



## Wondering about Confirmation A 10- 15 Minute Discussion

This session has been adapted from the 2016 Practice Discipleship Curriculum on *Wonder*. The full session can be downloaded at [www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship](http://www.nemnsynod.org/Discipleship) or [www.practicediscipleship.org](http://www.practicediscipleship.org)

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

Confirmation is a ministry with a long history, yet what is the place of confirmation today? This brief “Wondering about Confirmation” discussion challenges us to think about ways confirmation can continue to be an adaptive and vital congregation ministry in the 21st century.

### **BIBLICAL FOCUS**

Matthew 28:16-22

### **MATERIALS NEEDED**

notecards and pens, handout (attached)

### **DISCUSSION PLAN**

#### **Part 1 - Opening exercise: (5 minutes)**

##### **Our Insights and Experience with Confirmation**

Today’s reality is people have different understandings and experiences with confirmation. This diversity is a gift to explore, so let’s get started by sharing some of our ideas. Each person has a notecard. (There is no need to put your name on the card, as you will be turning it in later.) On the notecard, write the following:

1. Write a definition of confirmation (1-2 sentences).
2. Name two practices important to confirmation and share why.
3. Share one personal experience you have had with confirmation (as a student or leader).

When you are finished find one person you do not know and share your responses. Pairs have 5 minutes to share. When you are done, turn the notecards in to the leader.

#### **Part 2 – Learning and Wondering: (5 minutes)**

##### **A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:**

*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and*

*teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ -Matthew 28:16-22*

So often adults’ conversation about confirmation feels like the exchanging of “war stories” about the memorization and recitation of Luther’s Small Catechism, trips or retreats gone awry, and the survival of terrifying interviews with pastors or church councils. Too often confirmation is understood by confirmation students, their families, and congregations as a kind-of graduation in (and from) church. Amid dropping church attendance, declining religious affiliation, and ever-increasing pressure on youth today, we have to wonder, what is the role of confirmation today?

In *Wondering about Confirmation*, Terri Martinson Elton writes,

“Too many confirmation ministries are focused on creating Lutherans. What if we expanded our imagination about confirmation? What if the vision of confirmation was to help people discover a Christian way of life rooted in our baptismal identity?... What is the role of the congregation in affirming youth in Christian faithfulness with an emphasis on lifelong learning and discipleship?”

The ELCA’s definition of confirmation states that “Confirmation ministry is a pastoral and educational ministry of the church that helps the baptized through Word and Sacrament to identify more deeply with the Christian community and participate more fully in its mission.”

From a theological perspective confirmation is not itself a sacrament, but it grows out of our understanding of baptism where God names and claims us as children of God, out of our understanding of a church where God is revealed to us through the means of grace, and out of our understanding of God’s mission in the world.

Historically confirmation is a rich and varied tradition. It has never been *one* thing, but instead has adapted to the needs of the church and context over time. Though this can make confirmation ministry confusing, it is also a gift that grants congregations great freedom.

This freedom is granted to congregations today, too... freedom to rethink the way we understand and lead confirmation. Today the Christian church finds itself in a different place. No longer a central voice within the culture, the Christian church is having to find new ways of being a community and forming faith.

But rather than let these changes and challenges halt our faith formation practices, may they serve as a catalyst for wondering about and rethinking our confirmation ministries. After all, “The Christian life is not about knowledge, rituals, or church membership; it is about loving God and loving our neighbor. Hence, the point of confirmation ministry is living a life of faith based on loving God and loving our neighbor.”

### Part 3 - Some Areas to Wonder about Confirmation: (5 minutes)

Divide into 4 groups. Invite each group to focus one of the following four areas to wonder about regarding confirmation ministry. Circle some of the questions and ideas that may be key to your rethinking plans. Choose one, most intriguing to your ministry context, and explore it in light of rethinking confirmation as a vibrant ministry for your congregation's future.

1. **confirmation as *beginning*, rather than completion** – bridge into Christian way of life (based on baptismal theology, the practice of the catechumen, and the vision of lifelong discipleship and learning)
  - a. *Questions to discuss:*
    - i. What comes to mind with this view?
    - ii. How would this view be different than what your congregation does now?
    - iii. How would this view tie to commitments your congregation has for faith formation?
    - iv. What would be the biggest obstacle in your congregation if you made this shift?
  - b. *Ideas:*
    - i. The unit on discovering your spiritual gifts and exploring ways to use those gifts in ministry.
    - ii. Commissioning confirmands into a ministry as part of the confirmation service.
    - iii. Pair students with mentors that bridge the end of confirmation with the next stage of faith and learning,
    - iv. Have a ministry that welcomes confirmands *into* a small group ministry helping people discover what it means to live Christian in their daily life.
    - v. Others????
  
2. **confirmation as a *ministry of the congregation (or connecting ministry)*, rather than an isolated ministry** – (based on the idea that this is the church's shared calling and part of a life of faith is participating in the church's mission, imaging confirmation not as church membership but as ongoing engagement with the church community)
  - a. *Questions to discuss:*
    - i. How are the goals of participating in the church's mission and engagement in the church community similar or different he goals your congregation current has for confirmation?
    - ii. What would leadership of confirmation with this viewpoint entail? Who might be included on the leadership team?
    - iii. If connecting is a priority of confirmation with this view, what assets exist in your congregation that might be natural places to connect to confirmation? How would connecting them contribute to the overall learning within confirmation?

