

FOR RELEASE April 29, 2016

ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH

Loveland, Colorado | Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

BY *Terri Martinson Elton*

A portrait completed as part of



Research through Princeton Theological Seminary
Funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc.

RECOMMENDED CITATION: Elton, Terri Martinson, "Zion Lutheran Church," The Confirmation Project, Princeton Theological Seminary, April 29, 2016. <http://theconfirmationproject.com/gallery/zion>

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.

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

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
Bryan Miller | Digital Missioner, www.smartchurchproject.com
Sarah Hong | Graphic Designer, www.designbysarah.net
William F. Lewis | Research Consultant

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

Pat, a widow in her seventies, mentors confirmation students. Mentoring is a key way for her to be involved in her congregation. While she has many stories, one recent story stands out. Jenny, a shy and quiet middle schooler, was in confirmation a few years ago and Naomi's dad, a lifelong friend of Pat's, asked Pat if she'd consider being Naomi's mentor. Pat graciously agreed. For three years Pat and Naomi talked about faith and life in their sessions during Lent. In addition, they had see each other and checked-in on Sunday mornings and during other parts of the year. Shortly after Naomi was confirmed, Naomi's dad died suddenly. In the almost year since her dad's death, Naomi has not come to worship or been around church much. Yet, as Pat said, "the church still connects with Jenny because I connect with Naomi."¹ Pat, having been Naomi's mentor, knows she has a role in Naomi's life, and part of her role is reaching out keeping Naomi connected to church.

At Zion Lutheran Church, confirmation ministry is not focused on content or a rite, rather it is about drawing people into a web of relationships that nurture faith and witnesses to God's love in the world.

CONTEXT

Loveland, Colorado is set along the Big Thompson River in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. It feels like a big small town. The location makes it "a stop along the way" and its culture makes it a destination. With Starbucks, Subways, and Safeway sprinkled in the midst of local restaurants, services, and specialty shops, Loveland has much to offer residents and visitors. Artists, and a creative spirit, permeate the city, with sculptures in the parks, painted utility boxes by the road, and a variety of studios to visit. Green space is revered – as the thirty-one city parks, twenty-eight natural reserve areas, and seventeen and one half miles of hiking trails attest to. Retail shopping, the medical center, and companies such as Hewlett-Packard, Teledyne, and Group Publishing contribute to its economy. And if these gems are

¹ Pat, interview by Terri Elton, notes, March 2015.

not enough, Loveland residents are less than an hour from Denver and an Avalanche hockey game, fifteen minutes from Fort Collins, a “midsize college town”² twice it’s size,³ and 45 minutes from Estes Park and Rocky Mountain National Park.

As one of several communities scattered along Interstate 25 north of Denver, Loveland is an independent township, experiencing growth.⁴ Attentive to many aspect of community life the people of Loveland have fostered a healthy and positive ethos, where families want to raise their children and there are many opportunities to be in community.⁵

High school students recognized,⁶ and the census confirmed, Loveland is a primarily Caucasian community with a small Latino population,⁷ in line with U.S. age norms (with 15 percent of the population under 18 and 25 percent 65 or older),⁸ and slightly below the average income level (\$31,000) and college education (37 percent) in Colorado.⁹ Loveland has less poverty than the state and national averages¹⁰ and 60 percent of its population is not religiously affiliated.¹¹ It is in this

² Wikipedia – Fort Collins, CO. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Collins,_Colorado accessed March 5, 2015.

³ Fort Collins population is 152,061 and Loveland’s population is 71,334. <http://www.fcgov.com/visitor/fcfacts.php> and <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 5, 2015.

⁴ Loveland experienced 6.7% growth from 2010-2013. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 17, 2015.

⁵ In a 2013 quality of life survey, Loveland residents reported their needs were being met and they were happy with their community. Families felt safe (96%), had opportunities to enjoy the arts (90.5%), and saw sufficient opportunities to be community (87.1%). See ci.loveland.co.us/modules/showdocument.aspx?docementid=18123 accessed March 3, 2015.

⁶ High School focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 2015.

⁷ Loveland is primarily white (84.8%) with a small Hispanic/Latino (11.7%) population and a handful of other ethnic groups (a few Asian, Pacific Islanders, American Indian and African American/Black). <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 17, 2015.

⁸ Age demographics fall along the same lines as the US average, with almost one-fourth (23.9% compared to 23.3% in the US) under 18 and 14.9% (compared to 14.1% in the US) 65 or older. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 17, 2015.

