

# **Confirmation Work and the Future of the Church**

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## **I. What is at Stake?**

Confirmation Work in its historical development discerns a two-folded aim: firstly, to teach young people about what it means to be a Christian and to live as a Christian, and, secondly, to establish and strengthen young people's identification with and their participation in the Church.

Both aims have always been considered to be important and crucial factors in substantially fostering the viability of personal faith and securing the stability and future of the institution itself.

Therefore, throughout history, Confirmation Work manifested a certain self-conception of the Church in its deeper theological meaning, as well as in its institutional character and its organizational structure.

Thus, Confirmation Work and the future of the Church have always been closely and strongly interrelated, although not without certain tensions at times, as will be explained in the following.

What is at stake when the issue of Confirmation Work and the future of the Church is raised at this time – keeping in mind the present situation of churches in Europe and integrating the results of the Confirmation Studies over the last decade?

In which sense should we speak of the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church? Are the two issues connected? Or does a certain tension exist between them again? Who profits from whom – who sets the agenda?

And to ask here in a very general sense: Whose future is in doubt and where exactly do we locate the crisis. Are we talking about the future of the institution in terms of financial stability, employment, and thus the survival of the Church? Are we talking of the future of youth as future members of the Church? Or are we talking even more generally about the future of religion and faith in a postmodern society?

To address these questions further differentiations are required:

## **II. Dimensions of Confirmation Work, Ministries of Church and Types of Interrelation with the Church**

From its early history onwards, Confirmation Work consisted of different dimensions, which we shall only mention here in brief: we find at least a theological, pedagogical, ritual, organizational, personal and contextual dimension.

If we look at the history of Confirmation Work we find at certain times – depending on contextual developments – a specific emphasis being placed on one of these dimensions, which shaped a certain profile of this work. We might even speak of certain paradigmatic decisions:

Which paradigms were shaping these different dimensions and the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church?

To draw nearer to these paradigmatic decisions, it is helpful to introduce here the classical ecclesiological differentiation of the Churches' ministries as *martyria* (in the sense of a certain practice of confessional testimony and being or becoming a witness), as *leiturgia* (as practicing certain rituals like services, the sacraments or meditations), as *diaconia* (as a personal and ecumenical, experience-based form of practice), and as *koinonia* (in a broader sense of common experiences – not only within the Church, but also in its secular variation of contributing to society and the common good).

In different historical phases and when Confirmation Work stressed implicitly or explicitly on one of the dimensions named above, one of these ecclesiological ministries was somehow always in the background of these dimensions.

Just to give a few examples:

Bucer and Luther emphasized strongly on the pedagogical dimension of Confirmation Work: children should learn what it means to participate in the sacraments of the newly organized Church. Hence, they understood this work from its complementarity of the different ministries. Concerning interrelation, Confirmation Work was understood to be kind of preparation for a broader theological understanding of the Church and a free and active participation in it.

In later history, due to contextual challenges, this complementary emphasis led to certain, sometimes rather one-sided concepts and profiles.

At times, when the institution was seen to be in severe crisis, emphasis was placed more on the ministry of *koinonia*: Confirmation Work should strongly refer to the aspect of experiences of community – illustrated by the “metaphor of the body and its parts”, we might think here of Spener’s idea of building small pious communities. We might also think here of Schleiermacher’s understanding of Confirmation Work as preparing the younger generation to become active parts of religious sociability and conviviality (*Geselligkeit*), and also of Bonhoeffer’s idea of confirmation work in small, but strong movements.

As already mentioned, however, the idea of *koinonia* could also be understood in a secularized version, so that Confirmation Work should contribute to the society in a broader sense by shaping young people’s behavior in accordance with public reason.

At times when the reality of Word of God was in doubt, *martyria* became a core aim, not seldom by proclaiming the gospel in an authoritative, hierarchical manner – supported by the metaphor of the “shepherd and the sheep”. We might locate this in the phase of a dialectical theology in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

In times of societal conflicts, the Church was firmly understood to be an ethical institution which should allow for “individual practice”, so that the aspect of *diaconia* came into the focus – supported, for example, by the parable of the Good Samaritan, or in the perspective of a Public Church within the local and global realm. We might identify this from the 1970s onwards, when Confirmation Work was strongly understood in this sense.

In recent times, we find a stronger emphasis on the ministry of *leitourgia*, for example, in Michael Meyer-Black’s understanding of Confirmation Work as experiencing the liturgical, sacramental and ritual dimension in its deeper theological meaning of the Church.

