

The Minister of Confirmation

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1. Introduction

In the German Evangelical Churches, confirmation and confirmation classes¹ are an important part of the Church's ministry today.² Each year about the same number of people are confirmed as were baptised 14 years ago. But these are not completely the same people who were baptised at that time. There is rather a certain interchange taking place. While some of the baptised children do not participate in the confirmation classes, others join through migration, conversion or baptism in childhood or youth. It is remarkable in this context that there is a growing number of young people who do not come for their baptism until they are faced with the opportunity for confirmation.

The pastors and their teams invest much time and energy in the ministry to the young people who are to be confirmed. We know from empirical surveys that pastors are highly motivated to engage in ministry to the young people. In Western Germany, there is no other church ministry at the moment that reaches and appeals to the baptised as much as *confirmation* does. The situation in Eastern Germany is different because of the historic development of the Evangelical Churches to a minority status, therefore the structures and context of a People's Church (Volkskirche) no longer exist.

If one asks German Protestants why they are church members, then one learns that being baptised (93 %), confirmed (87 %) and a member of an Evangelical Church (74 %) are an integral part of being an evangelical Christian – (Kirche - Horizont und Lebensrahmen 2003, p. 18). This assessment corresponds to the fact that it is still the custom in the Western German Volkskirche that young people come forward for confirmation. Confirmation is very much the trademark of an evangelical Christian.

¹ I will not distinguish between the terms confirmation classes and ministry to confirmands, but refer to the whole field of work with each term. When I am discussing the matters of the classes, that means teaching in the narrow sense, this will be recognized by the context.

² At the end of this article I will list some important publications on the debate about confirmation and confirmation classes. References made in the text refer to this bibliography.

The following incident taken from every day life at school may illustrate this point. A teacher who is a friend of mine asked her students on October 31st, what the Reformation Day was all about. One student put his hand up immediately and said – apparently confusing reformation and confirmation – "Well, through baptism we become Catholic, but through confirmation we are made Protestant."

In view of the situation described above the question arises what exactly happens on the road to confirmation in the classes, in the activities around the services, the projects and in the confirmation service itself? What does the Church gain through confirmation? Which chances are opened up?

In retrospect, the eventful development of the theory and practice of the ministry to confirmands in the last fifty years may be characterised by some key words: In the fifties, there was an orientation on the catechism, in the sixties an orientation on the Bible. In the seventies, the young people were discovered as a subject matter (orientation on problems), and in the eighties, the church came into focus as a place of learning (parish education). Today, we find that the ministry to confirmands integrates and deals responsibly with the fields of theology, liturgy, pedagogy and education in its practice. I would like to remind us at this point that Ernst Lange made a major contribution to the renewal and distinction of this ministry, when in 1975 he made those working in Practical Theology and Religious Education take note of the fact that education is a part of the Church's function and task, and that the concept of the cycle of life presents a challenge to our religious practice of the utmost urgency. Evangelical Christianity emphasizes a close correlation between faith and education, faith and reflection.

We thereby recognize and implement a central *driving force of the Reformation* in today's conditions. The main point of the conception of Luther's catechism is its focus on the development of the believers' maturity and ability to speak about their faith, which is the correlation between their spirituality and their education. Rather than putting forward a certain canon of knowledge that was to be learnt by heart, the Reformer suggested a way of dialogical learning in the Christian faith. The believing individual was to be equipped and enabled to give account for their Christian faith and its contents, intentions, outlines and consequences.

The catechism emphasizes understanding ("What is this?") and does not seek to substitute, but to facilitate the believer's own expressions. Luther's catechisms are a compilation of essential elements of the Christian faith with an orientation on the basic questions of the Christian life, and seek to enable the individual Christian to form an independent opinion in questions of the faith. In this sense, it is legitimate to speak of maturity in faith matters in the context of the confirmation. The questions evolving around the understand-

ing of the confirmation will be treated in a different presentation; therefore I will only mention them briefly towards the end of this presentation. I can now focus on the tasks and roles the pastor is confronted with in the ministry to confirmands in general.

2. The Pastor and the diverse Expectations

In the field of confirmation and ministry to confirmands, the pastor is set at the intersection of very diverse expectations.