⁹ The average in income level is \$27,878 in Loveland compared to \$31,109 in Colorado (per individual) and \$54,977 in Loveland compared to \$58,433 in Colorado per household. Similarly, college education for Loveland is 32% compared to 37% in Colorado. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 17, 2015.

¹⁰ Poverty rate for Loveland is 10.5% compared to 13.2% in CO and 15.4% in the US. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/08/0846465.html> accessed March 17, 2015.

¹¹ Larimer County surrounding Loveland is not religious, with sixty percent of the population claiming to be unaffiliated. Of the forty percent who so claim a religious affiliation, they are primarily Christian. Evangelical Protestants is the largest (19%) group, followed by Roman Catholics (12%), and Mainline Protestants (6%). Non-Christian religious groups include Buddhism (largest), Bahai, Judaism, and Hindu.

context Zion Lutheran Church seeks to help people find meaningful ways to be in Christian community and live their faith.

CONGREGATION

As one of eleven ELCA¹² congregations within the Loveland/Fort Collins area, Zion does not get their identity from the denomination or organize their ministry over-and-against other congregations. Rather, Zion has cultivated a culture that draws on their tradition, assets, and mission. Cultivating such a culture is ongoing work, as history reminds them. With a past filled with challenges and joys, Zion is currently enjoying a healthy moment, but the current husband and wife pastoral team joined Zion seven years ago in a time when it was not as vibrant. Taking time to listen to the people and the greater community, discovering Zion's strengths, and discerning their core elements of ministry, and wondering about their dreams for the future, Zion has regained its sense of direction and recommitted itself to four key ministries.

Like Loveland, Zion is a dynamic community -

“a small, awesome, friendly church,”

“a learning place to worship God and grow in your faith,”

“[and] a place where grace is experienced.”¹³

Within Loveland's healthy community ethos and religiously unaffiliated culture, Zion Lutheran Church is a vibrant Christian community where people experience grace. Grounded in the soil of meaningful relationships, Zion strives to make faith come alive through ministries of worship, learning, caring, and outreach. Their mission to grow in faith and witness to God's love in the world is clear and visible.

http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/08/rcms2010_08069_county_name_2010.asp accessed March 17th, 2015.

¹² Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

¹³ Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

With just over 600 members (and 230 average worship attendance), Zion resembles Loveland, a big small congregation with a strong web of social support. People within this congregation care about each other, know each other's story, and are open to receive others. Spiritual and communal practices foster conversations and create habits that nurture relationships.¹⁴ Gathering is important for this community and its gathering space lies in the heart of its building. Like the crisp mountain air outside, the climate within Zion is fresh and inviting.

Zion is traditional in many ways. With two worship services, solid music ministries, and many educational opportunities Lutherans visiting on a Sunday morning would feel at home. Worship is in a Sanctuary with pews and stained-glass windows, education in a wing off to the side, and fellowship outside the Sanctuary and kitchen.



But in many ways Zion is not traditional. Pastors do preach and preside, but worship leadership is shared and worshippers are engaged in many ways. Worship is liturgical, focused on Word and sacrament, but the format draws from various sources.¹⁵ Music ministry includes a wide range of ensembles. While visiting I experienced a duet leading Holden Evening Prayer, an adult group singing an anthem, and a band leading contemporary worship. Christian Education is more than Sunday school and for more than children, offering opportunities for all ages on Sunday mornings and throughout the week.¹⁶ The kitchen is busy with people of all ages and genders tending to Sunday morning

¹⁴ Communal practices include: wearing names tags, praying for people's baptismal anniversaries in worship, having intergenerational Sunday School once a month, and guiding conversations around the round tables located in the narthex/gathering area.

¹⁵ Sunday services have two different formats - one following the liturgy of the ELW (Evangelical Lutheran Worship) and one framed by Faith 5 of Faith Inkubators. Share, Read, Talk, Pray, and Bless are the Faith 5. For more see <http://www.faithink.com/inkubators/f5.asp>, accessed August 19, 2015.

¹⁶ Faith formation opportunities include Bible Studies, learning about Lutheran theology, discussing how faith relates to life, and interactive prayer activities in the chapel. And they happen in the church, in homes, and around the community.

hospitality as well as preparing lunch for families of first communion and confirmation ministry participants. And the fellowship area is not a dark church basement; it is the key gathering space at the center of the building and at the intersection of the “fellowship hall,” the “narthex,” and the “education wing.”

