

Preface to On-n-On Growth and Confirmation of the Christian Faith

Complied by Pastor Tim Onnen, Christ Lutheran Church, Montrose, CO

Some history and reflections on confirmation from some leaders in our church:

Rev. Dr. Todd Peperkorn (Ft. Wayne Sem)

In the Early Church (to the fifth century A.D.), “confirmation” did not exist as we understand it today. Confirmation was actually a part of the rite of Baptism.

Rev. Dr. Marvin Bergman (Pastor, Professor, Editor for 25 years to *Issues in Christian Education*):

What is clear [from early church writings] is that the development of a process, the catechumenate, served as entry into the Christian community. Its focus was the transformation of pagan adults. . . In the early part of the third century, the practice of a priest giving one who was baptized an anointing at the font began. The one baptized then was brought to the bishop for the laying on of hands and another anointing [“confirming” the baptism done by the priest]. In the same century, the bishop of Rome insisted that the one who is baptized receive the anointing of oil [only] from a bishop.

Peperkorn:

[With the challenge of coordinating with a bishop’s schedule,] “it became much more common to make baptism and confirmation separate rites. The idea gradually came into place that confirmation was a complement to baptism. Baptism was where sins were forgiven, and confirmation was where the Holy Spirit was given. Later on this rite came to be considered necessary for salvation” and was even said to be the “second sacrament”.

Bergman:

In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther expressed amazement that the laying on of hands was turned into a sacrament. Instead of giving attention to confirmation as a rite, Luther placed emphasis on the instruction of congregations, parents, and children.

Rev. Dr. Kent Burreson (St. Louis Sem):

The reformers (as witnessed by the Lutheran Church orders) engaged this question [of readiness for the Lord’s Supper] not in terms of age, but in terms of individual readiness . . . the reformers clearly express that faith, with regard to the Lord’s Supper, include a cognitive, intellectual component. . . Yet, most of the church orders indicate that individual readiness . . . will be apparent . . . usually around ages seven or eight.

Summarizing Peperkorn:

Under pietism, a shift took place – confirmation came into the forefront, adding a vow and confession of faith. The catechumen was expected to examine himself on whether or not he was truly a Christian, and whether or not he could “discern” the body and blood of the Lord. This resulted in the age for catechumens going up.

Bergman:

[For Lutheran immigrants in the United States] the influence of Pietism was evident in some churches . . .

There was one exception. Those who had lived through the years of German Rationalism rejected many of the assumptions and perspectives of this intellectual movement. C. F. W. Walther, for example, emphasized that the promise made by a confirmand was not the first time that such a promise was made.

While the traditional order has been infant Baptism, confirmation, and the Lord’s Supper, a report issued in 1970 by representatives of the three largest Lutheran bodies in the United States [including the LCMS] emphasized that the right to commune is given through Baptism and that confirmation is not a prerequisite for Holy Communion, an emphasis reflected in the provision of a rite for “First Communion prior to Confirmation” in the *LSB: Agenda*.

Burreson:

“Confirmation cannot be understood solely as a one-time event. Confirmation is first a *process* begun at Baptism and continued throughout life. Confirmation should be seen as an ongoing immersion in the baptismal life, which includes regular reception of the Holy Supper beginning at an earlier age appropriate to each individual child.

Confirmation as a rite should affirm that life, not seek to establish a life of faith in [with?] the Supper at a stage of human life when establishing the rhythm of participating in the Supper may be difficult to accomplish.

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What follows is a model or format for the practice of catechesis (of children/youth) and confirmation of faith. The format has several facets, each of which might be profitable to incorporate into other practice formats, even if one does not use this entire model. This format assumes that the congregation does *not* have a Lutheran day-school. If it does have one, great; then this format might also be integrated with the catechesis also done in the school.