First of all, there are the *young people*. They have very different, but altogether also very diverse motivations and expectations towards the rite of confirmation and the confirmation classes:

- Some of them want to be confirmed without having to invest too much time and energy. They want the confirmation and put up with the confirmation classes. They want a beautiful, meaningful celebration of their confirmation, in which they themselves are the centre of attention.
- Others expect to receive reliable theological teaching.
- Some focus on a personal profession and testimony of their faith.
- Others seek guidance in the problems of their lives and an orientation about the meaning of their lives. They focus on the question of their own identity.
- Others expect a discussion of topical questions in society. They are moved in particular by the question of the norms of ethical action and the question of the criteria that enable us to live together in justice, freedom and peace.

The *parents* have particular expectations towards and a certain picture of the confirmation classes as well. There are parents

- who expect their child to receive good teaching on morals. "I want my child to become a decent human being."
- who are not affiliated with a church, but wish their child to be informed about Christianity so that he/she can make its own decision in questions of religion.
- who are open de-churched members of the traditional church, but who for reasons of custom and tradition want their child to participate in the confirmation classes and the confirmation and who support their child in this way.

- who have a high religious motivation themselves, and expect their child to be clearly led to faith.

Furthermore, there are the hopes and expectations of the *parish church and the parish church council (PCC)*.

- The PCC expects to win young members for the church. They hope for active membership.
- Members of the PCC often have high expectations towards the curriculum of the confirmation classes, as they remember their own time as confirmands when they had to memorize the catechism and quite a number of hymns and Bible verses.
- The church members who are involved in the ministry to confirmands in full-time or voluntary service need the theological expert and the moderator in the staff team.

The expectations of the *church at large and of the synods* are the following ones:

- The implementation of the Church's fundamental commission to "communicate the gospel" is – rightfully - regarded as central. This has to be the central theme of all the activities in the ministry to confirmands.
- Reference to the Bible as Holy Scripture and reflection on the Church's confession of the faith (question: Where are the boundaries of pluralism?) are emphasized.
- The expectations of the church towards the confirmation classes and the confirmation have been written down in a codified form mainly in the teaching curriculum for the classes (targets) and in the order of service for the confirmation (question of the profession of the faith and questions to the confirmands).
- It is necessary to realize the task of leading the confirmands to the Christian way of life (service, devotions, meditation, prayer, Bible reading and acting in the spirit of the ten commandments).

Conclusion: *The pastor is faced with an enormous challenge:*

- as a personal counsellor in a particular phase in a young person's life and as a representative of the Church and its commission to "communicate the gospel";
- as a teacher who provides theological and ethical education and as the confirming pastor, who provides spiritual support and performs the liturgical act of confirmation;

- as the person to contact for the parents and as a moderator among the staff team.

3. Objectives and Ways of Learning in Confirmation Ministry

In accordance with the decisions taken in the time of the reformation, the German churches are characterised by a distinct catechetical - pedagogical motif even today. There is certainly a widespread agreement to be found in the German churches currently in that ministry to confirmands is to be seen and developed in a close connection with the Church's commission to education. The manifold tasks have been summed up in the *central objective* that Weert Flemmig put down at the time of the first reform efforts in the seventies, and that has met with widespread acclamation. It says "The confirmands are to experience and learn what it means to live as a Christian in our times." A special magazine called "KU-Praxis" was founded in 1973 and has been the organ for questions of theory and practice evolving around the confirmation ministry and its reform ever since, recognized in all the German protestant churches.

In "Konfirmandenarbeit und Konfirmation. Eine Orientierungshilfe" (Confirmation ministry and the rite of confirmation. An aid to orientation, 2003), the Evangelical Church in Berlin-Brandenburg said,

The ministry to confirmands is one of the essential fields of action of the Evangelical Church. As a part of its evangelistic action, the Church supports (begleiten) young people in a phase of their lives that is characterized by questions about meaning and orientation, and seeks communication with them in questions of faith and life.

The Evangelical Church in Württemberg stressed the following four objectives in its "Rahmenordnung für Konfirmandenarbeit" (Guidelines for ministry to confirmands; 2001):

- "Children and youth learn about and understand essential issues in the Biblical message, and learn how to relate them to their lives;
- Children and youth are supported in their way of living the Christian faith and encouraged to find their own ways of expressing their faith;
- Children and youth learn and experience that they are welcome and appreciated as church members;
- Children and youth develop their own point of view and learn to accept responsibility and practice it in their life (Lebenswelt)."