The staff and programs provide the framework for Zion as it lives out its mission, but the mission and ministry are not dependent on the staff or programs.¹⁷ Programs anchor Zion’s commitments and are a means for people to grow and witness to God’s love, but ministry is as much about what happens “in-between” as it is about what happens in the planned moments. Staff and programs provide the pattern that organize and facilitate worship, learning, caring and outreach, but overhearing conversations in the gathering space, ministry also takes place outside these times and Zion’s building.

As people sent into the world, the ministries of Zion equip people to talk about faith and to witness to God’s love throughout the week. Ministries are intentional in seeing that all of what is done *in* the church building has an eye toward life *outside* the church building. For example, on the Sunday morning I visited, worship reminded people of ways that faith is part of everyday living – not just something expressed in the Sanctuary. Learning opportunities focused on thinking about faith within relationships, not just knowing the Bible. Children signed (using American Sign Language) their memory verse in worship, integrating what happened in the Sanctuary with what happened in the educational wing. Faith Inkubator’s Faith 5 not only provided the flow of worship, but also gave rhythm to conversations in the hallways, around tables, and in the car on the way home.¹⁸ Resources went out the doors with the kids and adults to help nurture faith in daily life. Some were in their hands, others were practices developed in Zion’s ministries.

Zion also is committed to witnessing to God’s love through serving. Formal ways Zion does this is commissioning communion servers as ministers to the

¹⁷ The staff includes six people: a full-time and part-time pastor, full-time director of faith formation, part-time music minister, office administrator, and nursery worker.

¹⁸ Faith 5 of Faith Inkubators include: Share, Read, Talk, Pray, and Bless. For more see <http://www.faithink.com/inkubators/f5.asp>, accessed August 19, 2015.

homebound, providing tutors and hearing devices for the neighboring elementary school, being involved in campus ministry at the University in Fort Collins, and working with Loveland's local Habitat for Humanity chapter. But just like Zion's programs do not limit people's worship and learning, serving and living one's faith are not limited to its organized caring and outreach programs. Just like a strong wind scatters seeds across the fields, the Spirit accompanies Zion's people as they play soccer, attend dance class, navigate complicated family situations, and make important decisions at work.

Children and youth are everywhere on Sundays. You cannot miss them; their voices are heard, their gifts drawn upon, and their stories known.¹⁹ The weekend I visited a confirmation student read the gospel lesson, two teenagers served communion, and children participated in the prayer station. Their presence, questions, and energy is not only an asset, it is part of what makes Zion's ministry vibrant.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

Learning is one of Zion's core commitments, and confirmation ministry is one way Zion carries out this commitment with youth and families. Students and parents have a choice to participate in confirmation ministry, yet almost all of the 6th, 7th, and 8th graders and their parents commit to their multi-faceted confirmation ministry. With all grades learning together, confirmation ministry is a three-year cycle that integrates interactive learning sessions, seasonal retreats, summer camp, serving in the congregation and community, mentoring, and worship participation. Surrounded by parents, peers, mentors, pastors, staff, and an intergenerational community of faith confirmation students lean into this formative ministry expecting to learn, grow, and contribute. And, as the high school students confirmed, that's exactly what happens.²⁰ Students told me,

¹⁹ One of the youth at Zion has chosen as her confirmation ministry project to write articles for the quarterly newsletter. Her column is called: From My Perspective. In the Jan-March 2015 edition, her column is titled, "Changing the World: One Kids at a Time." She says, "we have the best way to change the world and that is the knowledge of the Bible and God"(p.11). She goes on to talk about what she is learning in Sunday School and how we have opportunities in life to take what we know about faith and share it with others. She challenges them to share it with a child because it has the power to change the world, one person at a time.

²⁰ High School focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 2015.

“I could hardly wait until it was my turn to be in confirmation.”

and

The best part of confirmation is “furthering my faith.”²¹

Connected, yet separate from other faith formation ministries, students know confirmation is unique, anticipate being involved, and find it meaningful. Julie, a confirmation student said, “[It] is like stages for me. Sunday school is where we learn the topic and then confirmation is where we get a deeper understanding and where we get to live it.” Confirmation helps student learn about faith, as it also helps students “become closer to God.”²² Parents told me,

“We come to follow through with our baptismal promises.”

