that expectation is both stated in words as well as modeled (by peers just a few years older, by parents, and by other adults). ***Know, do, be, and become*** as a learning framework that takes into account our past, present, and future offers not only a great way to think about confirmation ministry, but also our Christian way of life. Are not all of us, as disciples of Christ, seeking to find ways of letting the hope of God’s promised future transform our past and guide our present?

This framework for learning and seeing our life as a journey in time translates into helping ministry leaders think about the need for shaping multiple learning environments.

More than content, crafting a confirmation ministry attentive to the multiple learning environments, separate from and integrated in the congregation, is critical. This line of thinking led Trinity to offer two different types of weekly gathering times, immersion experiences, intergenerational worship, and service. Engaging multiple learning environments provides for a rich ministry, *and* it can be daunting. Confirmation leaders, left to themselves, to develop such a multi-layered pedagogical confirmation ministry *outside* of the existing ministries of the congregation would be overwhelming. But the reality is learning environments already exist within the congregation and within the community. This is good news. Arguments can be made that larger or smaller congregations have it easier or harder to create such an approach. Such arguments are not fruitful, for the reality is all



ministries need learning partners to provide such a ministry. It starts with imagination and collaboration.<sup>45</sup>

No matter the size of confirmation or congregation it is possible to develop a multi-layered approach to confirmation.

Second, *confirmation ministry aligns with and connects to the overall ministry of Trinity*. And as one changes, so must the other. Trinity was in a period of rethinking what it meant to be a discipling congregation in the community of Owatonna. Stepping back and looking at Trinity's history, one sees commitments, values, and themes that have withstood the test of time, been reclaimed by new leaders, and found new expressions with each generation. This current evolution of confirmation ministry is both leading and following that dynamic process. For example, the paradoxical tensions of valuing the old and new, traditional and contemporary, past and future are critical to understanding Trinity. The lesson others can learn from Trinity is aligning confirmation ministry with the congregation's values is important. Learning and being a follower of Jesus is very significant for this congregation. Therefore a high commitment, multi-faceted learning program fits within the larger culture of Trinity Lutheran Church. Weekly Tuesday morning confirmation is part of the "old" way.<sup>46</sup> Students and adults make attending these sessions a priority, arranging their schedules accordingly. On the other hand, the fact that Trinity U was developed for confirmation and it is part of the larger learning and discipleship ministry is part of the "new" way. Just as confirmation relies on and connects into other areas of Trinity's ministry, like worship and mission, other areas of Trinity's ministry are now able to connect into and rely on confirmation with the development of Trinity U.

Confirmation ministry thrives when it works with the overall ministry of a congregation; sometimes leading and other times following.

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<sup>45</sup> In our researching congregations we learned of one community in Colorado where all of the Lutheran congregations in that city work together to offer a University-style confirmation ministry.

<sup>46</sup> Owatonna is a community with release time one morning a week. Release time allows students to miss their homeroom time in public school for purposes of religious education. That experience is an old practice of many Midwestern communities, a practice many communities have let go. Yet Owatonna and Trinity continue to work with that practice.

And finally, *the way leadership engaged in a listening and change process was key*. Pastor Smith noted that *how* Trinity arrived at this model of confirmation was as important as *what* they arrived at. The model for confirmation was not decided from “above” by the staff or totally shaped from “below” by the parents and youth. Each group had wisdom and expertise to share. And each impacted components of the model, with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. What resulted from the discernment process, involving staff and families, was a collaborative, generative conversation that co-created a model of ministry that was both familiar and new. And the process took place within a larger system with other realities. Two key aspects to Trinity’s success was the tenure of the person leading the process, the Associate Pastor, and the fact that Trinity was in a season of intentional rethinking. Leadership matters. Timing matters. Collaboration matters.

When making changes to ministries, such as confirmation, the process is as important as the end frame or content. Reading the congregation’s climate and creating/guiding a shared process of discernment is important for leading transition.