These objectives reveal an understanding of learning that has clearly changed since the days of the classical catechism concept of confirmation teaching. In the wording of the objectives we find the word "support" (*begleiten*³). Not training and education, but support is the central perspective. This is clearly the expression of a paradigm shift.

In the churches of the former German Democratic Republic, the great variety of the learning processes was put down in words at a very early stage and the ministry to confirmands was set under the key word of support. In a presentation on the parish church's action in confirmation for young people at the age for confirmation (12-15 years) for a conference of the East German church boards in March 1975, it says with regard to the *forms of learning*:

If the young people's encounter with the Church is to be adequate and appropriate for their situation, then the following six basic categories of experience and teaching will have to be implemented in a balanced way in the confirmation classes:

- Living together in companionship and partnership (growing close in a group) e.g. through retreats, outings, the organization of parties and celebrations, working together, devotions;
- Participation in church life and encounters with adult Christians, e.g. through active involvement in services, interviews with church members; guest speakers; the cooperation with parents and other volunteers;
- Exemplary introduction to the discerning (critical) way of reading the Bible and understanding the creeds, symbols and service forms *through* teaching, through preparing and leading through services together etc.;
- Orientation about the genesis, the form, tasks and functions of the Church, about the way the denominations and religions work alongside and with one another, *through* the evaluation of observations and experiences made during scouting outings as part of the lessons; encounters with individual groups of different denominations; the keeping of a confirmands' book etc.;
- Ascertaining the reality of today's world with the aim of enabling the young people to cope with this reality from the perspective of faith

³ The term "begleiten" is difficult to translate. Instead of "accompany" we prefer "support" - in the understanding that this term reveals, that youth in their search for identity und their striving for a basic life concept need persons that go along with them on their way of life and deal with them in forms of interaction that are shaped in a spirit of partnership and openness in regards of the faith-communication.

- through* subject and problem oriented teaching, taking up and dealing with experiences, documents and testimonies;
- Engagement in active Christian service to the church and to society *through* internships for confirmands; diaconical projects (quoting Schwerin 1989, p. 130f.).

This list reveals clearly that the confirmation classes in church can implement a more diverse approach than RE lessons in school: They can make room for an immediate relating of action to reflection, of acting and thinking. The list also shows that a variety of methods has replaced the purely cognitive and intellectual way of dealing with issues. However, this is not to call into question that, as regards content, the topics listed in Luther's Short Catechism are still definitive for the curriculum. In addition there is also room for dealing with the meaning of the rite of confirmation and questions youth are bringing up.

4. The Pastor and the Young People

The empirical surveys on church membership reveal that the confirmation ministry is received by the confirmed young people and their parents with a surprisingly high level of appreciation. (For the following cf. Lübking 1995, p. 149ff. and Lübking / Elsenbast 1998, p. 84ff.). The personality of pastors and their way of dealing with the young people are obviously of great importance if we are concerned with the question of how to create positive attitudes and possible access points to Christianity and the Church. Whoever is personally interested in the young people, feels real affection for them and regards them as people with their own dignity, he will thereby create positive conditions for the confirmation ministry and the development of a sense of community in the group of confirmands. From a pedagogical perspective, it is first and foremost a question of one's affinity for, one's basic attitude towards the young people that create a specific relationship.

When questioned, confirmands portray a surprisingly high level of *appreciation of the person* of the pastor, which seems not to be based on a positive view of the office, but linked to the quality and the nature of the confirmation ministry. The empirical surveys demonstrate that this positive view has clearly increased over the years. For instance: While in 1972 38 % of the persons interviewed said that what they had learnt in their confirmation classes was still important for them today, in 1992 the figure had risen to 61 %. In 1972 from the interviewed persons 68 % had pleasant memories of the pastor, while in 1992 the percentage was 77 %.

The question arises why that is so. Do the young people have so few contacts with whom they can enter into a dialogue about questions of religion and the meaning of life, so that somebody who takes them seriously meets with such positive appreciation?

In the time of confirmation ministry, the young people are usually 12 to 14 years old. This is a phase in which young persons become increasingly detached from their own parents. Even if there are less intense clashes between parents and young people during their prepuberty and puberty today than there were in previous generations, this is still a time of increasing detachment from their own parents. This process of "leaving the parental home" is an important precondition for the young people's progress on the way to their own identity. As they are on their way, the pastor can offer some form of companionship. It is interesting that, according to empirical surveys, most pastors consider themselves primarily as a "supporter" and "companion". Other roles are the "expert for faith questions" and "spiritual counsellor for young people".