Exemplary figures	Prior Dimension of CW	Prior Ministr(ies)y	Paradigmatic Types of Interrelation of CW and the Church
Reformation time	Theological Catechetical/ Pedagogical	Complementarity of ministries	CW as preparation for a true understanding of the Church and belonging to it
Ph. J. Spener (17 <sup>th</sup> century)	Personal	Martyria and Koinonia	CW as practice of living faith in new forms of Church life
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	Personal and social	Koinonia and Martyria	CW as building new Christian movements
Karl Barth	Theological	Martyria	CW as example of reshaping the Church
Late 20 <sup>th</sup> century	Social	Diaconia	CW as example of the societal responsibility of the Church
Michael Meyer-Blanck	Ritual	Leitourgia	CW as liturgical practice within the Church

These paradigmatic decisions not only led to different profiles of Confirmation Work, but also to a different understanding of the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church:

Hence, Confirmation Work could for example be discerned as being a more or less consequent and accurate analogy of a practice of witnessing. Confirmation Work was understood as an opportunity to rebuild the Church.

At other times, it could be estimated as enabling an individual, spontaneous “religious reflection of the ultimate” in smaller communities and was more contrasted with the institutional interests of the Church as a result.

Thus, the interrelation of Confirmation Work and Church was very often connected with a certain hierarchical presupposition – be it with a primary focus on the Church, its dogmatic representations and authoritative representatives, or be it with a focus on young people themselves, their individual needs and religious interest. Throughout history, there were – so to speak – different “leading houses” of Confirmation Work, depending on the respective theological convictions, societal reflections, a certain understanding of the “crisis” and also different contexts.

Of course, these different types showed and show various forms of combinations of these different dimensions and interrelations. But nevertheless, this differentiation may have a heuristic function for thinking about Confirmation Work in present and also in the perspective of the future of the Church.

How does this historical retrospect help in thinking about the future of Confirmation Work and the Church? Firstly, I would like to raise the question of whether current studies again disclose a certain paradigmatic decision on the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church. So, what does the situation look like today?

### **III. Can a Certain Profile be Identified in Current Studies – How is the Situation now?**

I do not intend to explain many of the results here in detail, but some are quite clear:

The results of current studies on the different dimensions of Confirmation Work and the interrelation between Confirmation Work and the Church provide an interesting picture.

If, for example, we examine the intentions of the confirmation worker, we can identify a certain profile:

In general, the different dimensions of Confirmation Work seem to be included to provide a kind of a plausible equilibrium of the different dimensions. Without doubt, however, there is an especially strong reference to the personal and communal dimension:

The confirmation worker clearly aims at a positive relation with the confirmands. The work is shaped along the main question of whether it matches the individual interests and needs of youth. The confirmation workers try to teach in the perspective of a possible relevance for the confirmands. Theological tradition alone is not considered to be being sufficient for that relevance however.

A strong emphasis at the ministry of *koinonia* can also be identified. A central aim is to experience good community in the group and in the Church.

So, what does this tell us about the paradigmatic decisions on the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church?

What seems to be the case is a dynamic and also processual interrelation between Confirmation Work and the Church, with the deep interest not to functionalize one side for the other. Hence, Confirmation Work in the setting of the confirmation workers' agenda

should avoid any strong hierarchies and one-sided decisions in favor of the Church as an institution.

Looking at the results of our studies, the following question needs to be raised: what do we know about the impacts of this certain profile? As we know, the results show a kind of snapshot of the present situation and of the understanding of the interrelation between Confirmation Work and the Church.

Exemplary figures	Prior Dimension of CW	Prior Ministr(ies)y	Paradigmatic Types of Interrelation of CW and the Church
Workers aims according to the recent studies on Confirmation work	Equilibrium of dimensions Personal and social	Koinonia and Diaconia	Avoidance of functionalization and hierarchies

#### **IV. Ambivalent Outcomes**

As we know, the results of our studies are not that easy to interpret, because they show ambivalent results, also in terms of the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the “future of the Church”.

On the one hand, we should not be too pessimistic:

The satisfaction of the confirmands is very high, be it with the confirmation workers and especially with the teams, be it with experiences of good community and friendship, or be it with special events like the camps or even youth services. Most them perceive the whole confirmation time positively. They see it – especially in comparison to the school – as being an attractive offer.

Even content-based forms of teaching and learning find certain plausibility amongst the confirmands. The assumption of a broader gap between “believing and belonging” is not validated by the results.