Key Components:

- 1) Encouraging Memory of Scripture and Key Catechism Truths from a Young Age, with Review as the Church Gathers
- 2) Learning, Review, Encouragement at Family Meal Times
- 3) First Communion for the Baptized as soon as They Understand and Desire the Sacrament
- 4) Growth in Catechesis from Elementary Years through High School
- 5) Longer, Comprehensive Monthly Gatherings with Parents and Church Members Involved
- 6) Many Opportunities for Short Professions of the Faith
- 7) Ongoing Confirmation of Faith by the Entire Congregation Annually

Summary: Ongoing Learning, Ongoing Professions of Faith, Ongoing Interaction with the Pastor, and Ongoing Involvement and Encouragement from the Congregation

1) **Encouraging Memory of Scripture and Key Parts of Catechism from a Young Age, with Review as the Church Gathers**

- I believe we should tap into the God-given capacity to memorize best in our earliest years.
- Scripture memory is encouraged through Pastor's Sunday Children's Messages. A Bible verse is chosen each week and is the foundation for the message. These verses are ones used throughout the Small Catechism, laying a foundation with the children for later catechesis. Memorizing is also easiest when children are young.
- The Children's Message includes talking about and explaining the verse. At the end of the message a page with the verse printed on it in a Trace font (on clip boards, along with markers) is given to each child to take back to their seats.
- Children may trace the verse (usually during the sermon – which can also help them listen well at that time).
- After the service, I remain at the front of the church and have the children come forward (or step into the aisle near them) with their verse and I cue the whole congregation to read/recite the verse as the children hold them up. (My church is small; still I also print the verse in the bulletin so that everyone can recite it, whether or not they can see those being held up by the children.)
- Last week's memory verse is reviewed by everyone at our all-ages Sunday School Opening - children alternate in leading the review pointing to the words of the verse with a short pointer as all recite it.

The child leading may state what helped them to memorize that particular verse. One part of the Catechism (altered each month and printed in the bulletin) is also recited. These “presentations” help inspire everyone - all ages - toward memorizing and provide opportunity for all members to encourage and thank the children involved. (In churches that do not hold an all-ages S.S. Opening, multiple children, each with their parent, could visit the various classrooms and, prior to the opening prayer of the class, review the verse with that class, then return to their own classroom. Or, if you have a big scene in your sanctuary, one child could be video-taped explaining briefly what helped them memorize the verse, and then asking everyone to recite it with them. This video could be played right after the new verse-of-the-day was recited by congregation as the children held up their clipboards.)

- The new verse is also reviewed in the children’s Sunday School class with the teacher helping them think of what might aid memorization (e.g. color-coding certain words or phrases, noting repeated words or phrases, writing it in a poetic format, noting building emphasis, using hand motions to act out the verse, using iconic diagrams/symbols for certain words or phrases, numbering the phrases, etc.) Parents can reinforce this as well at home.
- Small Memory-Verses Slips are provided for use with meal-prayer flip charts. (See sample on chart.)

2) Learning, Review, Encouragement at Family Meal Times - Meal-Prayer flip charts

- I provide these to families to encourage meal prayers, review of memory verses, and learning parts of the Catechism.
- Family members take turns choosing the prayer for each meal.
- Included in the flip chart are The Apostles Creed, Ten Commandments, and The Lord’s Prayer. These may also be taught or reviewed easily at meals.
- The charts also include “Family-Sharing Starters” with the suggestion that you alternate which family member picks one for each day. These can be used to encourage good conversation and heartfelt sharing during mealtimes.

(The info in these prayer charts could be placed in a small “Family Meal-Times” booklet, used in the same way.)

3) First (and ongoing) Communion

- At a time agreed upon between pastor, parents and elders of the congregation (perhaps 3rd or 4th grade for children who’ve grown up in the church, perhaps a little later for families if they are brand new to the church), children, along with their parents, will go through a children’s level “Summary of the Faith” education that includes the basics of sin, God’s grace in Jesus Christ, and the meaning of the Sacraments. Upon demonstration of a sufficient understanding and examination as outlined in the LSB Pastoral Care Companion (page 664f), they will briefly profess their faith before the congregation using the rite “First Communion Prior To Confirmation” in the LSB Agenda and begin receiving the Lord’s Supper.

- A “Faith Verse” or “Life Verse” could also be given to the child. (I prefer changing the name from “confirmation verse”.)