It seems that many ministers want to be close to the confirmands and provide them with guidance in the difficult phase of puberty. But one has to ask whether this is in keeping with the minister's real opportunities in the framework of the confirmation classes. In principle, one can expect the confirmands to see their pastors as adults with whom they can identify. In this process, the pastor's office or role offers a certain protection, as it brings objectification and distance with it. This is important for both sides. It is particularly recognizable in the erotic / sexual field. Many young people direct such feelings and expectations in their puberty (partly subconsciously) towards the adults they relate to most closely. The connection between the person and the office enables the pastor to "accept" such feelings, but to deal with them through the distance the role entails.

But perhaps the role of the pastor is better described as "significant other" or "adult Christian who can serve as an example". The pastor addresses topical questions with the young people, reviews Christian convictions, justifies himself or herself to them, and thereby informs them of the origin of his or her own convictions. It is precisely in this way that they can help the young people form their own opinions and find their "own" faith (Lübking / Elsenbast 1998, p. 87). As they are learning about meaning, the young people learn from the adults credibility, authenticity or unreliability. However, this learning about meaning is always related to certain persons, it is a way of personal learning. So the young people learn through the pastor about certain topics, especially how to speak about God. At the same time, they also learn from the pastor about his or her views on the particular subject. Thus, the

pastor simultaneously provides them with a model – a model which sends out the one or the other message.

Learning by example is a way of learning that is an integral part of the pedagogical concept of how to impart knowledge in the field of religious and ethical learning. One can speak of learning by example or learning by imitation. "The process of becoming a Christian requires examples" – that is the title of a book by Günter Biemer and Albert Biesinger (Christ werden braucht Vorbilder, Mainz 1983). The notion of the example can be misunderstood for reasons of history in that one is reminded of a model-image relation, thus following the old imitation teaching method according to which the younger ones simply have to take on over whatever the older ones teach them. However, I am not suggesting that the example should be taken up and copied identically, rather it is important that the example becomes an example inclusive of all its doubts and insecurities. It is only in this way that a false glorification, even ideologization can be avoided. Examples provide food for thought and prompt us in this way to act in personal responsibility. A prompting to simply copy our examples would be the wrong way. The authenticity of a person's Christian walk has always been very important in the propagating and spreading of the Christian faith. It will also stay important in the future.

For the above mentioned reasons, we prefer to speak about learning by example rather than learning by imitation in religious education. Crucial experiences and questions in one's biography, as well as the decision-making patterns that have proved valid in these situations and our everyday life and actions can thus become orientation aides for the young people. The most recent surveys reveal surprisingly clearly the high degree to which young people (again) orientate themselves on examples (cf. the Youth Surveys: Hurrelmann 2002 and Zinnecker 2002).

Now, there is undoubtedly also the way of learning from a historical example. Furthermore, the encounter with these examples can take place with the aide of objective media (films, TV, literature). For the confirmation ministry, the examples in the recipients' immediate vicinity are the ones to consider first and foremost. Therefore, it is the pastor who needs to be considered. If a pastor teaches the classes on his or her own, he or she will provide the youth with a concrete and approachable role model for Church and Christianity. Of course, this person will then also have to personally vouch for the credibility and relevance of the cause on their own.

The less the people's attitude towards the established Church is that of a natural relationship, the more decisive the question becomes whether those who represent faith and religion appear credible. But who can achieve this in the long term – and on their own? (Lübking / Elsenbast 1998, p. 85).

It is sensible or even important, not least for this reason, to involve other people in the confirmation ministry. I will later focus on this point in more detail.

Understood and practised in this manner, learning from biographies can become a useful and impressive element of religious education and guidance. It will be an essential part, even if one does not want to accept it. The theory and practice of religious education will be enriched by this way of learning from an example, as long as it takes the modification into account that we marked earlier with the term "learning by example". If they are not made use of for mere imitation, then there really is reason to believe that examples can pave the way for self-determination. Real Christianity is always lived out in brokenness, that is how it reveals itself as real life. Young people who want to learn how to be Christians will be able to learn it in encounters and discussions with the others' way of living out their Christianity in brokenness. Therefore, it is about the "saints of every-day life".