Clearly many of the aims of confirmation workers have found a certain fulfillment. And consequently, they are satisfied as well.

On the other hand we should not be too optimistic:

Young people's identification with "the Church" and its dogmatic contents is rather low and does not change significantly throughout the year. Aspects like services and rituals are considered to be rather boring. And, as we know, a willingness to engage in the parish after confirmation time can only be found amongst a minority of those confirmed.

To look again at the confirmation workers' perceptions: they themselves seem to be not all that happy with some of the outcomes. And, of course, according to the results of t3, we find that a great number of those confirmed have simply lost contact with their parish.

Now the question has to be raised about whether this is really due to Confirmation Work. At this point, I would like to shift the perspective by looking at the broader picture.

## **V. The Broader Picture of the Current Situation in the Church**

As we know from a wide range of different studies, there are various reasons why the younger generation maintain a certain distance to the Church.

Of course, some developmental-psychological factors could be named: it is obvious that at the time of adolescence a general critical attitude towards almost any institutional authority is the case for many young people. Consequently, this also includes the Church and her representatives.

Even more plausible seems to me to be the following theoretical assumption, developed by the Sociologist of Religion Jörg Stolz: in his view, in times of increasing individualism, consumerism and in a situation of intense religious/secular competition, it is not at all easy for the Church and her representatives to appear as the monopolist institution for meaning and religious practice any longer.

He identifies at least four different types who – with very different attitudes – determine their relation to the Church. He calls them the "institutional", the "distanced", the "secular" and the "atheist". And, indeed, amongst confirmands we might in general identify the same types.

We can combine this heuristic approach with the results of the latest membership-survey in the context of Protestant churches in Germany. Here we find – leaving aside the methodological problems of the study – a similar picture, with a broad majority of young people who more or less maintain a certain distance to the Church and her offerings of religious orientation and practice.

Now, although these typologies have been developed and the surveys conducted in specific national contexts, they might be considered to be interesting heuristic approaches, also for a better understanding of the current overall situation of Churches in Europe.

By the way, in this case, youth is rather a paradigm for the general attitude of many members of the Church – so they should certainly not be stigmatized.

At this point, I would just like to remind you of the fact that according to our studies there is a significant gap between religiously socialized and non-affiliated young people. Religious socialization is therefore a key factor not only of engagement but also of satisfaction. Obviously therefore, there is a strong influence on the confirmands' attitudes to the Church, which has long ago been established and imprinted on their minds. Consequently, these individual factors intensely influence the outcomes of Confirmation Work. Therefore, they cannot just be ignored – leaving alone the fact that a comparatively short time of teaching and learning can hardly transform a young person's perspective completely.

Thus, Confirmation Work should face certain contextual factors which can hardly be influenced in a mind-shifting way.

In the following, I shall argue in favor of a different change of perspective therefore:

## **VI. Changes of Perspective**

### **VI.1 Burden of Proof on the Shoulders of Youth**

In certain statements about the challenges of Confirmation Work, it seems that the burden of proof still lies on the shoulders of youth. In other words, the distance between the younger generation and the Church seems to be blamed on young people. The demands being: they should decide to be or become active members of the Church, they should commit themselves to certain contents and they should say “yes” and agree to what is offered to them.

How can the dynamic lives of young people become connected with the established form of the institution? If this offering, as we know from our studies, is no longer perceived as a rite of passage, what can the consequence of this be?

So, who has the problem, if sustainability seems to be a real problem and challenge?



As I just said, we should change the perspective – in two directions:

## **VI.2 Change of Perspective towards the Potentials of Youth**

Without any doubt, the young generation or least the broad majority of them is quite capable of leading their own lives. At certain times, they might seek orientation from adults outside the family and even from certain institutional representatives. But, normally, they get on quite well by relying on their friends and family members.

For the Church, therefore, the main question is how to deal with the potentials of youth?

What does it mean to really start with the young peoples' potentials? How do we acknowledge the potentials of young people as constitutive factors of Confirmation Work? How can the Church become a credible space for the “religious reflection of the ultimate”?

This can only be answered from the clear basis of a fundamental subject-orientation.

The task is to accompany the fast-moving on a journey..., but also include the slower and reluctant and restrained ones.

This is the very first pedagogical and personal challenge for Confirmation Work.

By the way: if perceiving the Church in a very individualistic and consumeristic way is reality, then it only makes little sense to ignore this fact.

## **VI.3 Ecclesiological Interrogation**

Hence, I would like to ask here: who is confronted with the problem in Confirmation Work? Perhaps not so much the younger generation, but rather the Church and her representatives.