and

“...the best part of confirmation ministry is learning with my daughter.”²³



Students commit to be part of this ministry and parents do as well. Parents commit not only to support their son or daughter in all aspects of the program, but also *to attend classes two Sundays a month with them*. One parent acknowledged that confirmation is a “big commitment - three years, two hours every other Sunday, and three retreats a year,” but also saw the rewards for making the commitment. Participation is “a good way to connect spiritually with your child because at least our family life is so busy [and] this is the one dedicated day that we can share our spiritual journeys together.”²⁴ Another parent connected her participation with her role in faith formation and said, “It is a way to lead by example. If you are expecting them to do it, you yourself should be accountable and

²¹ Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

²² The names of students, parents, and volunteers in this document have been changed. Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

lead by example.” And parents recognized that participation is not just for student, it is a positive opportunity for them as well. “[I]n some ways I realize I didn’t even remember learning some of this stuff,”²⁵ one parent noted. Another parent agreed recalling her confirmation experience and said “it is a great refresher for me. I did [confirmation] one-on-one with our pastor in our small church in a tiny town ... [This is different] and I do like the time commitment overall because it’s well rounded. You don’t just touch on things you get to go a little deeper.”²⁶ And, as in all congregations, “some parents weren’t confirmed...and never learned this”²⁷ so parents see this as a great way for parents and students to learn together.

The multi-faceted approach to confirmation ministry creates a holistic environment; one that mirrors Zion’s overall ministry, as it also cares about the needs and relationships of the students. With the bi-monthly classes as the backbone, the three annual retreats, two weeks of summer camp, and times of service students have the opportunity to learn in different settings, connect with different people, and learn in different ways. Each component is meaningful in its own way, but also fits together into a whole that makes sense. Students told me,

“The retreats are fun, because we get close to each other”

and service is “fun because we do it together

and we learn more about God as we are doing it.”²⁸

“My favorite part is just being with the confirmation group because it strengthens my faith and I get to hear from other kids. I feel like just participating in things like that is when it all comes together and clicks.”²⁹

The congregation and community are of a size that most students know each other before confirmation, yet that does not keep the leadership from being intentional about growing relationships. Julie saw “confirmation as a way to get closer with our brothers and sisters in God. And after these three years we will still be in close

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

touch.”³⁰ This reality was something the high school students affirmed looking back on their confirmation experience and where they are today.³¹ Within each of the learning environments, cultivating relationship is a priority. Leadership sets the tone as they value the questions, ideas, and experiences of each person and by implementing practices that get repeated and embedded in their life together.

While students sense an overall welcome within the congregation, confirmation connects them to the congregation in specific ways. One way is through a sense of belonging. Jenny, a confirmation student, said,

Before confirmation, I was very disconnected from the church. I didn't go to church as much. I feel like confirmation and Sunday School, and just being with these kids, have helped me grow closer to the church and to the kids on so many different levels that it makes me want to come to church every Sunday. And I do get bummed out when I can't come.³²

Connecting students with adult mentors is another way. Mentoring widens the circle of adults in each student's life, as it also makes confirmation ministry visible within the congregation. One council member when asked to mentor a young man was excited to be asked. What transpired was a deep appreciation for this young man and his curiosity about matters of faith and life. The mentor is now completing his second year and hopes to continue in the future.

A third way students connect with the congregation is through a ministry project. As a way of helping students discover their unique gifts and ways of serving, students do a ministry project in an area of their choosing their final year. The project is “launched” with a day long retreat on gifts. One student said, “I think it is awesome that we get to help and I think the adults weren't sure if we should help, because they didn't know. But now I think we have proven ourselves in a way. Stepped up to the plate.”³³ Another student reflected, “I think, like six years ago, if a kid would have read [in worship] I think people would have been real confused. But since I read I think people are more accepting and thinking of it more like an opportunity

³⁰ Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

³¹ High School focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 2015.

³² Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

³³ Ibid.

to learn more.”³⁴ Students reading the lessons or helping with communion, has become an accepted practice within the congregation. A parent recognized the significance student involvement has and said,

I actually think that is one of the smartest moves our church has made in the past five years. Because not only is it empowering our youth to feel like they do have a place, but it also shows older people that these kids are valuable too. I think it is reaffirming on many different levels and from many different perspectives. And I think it tunes the kids in because there is a certain amount of responsibility.³⁵

From a content perspective, Zion is fairly traditional. In sync with many ELCA confirmation ministries, Zion’s confirmation has three main themes: the biblical story, what it means to be Lutheran, and the Small Catechism. Each year the interactive Sunday classes focus on one of the main themes. Themes of worship, prayer, service, giftedness, and other faith traditions are covered in retreats, camp, or service learning. The curricular content is curated and contextualized by the staff weaving together various curriculums, ideas from other churches, and feedback from students.