5. The Pastor and the Team

Confirmation classes and confirmation are a part of the pastor's catalogue of duties. In the old regulations, this field of work was assigned only to the pastor. In the last three decades, however, there has been a shift towards the deliberate involvement of other members of staff in the confirmation classes. Two strong arguments can be put forward in favour of this motion. The one is the argument for credibility (being a guarantee), and the other concerns the specialists' competence in their own field.

We emphasized earlier that the pastor represents a concrete and approachable role model who can be questioned and challenged. Operating on one's own can easily lead to feeling overstretched, it can cover up the fact that there are different approaches to Christianity and that diverse forms and expressions of the Christian faith are valid. If now *more and other people* are involved in the ministry to confirmands, then the young people are supplied with additional persons they can get attached to, with additional opportunities for identification, and therefore with additional examples to learn from, who can help them to orientate themselves and with whom they can argue. In this way it can also be guaranteed that the young people encounter diverse approaches to the faith. For a long time now, the order of service for confirmation published by many regional churches (e.g. Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, North-Elbian Church) have made provisions for more members of staff in the confirmation ministry.

The Evangelical Church in Württemberg has been most determined to include this point in its new concept of confirmation ministry. In the context of

the aim already quoted above, that the young people are to be "supported in their way of living the Christian faith and encouraged to find their own ways of expressing it", the young people are offered the companionship of different companions, in order for them to experience different ways of living the Christian faith and diverse forms of spirituality, thus finding their own way of living their faith.

There is another point to be considered here. In the past, vacant ministers' positions were mainly filled with men. Therefore, it was important that women were won over to join the staff, in order for the female confirmands to be able to identify with a role model they can learn from. In present times, as there are many female pastors, it will be necessary to bring about a balance for the male confirmands.

About the second aspect of the *extension of the specialists' competence* I would like to say there is no way that the pastor can himself perform all the tasks he is confronted with in the ministry to confirmands in the best possible way. Matters concerning the music in the service and questions of liturgy, for example, are best put to the choirmaster. In dealing with questions concerning the church's social service to the community, the pastor can get the church's deacon or a staff member from a diaconal institution involved. Parents can play an active part in certain areas of ministry. Whole days of lessons over a weekend or retreats cannot be done without the involvement of more staff members.

Now there are very different groups of staff members. Full-time staff can feature as parish workers, teachers of religious education, deacons and church musicians.

Voluntary staff members can be recruited from the group of confirmed young people. They brighten up the classes and make the lessons less monotonous.

They save the pastor from theological flights of fancy, can render the standard theological topics more relevant for the confirmands and / or take care that there is a balance between the discussion of the various topics. Singing, working in small groups, opening and evaluating group discussions, doing drama related to a topic or encouraging the confirmands to act and perform work better with their participation. (Witting 1998, p. 114).

There are also many adult church members who contribute to the confirmation ministry in many different ways.

One particular concept deserves to be mentioned in brief, according to which the parents (primarily the mothers) have an important part to play: Mothers teach their children. This is the so-called Hoyaer model, which was developed more than 20 years ago. According to this model, the confirma-

tion classes are divided into two phases. The children go through the first phase, dedicated to the treatment of Bible stories or of baptism, the Lord's supper and the ecclesiastical year, at the age of 8/9 years (i.e. at the time of the third or fourth year of school). Here, the parents teach the children in small groups. The preparation is done intensively every week by the pastor. The children go through the second phase of the confirmation classes at the time of the eighth year of school, at the age of about 13/14 (cf. Meyer-Blanck / Kuhl 1994).

The involvement of volunteers usually brings a new dynamism into the church and generates changes. Often, new activities or groups emerge. In this way, ministry to confirmands with volunteers can become a starting-point for the promotion of congregational life. Often, this structure gives an impetus towards a "participatory church", i.e. more active participation on the side of the church members and more support for the church's ministry.

Through the involvement of other volunteers, however, the *role and task of the pastor* changes recognizably. He or she can concentrate more on the task of the theologian, since some of the work is taken on by other people. A deacon can take over pedagogical tasks for example and enhance the atmosphere in the group. In this way, the generalist who is responsible for everything becomes a person who can concentrate on certain things: e.g. dealing with theological questions, further theological education, organizing the preparation of the next lesson with the team, further training of the team, counselling when staff members are faced with disappointments. The role of the church pastor in the team is characterized mainly by the following features:

- His ability to communicate is in demand through the continuous work of preparation and planning as well as the exchange of experiences and the evaluation with those involved. He takes on the role of the moderator in the team meetings.
- He is challenged as a theologian; the team meetings often lead to intense discussions and the need to clarify theological questions.
- In working together with all the full-time and voluntary members of staff, he is responsible for the church's educational work.
- He keeps the connection with the parish church council and with other fields of work and ensures that the confirmation ministry is networked with and transparent for the church.