Or to put it even more specifically: does the Church really care about the younger generation? Might there still be indirect hierarchical attitudes within Confirmation Work?

And what does Confirmation Work really have to offer them? As representatives, do confirmation workers dare to express their own meaning and understanding of the truth?

Consequently, the task is to realistically contribute to this certain phase of their lives, as an inherited institution to deal with this individualism, and to be a relevant source for individual orientation.

The question about whether this means that Confirmation Work can or shall change attitudes to personal faith might well be asked, and also the idea that the confirmation period should be considered an opportunity to missionarize in a narrow sense.

## **VII. Is there a Need for a New Profile and Emphasis?**

In the midst of the current general situation of the Protestant Churches in Europe, one might ask whether there is a need for a new emphasis within Confirmation Work. Do we need a certain dimension to be placed first or given priority to? And what would be a consistent, fruitful interrelation between Confirmation Work and the Church?

Of course, complementary thinking, i.e. the consistent integration of the theological, the pedagogical, the ritual and the personal dimensions, should be the aim. The same is obviously true for the four ecclesiological ministries, which should be dealt with in a complementary sense.

Nevertheless, it might be fruitful if an emphasis on the theological dimension would come to the fore.

### **VII.1 From Interrelation to Reciprocity**

I would like to start with the supposition that Confirmation Work and the Church share a common inspirational power. They are not only related in an organizational sense, but far more and deeply reciprocal in a theological sense.

Confirmation Work should be embedded clearly in Church work and it should entail experiences which shed light on the deeper meaning of the Church and its different ministries *martyria, koinonia, leitourgia* and *diakonia*.

In Confirmation Work, all four ecclesiological ministries should be communicated in the sense of:

- their connection to tradition
- their theological meaning
- their processual character.

Confirmation Work should promote the understanding of the Church as an institution for communicative interrelation and interaction – but communication not only between human beings, but also between listening to Word of God and individual interpretation. All activities within Confirmation Work should be motivated and reflected in the dimension of listening to and interpreting God's Word.

From this communicative aspect, process orientation is not primarily a pedagogical virtue, but a theological figure of trust.

Therefore, we might rather speak of reciprocity concerning the question of the interrelation of Confirmation Work and the Church: all dimensions of Confirmation Work and all four ministries allow – in the perspective of listening to the Word of God – individual interpretation and institutional orientation. I will concretize this in the following:

## **VII.2 The Challenge of Confirmation Work Contributing to Individual Faith (*martyria* and *leitourgia*)**

As already explained, Confirmation Work faces the challenge of making clear what this specific Church practice is all about. It would certainly not be sufficient to just provide certain positive group experiences, attractive camp offers or show the “coolness” of the confirmation workers. It is therefore probably not sufficient to disclose the deeper theological meaning in indirect or even implicit ways alone. The idea of a Protestant profile of Confirmation Work should – at least at certain times – be raised explicitly.

If we speak of the reciprocity of Confirmation Work and the Church, the question of how to teach and communicate the deeper theological meaning and the substance of Confirmation is crucial.

However, it is also obvious that this requires much more than cognitive approaches. As we know from the results of our studies, it is not easy to teach about questions of individual faith.

In other words, the ministries of *martyria* and *leitourgia* somehow require integral and holistic approaches based on individual experience and experiment, new arrangements and creative ways of theological discussion and debate. To come to plausible interpretations of the individual conduct of life, new creative forms of individual theological language are necessary.

To become and to comprehend oneself as a witness of Christian faith takes time and experience to be able individually witness the possible relevance of certain theological traditions, interpretations and liturgical practices. This might require an understanding of theology more in the mode of raising questions than in the mode of giving clear answers.

It might also require an understanding of liturgical and ritual practice as a certain mode of searching for meaning rather than celebrating an undisputable truth.

Consequently, theological tradition and interpretative innovation should be seen as two sides of the same coin. Expression and explicitness is a question of active participation.

Regarding the ministry of *martyria*, for example, the concept of youth theology might open up some new possibilities for confirmands to reflect on their individual standpoints, beliefs and commitments.

Regarding the ministry of *leitourgia*, obligations only make sense if their potential deeper meaning can be reflected upon freely. In other words, services only make sense when something relevant can be experienced. Perhaps something like a “pragmatic mysticism” is required here. We might also call it the challenge of forms of content-based spirituality. Thus, the main aim here could be, “that the confirmands have more fun learning”.