- iv. How open is your congregation to seeing themselves as part of confirmation ministry? How learning might need to take place to make this view of confirmation work within your congregation?

*b. Ideas:*

- i. Have confirmands talk about how ministry takes place within your congregation, have confirmands apprentice in areas they are interested in, and then talk about what you learned as a group.
- ii. Worship is a central part of congregational life. Create meaningful ways for confirmands to participate and lead worship.
- iii. Congregations are always facing challenges. Present one of your congregation's current challenges to the confirmands and have them wrestle with it and lead the congregation in an experiment of facing that challenge.
- iv. Some congregations have church council members interview confirmands before they are confirmed. They have a series of questions (given to both the council members and the confirmands) that guide their conversations. Imagine such a practice in your congregation where the conversation is an opportunity for congregational leadership to learn about the church from the viewpoint of a confirmand and for the confirmand to learn about the church from the viewpoint of a church council member.
- v. Others?

3. **confirmation as *catalyst for lifelong faith formation, rather than the whole encyclopedia*** – (based on the commitment that faith formation is ongoing, this shifts confirmation from trying to “teach it all” to inviting people into a lifelong journey of faith)

*a. Questions to discuss:*

- i. How would confirmation be different in your congregation if it started with confirmands questions rather than a set of concepts that had to be covered?
- ii. The ways people learn is shifting in this information age. What would it take to create a curious learning community in your congregations? What assets does your congregation have to help with this? What obstacles are there to such an approach in your congregation?
- iii. If confirmation is one moment of faith formation, what is most critical in this one moment and why? What are other moments of faith formation that are important in your congregation? What are moments you could lift up or enhance as opportunities for enhancing faith formation?
- iv. Content is important in faith formation and confirmation ministry. How might learning content be framed within this view of confirmation?

*b. Ideas:*

- i. Model that learning about faith is lifelong by having people of various ages lead the learning throughout confirmation.

- ii. Have confirmands create their own resource guide (electronic or paper, personal or communal) for helping them address real questions of faith they have. (I.e. where to go to figure out the difference between various denominations, guides for understanding the Bible, resources for prayer...etc.) Perhaps even make this resource available to the whole congregation.
  - iii. Have confirmands “teach” other groups on areas they are studying. This could be young kids, Senior adults, and/or cross-generational groups.
  - iv. Video record people in the congregation about the role faith has had in their lives. Create a library of videos over the years and have confirmands watch them periodically. (They can also be the ones making the recordings.)
  - v. Others?
4. **confirmation as communal endeavor, rather than individual journey** – (based on the theological commitment that our Christian identity is a communal identity, being a person of faith is not just a personal one, but one lived in relation to other Christians and in the world. What would confirmation be in light of a call to the neighbor, both within Christian community and in the world, look like?)
- a. *Questions to discuss:*
    - i. How does your congregation balance the personal and communal aspects of confirmation? What would strengthening the communal aspect entail? What would strengthening the personal aspect, recognizing the communal aspect, entail?
    - ii. How are the issues of the world, and/or your immediate context, impacting confirmation? How might confirmation ministry provide a way of thinking about our Christian calling to serve our neighbor?
    - iii. How does confirmation in your congregation help confirmands become a community embodying our Christian commitments? What are practices important to making that commitment a reality?
    - iv. Is confirmation ministry open and inviting to “the other” or people not like each other? How might confirmation help confirmation discover what it is like being in relationship with people different than themselves?
  - b. *Ideas:*
    - i. Engage in experiential learning by moving learning out of the church building and into the world. Go to the police station and talk with police officers and then talk about law and gospel or the 10 commandments. Visit a funeral home and talk about life and death. Invite teachers from a neighboring school to talk about the issues important to their school.
    - ii. As part of a regular prayer practice, read through the newspaper (or better yet have students bring concerns they encounter throughout the week) and pray for concerns in the world.

- iii. Connect confirmands with someone in the congregation and commit to pray for each other once a week. Periodically reflect on how that practice has impacted their relationship.
- iv. Whenever someone in the congregation has a death, have the confirmands write a note and send it to the family.
- v. others?

#### **Part 4 - Closing Prayer:**

As we gather in community around the Word and sacrament and as we are scattered in the world, let us pray:

*God of grace, we thank you for the rich theology and varied history of our confirmation traditions. Grant us wisdom and guidance as we wonder about confirmation, rethink and refocus our faith formation practices on loving and following you, and seek ways the church may help people discover a Christian way of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*



*This curriculum was developed for the Practice Discipleship Initiative and modified by the Northeastern MN Synod Practice Discipleship team. Practice Discipleship is a ministry of the ELCA Youth Ministry Network in close partnership with the ELCA and its synods. It is funded by the Congregational and Synodical Mission Unit of the ELCA as an extension of the ministry of the ELCA Youth Gathering. Permission is given to use these resources in your local context, so long as no organization or individual profits from the use of these materials. For more information please visit [www.practicediscipleship.org](http://www.practicediscipleship.org).*

### Some Areas to Wonder about Confirmation

*In small groups, focus one of the following four areas to wonder about regarding confirmation ministry. Circle some of the questions and ideas that may be key to your rethinking plans. Choose one, most intriguing to your ministry context, and explore it in light of rethinking confirmation as a vibrant ministry for your congregation's future.*

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