If one asks what the church gains from the church members' involvement in this way, then, firstly, one may point to the benefit the volunteers gain personally in that they attain a deeper theological understanding of faith issues

through their ministry; and secondly, they implement something of the priesthood of all believers through their involvement in the commission to communicate the gospel; and thirdly, the quality of the confirmation ministry will be enhanced.

However, we should not conceal the fact that the discovery of the pedagogical potential in younger and older church members is one of the most fortunate discoveries and developments in the confirmation ministry of the last 25 years, though seen in its entirety, it is a minority of churches which have made this a reality in their church life. In the vast majority of churches, the confirmation classes are still planned and carried out only by the pastor.

6. The Pastor and the Parents

The involvement of the parents in the confirmation ministry is important, as the influence of family and parents on the young people is not insignificant. The ministry to the confirmands' parents seeks to support the parents in their discussions with their children about faith issues, but at the same time to offer opportunities for parents to find answers to their own questions.

The parents want their children to be confirmed, but often show little interest in the contents and form of the confirmation classes. Many parents confine themselves to the task of "sending" their children to the classes and will only respond to the clarification of organizational questions evolving around the confirmation classes. Ministry to the confirmands' parents is a laborious affair for the pastor. Many years of experience suggest that the following approach seems realistic (see also Arbeitshilfe 1992, p. 48f.):

At the start of the confirmation ministry, a meeting with parents and young people together is helpful, during which the interests of the young people and of the parents must be taken into consideration in the same measure. During the time period in which the confirmation classes take place, one can offer several parents' meetings. With regard to the contents, experience teaches us that in encounters with the parents, one can

- inform them about the targets, the contents and the form of the ministry to confirmands;
- address the parents' expectations of the confirmation classes, speak about and develop the parents' experiences with their own confirmation classes;
- take up the pedagogical questions around the confirmands' age group, provide opportunities for an exchange of experiences and search together for possible solutions to arising questions;

- prepare or evaluate special projects (internships, retreats, outings etc.);
- share about the confirmands' experiences and insights;
- speak about their attitudes to religion and faith (e.g. involvement in the church's life and activities, prayer, spirituality, services);
- promote contacts between parents (e.g. through sharing a meal together, handicrafts, singing, celebrating the Lord's Supper).

During the time of the confirmation classes, meetings of the parents and young people have also proved to be worthwhile. The following forms need to be mentioned:

- weekends or evenings, during which the methods employed in the confirmation classes are applied to questions or topics parents and young people are interested in;
- services that parents and young people can go to together, the topic of which is worked out by both parties together (e.g. on a confirmands' day or weekend);
- celebrations, sharing meals together.

Finally, about half a year before the end of the confirmation classes, it is particularly important to discuss the question of the confirmation in the framework of a meeting together with parents and young people. On the same occasion, the celebration of the confirmation in the families can be spoken about and suggestions can be made for the plans and arrangements.

7. The Pastor in the Confirmation Service

The confirmation service at the end of the confirmation ministry is a central event from the point of view of the pastor, the parish church and the church at large, but especially also from the point of view of the young people and their parents and families. A whole cluster of motives comes together at this point. It is important not to regard the theological and anthropological approaches as antagonistic alternatives, but to integrate and connect them. The pastor's task to deal with the diverse motives and concerns adequately is a responsible one. I would like to make a few comments on this point.

The theological understanding of the confirmation is determined by its relation to baptism and to the Lord's Supper. In the evangelical view, the confirmation does not complement baptism, nor does it convey a new grace that could lead us on from there. Rather, the confirmation is a free creation of the Christian church, not a sacrament with a Biblical foundation. It is a way of

commemorating our baptism, an action of intercession and blessing in a particular phase of the confirmands' life under the gospel's words of encouragement. In this act, the young people join in the Church's profession of the faith according to the measure of their insight.

In essence, the confirmation service wants the individual young person to experience up close and personal that they are accepted (through calling them by name, through the blessing, the laying on of hands, the personally appropriated Bible verse) and to commit their journey through life to God's protection through intercession. This is an incredibly dense point in the young person's life cycle and biography.