4 & 5) On-n-On Growth in the Faith through Monthly Gatherings

- If children began coming forward for the Sunday Children’s Message beginning at age 2 or 3 and continued until age 9 (about 4th grade), they will have been tracing and memorizing verses for six or seven years prior to youth catechesis instruction. And these verses continue to be reviewed by them and all ages of the congregation on an ongoing basis throughout the years. I use the 3-year lectionary, so with 52 Sundays a year, over three years, that is 156 verses. Then, what I do is repeat those same 156 verses again over the next three years to reinforce their memory - though adding other new verses could also be done. With that Scripture-memory foundation for the children . . .
- At 4th grade all children would begin a once-a-month "Alive" discipleship ministry where ongoing catechesis takes place through high school. For most congregations, I envision three “Alive” groups (e.g. grades 4-6, 7-9, 10-12) each meeting a different week of the month. (In smaller congregations grades might be combined differently, in order to have enough students to form a “group”.) The once-a-month format would be conducive of a longer meeting time (perhaps 2 ½ to 3 hours) that allows for more creative teaching methods and other activities. These things might make students more eager to attend and perhaps make it easier for parents to prioritize and also attend.
- So, parents/mentors would be highly encouraged to attend each gathering and will themselves benefit from review of the Catechism teaching and fellowship. (Note: It may be good to reduce parental involvement at the gatherings of the 10-12 year olds, as they need to spread their wings and grow in independence and leadership themselves during those years. In fact, some older youth could be “helper/mentors” at the younger gatherings, which can be quite beneficial for all involved.) One way to encourage parent/mentor attendance is to have them help plan and assist with different activities of the gathering. The gathering would be focused around teaching one part of the catechism which could be integrated into some of the other activities, which could include simple fun games, memory review, fellowship, brief worship, prayer time, perhaps a meal that families take turns being in charge of, and may at times include related “speakers” or “outings” for which the adults serve as escorts; on occasion maybe even as a presenter. These speakers and outings involve people in their vocations or hobbies – perhaps even the students’ own parents - as assistants in the teaching-lessons. Having adults share in this way can have a good impact on them (maybe even the not-too-involved-yet parents). It can help them feel that they are contributing to the education ministry and so also can increase their support and enthusiasm for it.
- Along with outing / speaker ideas, there are also, online and in books, many great catechesis teaching ideas, and resources that can enhance these instructional gatherings. For all grades I encourage that “homework” between monthly gatherings greatly include parents and grandparents (or other adult mentors) discussing it together and also sharing their own faith-experiences with their children. I envision written “homework” decreasing with the 7-9 grade group and being very simple for the 10-12 grade group, perhaps just faith-life discussions with parents, mentors, or others. Lastly, regarding the monthly format, I believe it would also be more conducive to having our youth invite their unchurched friends and those friends attending and embracing the fellowship, learning and faith-professing life of our young people.

- Because families move, and some individuals may come into the “Alive” ministry later than 4th grade, I’d suggest covering the full catechism three times, during grades 4-6, grades 7-9, and grades 10-12; in grades 4-6 keying on Bible stories that relate to the each lesson and memory work, in grades 7-9 learning and applying the doctrines more deeply, and in the latter grades relating the Catechism teaching to other good materials on issues they face along with teaching defense of the faith. By covering the Catechism three times, even if someone is involved less than nine years, they will still likely cover all the teachings. In the earlier years more concrete teaching and illustrations may be used - for example: relating baptism in the name of our Triune God to His adoption of us into His family. Later grades might grasp better the abstract concept of dying with and rising with Christ. Retreats (maybe six, each focusing on one chief part) would also be held annually for the 7-12 year-olds to provide deeper learning of the truths as well as give focused fun and fellowship activities.
- This approach to “catechesis instruction” provides adaptation of the material to different age groups and provides more continuity of subject over a wider time period, in both the elementary and secondary learning years. It also provides greater sequencing of learning – first, memory of Scripture and Catechism chief parts, then learning progressively what those Scripture and chief parts mean, then learning the doctrines taught by the correlation of the Scriptures and chief parts in ever deepening ways, and finally defending the faith (both in terms of Christian and Lutheran) during their later high school years. And because the catechetical instruction is spread over many years, it will be more integrated with a wider range of life experiences and the learning of the student during those several years – for as children grow through these years, their faith questions will change and still they will be applying catechetical and Biblical truth all along the way.