The architecture of Zion’s confirmation ministry is well crafted. With clear expectations, students and parents are asked to invest time, energy, and money into this ministry. In return, they find themselves in the midst of meaningful experiences where learning is multiplied. The design pulls together six different types of experiences, communicating to students, parents, and the congregation a robust view of faith and faith formation. Each of the learning environment focuses on some aspect of faith formation and draws upon the various gifts of leaders and the community. While each area has strengths, the true strength is the synergy of the whole. From a pedagogical perspective, Zion’s confirmation ministry scores high. Yet the components, like the content of Zion’s confirmation ministry, are more traditional than innovative, more similar than different to other confirmation ministries in the ELCA.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

So what makes confirmation ministry thrive at Zion? One has to dig deeper to find the gem. As I drove away from my visit, I could not help but wonder about the community I had just met. Their stories raced through my head and my heart was full. I entered a stranger and left a friend. There was something about this community. One parent agreed sharing,

I have been in this church my whole life, but after my mom died it was just to hard to be here. So our family took a break. After a while the boys asked why we weren't going to church. After we talked about it, the boys decided we should start coming again, so we did. It's still hard, but it's were we need to be.³⁶

What is it about this community that middle school boys want to be part of it?

The spirit of Zion, and of confirmation ministry, lies in its people. They are the character, the invisible force, that when connected to God's love creates the spark. Worship, learning, caring, and serving are what shape this community, but the social web of relationships is the secret ingredient for helping young people grow in faith in meaningful ways.

“If confirmation ministry disappeared from Zion would it be missed?” I asked. Even suggesting the idea got a collective “Gasp!” One adult said, “It would be an empty space.” Another added, “There would be a gap.” A student noted, “I'd be really sad ... I know how much I have learned from this and I know I've gotten closer to God and my church family.”³⁷ Having heard about confirmation from her older sister she said, “I'd feel like I was missing out on a lot because she [my sister] was telling me about her experience and I would want to have my own experience and have my own interpretation.”³⁸

But the students and parents are not the only ones who would miss it, the congregation would miss it as well. Todd, a confirmation mentor, shared, “I think the kids get a lot out of mentoring, but I definitely see it as a two-way street. I know I have gained a lot from mentoring, and working with the youth in general. I love

³⁶ Conversation with a confirmand's mom, with Terri Elton, notes, March 2015.

³⁷Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

³⁸ Ibid.

the questions they ask and how they think about God.”³⁹ And parents believe the participation and presence of students in the life of the congregation has deepened the congregation’s commitment to confirmation ministry. Parents told me,

“What I like about confirmation is it is not just class, it’s not just Sky Ranch [camp], it’s not just retreats, it’s like all of those put together.”⁴⁰

“Confirmation has had an impact on her daughter’s life. “Now she walks the walk and ... she chooses to come.”⁴¹

While the communal aspect and connection to the church is important, parents rate the “*success*” of *confirmation ministry* at a more personal level, the changed lives of students. In the six years since this new approach has been in place, Zion has found ways to shift confirmation ministry from being an end (or graduation) to being a bridge (or stepping stone) into a life of faith. As confirmation experiences come together lives are changed, faith matters, ministry is meaningful, and students see themselves as part of a vibrant community of faith life-long.⁴²

METAPHOR

Ministry at Zion Lutheran Church is like a garden, a small eco-system within a larger eco-system that needs tending in order to flourish. Conscious of this reality, leadership keeps an eye for the whole garden and understands their role within it. As lead gardeners they have a responsibility for tilling the soil, planting seeds, pulling weeds, and watering as needed. But gardeners cannot make plants grow and these gardeners are aware they are only one garden in a larger eco-system.

³⁹ Anonymous, interview by Terri Elton, notes, March 2015.

⁴⁰ Confirmation students and parents focus group, led by Terri Elton, transcript, March 1, 2015.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Another parent with an eye toward the future recognized how this ministry is a step in helping integrate faith into their life long-term. “As a parent we are raising our children, but they are young adults and in five years they will be moving on to chase their dreams and become an adult and have all that responsibility, so if we don’t allow them to learn and experience some of those things in a church setting or family setting, they will be thrown on their feet in a couple years. So it is good to have them practice and take responsibility.” Being known, having a place in the larger community, using their gifts to serve, and discovering language to talk about their faith are all part of what make student experience that stays with them long after the classes. Ibid.