It is about a life with God's promise. It is about the construction and reconstruction of this life, about a life-story with the perspective

that it is God himself who has created the individual, who is a companion on his journey through life, who brings him into the community of other human beings, who meets with him often in a very human sort of way, who is with him in danger and in times of need, and who will show him the goal in his life. God's act of blessing is asked for (C. Westermann), which refers to the individual in his life-story and to his family, and which corresponds in one's personal spirituality to the plea: I will not let you go unless you bless me (Gen 32: 26). (Starck 1990, p. 15).

The reform of the evangelical order of service after the Second World War looked back to the central subjects of the conception put together in the Reformation. Thus, according to the basic structure of the confirmation service, the profession of the faith and the confirmation question or commitment is followed by a prayer of intercession and blessing through the church, which is followed by an act of blessing with a *formula of blessing*, which is spoken to each individual young person with the laying on of hands.

Since the time of the Reformation, since 1534, this act of the laying on of hands is connected with the following formula of blessing (Ziegenhain Order of Church Discipline):

- "Accept the Holy Spirit,
- Protection and shelter against all evil,
- Strength and help to all goodness
- from the merciful hand of God, of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The Biblical background is here a verse taken from a Song of Ascent, Psalm 121: "May God keep you from all harm, may he watch over your soul." The reference to Psalm 121 suggests the understanding of the confirmands' bless-

ing as a blessing for a journey. Such a blessing can take up the yearning for a successful life. In this sense, the blessing at the confirmation has at least three intentions:

- to give an identity: "You will be what you are not yet." – This is important for young people. Their religious question is the question about the Where from? and Where to? of their own person "Who am I?" Again, the central theme of their time as confirmands becomes even more condensed: Before God, the life of every human being is affirmed.
- to encourage to live life: Confirmation is a celebration of encouragement in the adolescents' threshold situation. They have reached the end of their childhood and are now in a period of transition to their time as young people. The promise of God's spirit becomes physical in the act of touch (the laying on of hands): According to an old line of interpretation, God's name is thereby laid on a person's head; i.e. this young person is inviolable, however he or she is or behaves him- or herself. They are believed capable of being a blessing themselves. The fact that they are encouraged in the blessing to live in the power of the spirit suggests that it is quite sensible to keep to the old formula "protection and shelter against all evil, strength and help to all goodness".
- to provide emotional support for a turning point in the young people's life-story: The blessing is a "point to hold on to" for all those involved: For the young people, this means personal affirmation and confirmation with a view to the future. They are recognized and appreciated. Blessing thus means strengthening and support, the knowledge that they are not alone. The parents realize that their child is looking for its own ways and will hopefully find them. In a similar way, they may have been moved at their child's baptism by the worries about their child's future way of life, by the knowledge that human power and care is limited. That is why they wanted to place their child under God's blessing and guidance.

The liturgical centre of the confirmation service is the blessing, i.e. the personal appropriation of "protection and shelter", in the blessing as an act of intercession. The rite's message is the unconditional respect for the young people as their own persons. This is also a possible point of convergence between the theological and the non-theological dimensions of the liturgical action.

Finally, the confirmation is also the representation of a Christian who has come of age. With their confirmation, the young people have become mature in the sense that they can make their own decisions in matters of religion.

Their time as confirmands and the learning processes involved are an important phase for their developing this competence.

The order of the Confirmation Service of the German protestant churches has undergone its latest revision in 2001. It was published in "Konfirmation. Agende für evangelisch-lutherische Kirchen und Gemeinden und für die Evangelische Kirche der Union." The Confirmation Service encompasses the individual (youth and its identity), public (presentation for the general public) and church related (parish as community of believers) aspects of Christian life.

The new order of the Confirmation Service (Konfirmation, p. 140ff.) combines the theological-liturgical and anthropological motifs for the rite of confirmation. This is a new development in the formulation of the liturgy. The new order also puts a special emphasis on the blessing. Confirmation therefore with good reason is called "Einsegnung". Emphasis is also laid on the aspect of individual appropriation and the personal expression of the confirmands of their Christian faith.

With their answer the young persons adopt the confession of faith, that their parents and godfathers have spoken, when they were baptised. This answer is not a vow for a specific Christian behaviour in the future, but an actual confessing, which includes the intention to 'keep in touch and grow'. (Konfirmation, p. 138).

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