6) On-n-On Profession of the Faith

- Many opportunities for the public profession of God's truth will be provided for all children/youth in the “Alive” groups. In a way the youngest children are already doing this by helping review the memory verses and Catechism in Sunday School openings. Once a child begins the “Alive” discipleship ministry, and for several years, even into high school, many opportunities to profess their faith briefly will be made available, primarily on Sundays. What we present to others, we remember better ourselves. The depth and length of their profession will certainly reflect their age; but even the youngest children can profess something they've learned.
- These professions could be during an All-ages Sunday School Opening or prior to or after the worship service (my preference), possibly even immediately prior to a particular part of the service; (e.g. relating God's truth to what we are about to do in the service, for example, prior to: 1) confession and absolution (Ten Commandments or Confession truths), 2) prior to saying the creed (Apostles Creed truths), 3) prior to the time of prayer (Lord's Prayer truths), 4) prior to a baptism (Baptism truths), or 5) prior to the communion liturgy (Sacrament of the Altar truths). Which setting would be most appropriate for any given child is based on their personality, age, etc.

- After each lesson, between gatherings, “homework” might include the student with the help of their parent/mentor summarizing: “What is God teaching here, and why is that good for me?” Their answer could be the basis of their profession on that part of the catechism. Prior to giving the profession, the pastor would meet with the individual and parents/mentor to help them refine what they would say. I’d recommend that the child write out or type out their profession and have this with them, even if they have memorized part of it. Here’s an example of a profession a 4th grade child might make prior to the time of prayer during a Sunday service, (inconspicuously coming up with his parent/mentor to the lectern during the offering and beginning when cued by the Pastor). This example is based on the Introduction to the Lord’s Prayer:

“Jesus called God His Father. He wants us to think of God as our good Father also. In the prayer He taught His followers, Jesus began by saying ‘Our Father who art in heaven’. What do those words mean? With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father. I am so glad that God is a Father to me.”

A little older youth, say an 8th graders, might make a profession that relates catechetical truths to issues of their age group. For example, based on the first article of the Creed they could profess that our bodies and faculties, as God has given them to us, are a gift from Him that we should thank Him for and be content with.

Youth in the oldest group might make professions that include finer points of the teachings and defend the faith. For example, based on power of Baptism they might profess that Baptism is God’s work, not our work, and that is important for our comfort and assurance.

- In the nine years from fourth grade through high school, there are many Sundays services (some 468). If you have two services per weekend, it’s 936; three services, it’s 1,404. Even in a large church with many children grades 4-12, there would likely only be one, maybe two, professions on any given Sunday. The many opportunities would allow children and youth to make multiple professions, increasing in depth of truth shared as they get older. Congregations would decide how many professions to encourage - perhaps 6, one for each part of the Catechism; or 9, one each year; or maybe more; whatever number they think best. Some children may be eager to make many professions, some less eager. We want to encourage all, yet consider each student individually with a shepherding attitude. A “get-to” atmosphere is very important.

[Now, a side note to speak logically: Though the number encouraged has complete flexibility, I’ll give some numbers about two board possibilities: 1) all individual parts encouraged to be professed, and 2) the six chief parts encouraged to be professed. For all (# 1), the various parts of the catechism could be divided into 29 parts / 29 professions: 3-creed, 10-commandments, 8-Lord’s Prayer, 3-baptism, 2-Confession, and 3-Lord’s Supper --- for a total of 29. And if it was desired that a child seek to make a profession of each part over the nine year period (just a tad more than 3 per year) – with 468 Sundays, and just one profession per Sunday, that would allow 16 children/youth to do this; (468 divided by 29 = 16). If two persons made professions per Sunday, then 32 children/youth could profess each part. Larger churches that have multiple services each week have increased worship opportunities where those professions of faith could occur. If some of the parts of

the catechism were combined a bit, you could have even greater numbers of children/youth professing each part. And in light of that, it's easy to see that for encouraging six professions (# 2), one on each of the 6 chief parts, or nine (one each year), there is ample opportunity over the nine years for even a large number of students to do so. YET THE POINT IS NOT that this on-n-on profession model would only be beneficial if *every* child made a profession of 6 or 9 or 29 parts of the catechism. I'm showing these numbers simply to show that many children/youth can be involved, and that there is great flexibility as to how things might be done. Even the 29 professions are feasible. With a child doing just two or three professions per year, that's still 18 or 27, over the nine-year time period. In many churches, traditional practice has been having each student make one profession at the end of their catechetical instruction. This model encourages them, beginning at a young eager age, to make short professions through these years as they are learning the teachings. And they do this simply in relation to the regular weekly joyful proclamation of the Gospel as the congregation gathers.]