### **VII.3 The Challenge of Confirmation Work Contributing to a Public Church (*diakonia* and *koinonia*)**

As I have already stated, Confirmation Work should promote the understanding of the Church as an institution of communicative interrelation and interaction. This should not only be communication between human beings, but also between listening to Word of God and individual interpretation. This is also true for the public role of the Church as well. The two ministries of *diakonia* and *koinonia* come into play here.

The *diaconical* perspective is indeed an important aspect of Confirmation Work: confirmands should not only learn, but also experience what it means to take over public responsibility in a personal and institutional sense. By doing so, they will not only get an idea of Christian ethics but also get important insights into the diaconical work of the Church. In this respect, voluntary work can itself manifest a concrete opportunity of Christian commitment within civil society. Incidentally, in our latest study we encountered impressive results concerning the effects of voluntary work in terms of young people gaining individual and personal skills.

This ministry is indeed closely connected to the ministry of *koinonia*. The public role and critical responsibility of the Church manifests itself by building strong and committed communities, be it within the Church or within the public sphere in the broadest sense. For example, local activities, and confirmands participating in them can indicate the importance of global and ecumenical thinking and action.

Reciprocity in this sense also means that activities performed during Confirmation Work concerning this public role and relevance of the Church should be motivated and reflected in the dimension of listening to and interpreting the Word of God. In a theological sense, the ministries of *diakonia* and *koinonia* reflect not only the dimension of the priesthood of all believers (1 Petr 2), but also concretize the ecclesiological metaphor of the body and its

different parts, all being equally important. These metaphorical formulations of dynamic participation can also express the public responsibility of the *koinonia* to contribute convincingly to solidarity, cohesion and unity.

This might even lead to some new organizational forms and movements within Confirmation Work, which the Church in a wider sense could contribute from. Confirmation Work could even help to build small, dynamic and spiritual “ecclesiolas in ecclesia” – not in an exclusive sense, of course, but rather in an inclusive one. Thus, the Church itself could be inspired by lively, bottom-up forms of new confirmation movements. The other way round, the idea of a Public Church means to provide an empowering framework for such new movements.

Finally, in this respect, the theological-anthropological conviction of the charismata of all believers is also a fruitful perspective for dealing with heterogeneity within the respective group.

### **VIII. Final Considerations – The Passive Dimension of Active Work**

It should be clear by now that Confirmation Work and the Church are deeply connected in a reciprocal sense. Thus far, I have only spoken about the future of the Church in a more implicit sense. The results of the confirmation study might give a hint of possible scenarios for the future. Looking at broader surveys, one might get the feeling that Confirmation Work should now be strongly improved to avoid the worst case of declining membership. As I have said already, however, we should be careful not to functionalize this work. The idea of reciprocity helps to avoid this. And these arguments also derive strongly from theological conviction and a theological standpoint:

Confirmation Work and the Church have common ground, not only from the perspective of building and experiencing relevant and fruitful relations amongst her participants, but also in their theological foundation. Beyond the dimensions and ministries I have mentioned in particular, one common aspect should be mentioned here, which is all too often forgotten:

All descriptions and formulations of this reciprocity and all considerations about the future of the Church must have an important theological distinction in mind between the visible and the invisible Church. When we focus too intensely on the pedagogical and cognitive aspects, we lose this crucial distinction, which avoids all-too-easy judgments about true membership, discipleship, etc. The understanding of the Church as the “Word of God” allows courage and confidence in the unexpected and unpredictable.

And to add: any essential provisions of Confirmation Work and the Church must integrate the fundamental theological category of passivity. Practitioners might be quite right to search for concrete advice and best practice. But we must not forget, that frequently the most important insights and turnovers just occur – maybe because of pure coincidence, or maybe and hopefully as an unexpected gift from somewhere else.

Therefore, what is required is trust in a two-folded sense: trust in the younger generation and trust in what might occur during the confirmation period. Confirmation and Church work should integrate this dimension of passivity, in the most professional and ambitious sense, of course, and with great awareness of the real challenges.

Thus, the reciprocity of Confirmation Work and the Church does also include the theological mindfulness of situations of activity and passivity, of activation and dedication, of listening and being heard and of developing and being built.

This requires a certain serene attitude amongst all the participants, maybe even a new sensitivity for what one could call the “mystical dimension” within this reciprocity.

It is probably this dialectic perspective on the given potentials and the active engagement of the young generation that is most adequate, not only for developing Confirmation Work, but for working actively and trusting passively in the future of the Church.