Loveland is an eco-system made up of government, transportation, school, and environmental systems. Zion’s garden exists in the midst of these systems. The difference between Loveland thriving and surviving rests in how well the community navigates and adapts the many moving pieces within the multiple systems. The same is true for Zion.

Zion knows their immediate context, Loveland, is healthy; their religious context is primarily religiously unaffiliated with a small Mainline Protestant population; they are cognizant of changes taking place within their denomination, the ELCA; and they are appreciative and attentive to the vibrant climate they are currently experiencing. Cultivating and sustaining one’s own garden with an awareness of the multiple systems around is hard, but this is what the leaders at Zion are doing.

Mission drives and shapes Zion’s community, character, and ministry – and confirmation ministry is one of them. Confirmation relies on the vitality of other ministries as it also contributes to Zion’s present and future. In a humble and quiet way, the leadership of Zion Lutheran Church are impacting the lives of young people and transforming Zion by leading with an ecological understanding of church and faith. As students thrive, parents thrive. As parent thrive, students thrive. As young people thrive, senior adults thrive. As faith formation thrives, worship thrives. In organic and intentional ways, Zion is breathing new life into “traditional” Lutheran practices and commitments. Confirmation is one way this is happening.

AUTHOR’S LEARNINGS -----

There are many practical learnings that can be gained from Zion. For example, having parents participate in interactive learning sessions with their students is one idea another congregation could adapt. While these learnings are important, they are not the key take-aways from Zion’s confirmation ministry. Three meta-learnings stand out.

1. Congregational culture matters when discipling youth, or to steal a phrase from the Exemplary Youth Ministry (EYM) Study, “it’s the spirit and culture

of a congregation that leads a congregation to exemplary youth ministry.”⁴³ The interplay between the “spirit” of confirmation ministry and of the congregation is critical. As the EYM study points out, cultivating a culture means attending to assets around four spheres: Congregational life and ministries, congregational leadership, youth ministry, and the family/household.⁴⁴ Zion has discerned its assets, been intentional about growing assets, and focused on areas they want to grow overall.

Therefore what is central to confirmation ministry is what is central to Zion. Zion is a self-differentiated community, not trying to live up to anyone else’s ideals or duplicate another ministry. Confirmation ministry has marinated in the ministry commitments of Zion, with their particular focus on making faith formation meaningful. A strength of confirmation ministry is its culture, and its culture lives in the interactions between students, parents, mentors, congregation, and leadership.

And Zion is aware of their greater context, a primarily religiously unaffiliated population. Therefore their attention to shaping a Christian culture is counter-cultural. Zion’s leadership takes this reality seriously, within the congregation and within confirmation.

Cultivating a congregational culture requires discerning assets, attending to its people, and contextualizing commitments.

2. A multi-faceted view of faith translates into a multi-faceted confirmation ministry design. Zion has a particular understanding of faith that is dynamic, multi-faceted, and integrated into daily living and they are committed to an intentional and thoughtful formation process. (For one understanding of a multi-facet view of faith, see the EYM study’s Seven Characteristics of Vital Faith in Youth.⁴⁵) This view of faith and faith formation informs their robust multi-faceted confirmation ministry design. Their view sets their priority on attending to

⁴³ Rollie Martinson, John Roberto, and Wes Black, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry: Leading Congregations Toward Exemplary Youth Ministry*, (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010).

⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 27.

relationships and influences their decisions around connecting students to the overall life of the congregation.

This view has helped Zion recalibrate the focus of the end of confirmation from being a graduation to being a bridge into the future. The reality is there is no magic pill or quick fix to creating meaning in confirmation ministry. Time, energy, and resources are needed to nurture faith and discover what it means to witness to God's love in the world. And students and families want a meaningful path to follow. Students are interested in talking about God and want the opportunity to discover a language to talk about faith.

3. Belonging, and a sense of community, is cornerstone for a lifelong journey of faith. The relational aspect of Zion's confirmation ministry is more than accidental, it is in fact the cornerstone of their confirmation ministry. Understanding what Diana Butler Bass calls the new reversal of belonging, behaving, believing,⁴⁶ the community of Zion makes faith matter in a religiously unaffiliated culture by creating a particular community. They embody their commitments, more than proclaim their doctrinal beliefs. And they do this by attending to their gathering and scattering pattern with habits and practices that make faith real in everyday circumstances. Zion gets the reversal and loves people into community. At Zion confirmation is not about forming church members, but about setting students on a lifelong path as followers of Jesus with a community to accompany them.

⁴⁶ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2013).