- The congregation members would have the opportunity to encourage individual children/youth all through these years in the professions they make. The young people would also be encouraging each other and would be confirming their faith all along the way, affirming the profession the whole congregation makes as we worship each and every Sunday. Perhaps it would be good to be known in the community as "the church where the children regularly profess the Bible-teaching of the Church." The on-n-on model's simple benefit is ongoing learning, ongoing profession, ongoing interaction with the Pastor, and ongoing involvement and encouragement from the congregation.

7) On-n-On Confirmation of Faith

- A "confirmation service" for all ages and all members of the congregation using the confirmation rite (in the place of the creed) will be held once a year. (Perhaps the saying of the Ten Commandments could be incorporated into each worship service the month prior to the confirmation service.) We will all affirm each year that we believe and are committed to this faith even unto death. There is great blessing in doing this, as all members of the congregation – young and old – grow in faith but also face new challenges year to year. It may be a particular blessing and encouragement for children, from little on, to hear their parents making this profession year after year. Each year at the "confirmation service" those who are seniors in high school will be acknowledged and a special prayer said especially for them as they will be moving out of the formal youth catechesis instruction at the end of the school year and moving into new challenges, possibly away from home.
- Confirming our faith should not be thought of as a one-time action. Just as we say that it is a different thing to ask, "Have I been baptized?" or "Am I living in my baptism?" - so it is also a different thing to ask, "Have I been confirmed?" or "Am I regularly confirming my faith"? This "confirmation service" and the sermon for the day could be based around the Creeds. At one point in the service, all the baptized members could even file to the front of the nave to receive from Pastor a laying-on-of-hands blessing and from an elder an "anointing" with fragrant oil (maybe in cross-shape) on their foreheads - a symbol of the Holy Spirit's presence in them. (We do ashes to remind ourselves of our sinfulness; this would remind ourselves of our new life in Christ and His presence with us.) I believe Pentecost would be a wonderful time for this service.

- Someone might argue that individuals need to make a one-time confirmation of faith in a small-group (class) format so that they take it to heart more seriously than if done annually with the whole congregation. Yet, consider the potential benefits of an individual confirming their faith at each level of their growth in faith. In addition, I believe that the confirmation rite with the congregation could be led in such a way that individuals do take to heart their personal answers to the questions - and do so each year with new seriousness as they mature. One possibility for added personalness would be having the Pastor instruct that for some questions he will say "Name?" ahead of the question and then pause briefly – at which point each person is to say their firstname quietly to themselves – after which the Pastor will follow with the question. In other words -- Pastor: "Name?" Everyone: "first name" Pastor: "Do you this day in the presence of God and of this congregation acknowledge the gifts that God gave you in your baptism?"

It also seems that, with our current traditional practice, youth involvement after confirmation-day depends more on how active or inactive the individual's family is in worship and church life, than as to how big or small a person's confirmation group was. In addition, when making this confession is the last hoop to jump through to get beyond the rigorous class they've been in, then it is hard to judge how serious individuals may be about their pledge to God. It is certainly sad when in some cases the young person is never seen again. Because a family's faithfulness to worship and church life seems to be a strong indicator of the faithfulness of post-confirmation youth, this speaks to the ongoing power of the Word of God as the real strength behind any of our pledges. And so, I believe that an annual confirmation spoken by the whole congregation, attached to the regular, ongoing proclamation and worship life of the church might give our youth – and all our members – greater strength in their pledge to remain faithful.

The redeemed and baptized people of God, treasuring Scripture and the teachings of Scripture as summarized in the Small Catechism, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, professing this faith in Him, and encouraging each other to remain faithful to Him; this is who God has made us to be. To Him be the Glory!

Praying that any helpful thoughts expressed above might be refined or used by God as He sees fit for the sake of Christ's Church,

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