


Keeping the main thing, the main thing: An overview of a United States ecumenical study of confirmation

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An empirical study in five denominations in the United States provided a snapshot of current conceptions and practices of confirmation.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: Using a mixed-methods approach, this study yielded important comparative results among Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and African Methodist Episcopalians, highlighting denominational distinctives. The quantitative findings indicated priorities in both content areas and instructional practices, while the qualitative results suggested elements for constructive approaches to confirmation in the near future.

Keywords: confirmation; curriculum; practices of confirmation; instructional practices; age of confirmation; motivation; relationships; priority topics; teaching methods.

Introduction

From 2014 to 2016, leaders from five denominations in the United States (US) studied the practices of confirmation in the US. The research was generously funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. To our knowledge, this is one of the few empirically based studies on confirmation conducted in recent decades, if not the only one. The project included the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), the United Methodist Church (UMC), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Episcopal Church in the United States (ECUSA), and the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). Each of these Protestant traditions practises confirmation in some form, which also indicates that they practise infant baptism. Four of the denominations are historically Euro-American, while one is historically African-American. Although these five denominations are not representative of all denominations in the United States of America practising confirmation, they do reflect several core traditions. Our study revealed various insights into what was happening in the 2010s in relation to confirmation and suggested possible ways forward.

Our research team aimed to capture a snapshot of what occurs in confirmation programmes in the US during the mid-2010s and identify exemplary congregations engaging in innovative practices that could serve as models for other congregations. To achieve these goals, we implemented an ambitious mixed-methods empirical research programme. We partnered with a research firm to develop, administer, and analyse quantitative results. The quantitative empirical research involved responses from 3569 confirmation leaders, 1121 parents of confirmands, and 2087 confirmands themselves. For the qualitative aspects of our research, we conducted 18 site visits to congregations or camps within each of the denominations in our study. Our results do not represent all confirmation practices across the United States in mainline Protestant churches, but our study offers a significant cross-section and insights into several traditions and what they are doing. Further analysis and findings related to the research can be found in Douglass and Osmer (2018).

Quantitative findings

Surveys were distributed to every congregation within the five denominations under study. Most respondents were from the Midwest and the South, with substantial participation from the Northeast and the West. While we received a high number of responses from clergy and confirmands, there was a significantly smaller number of confirmation volunteers, youth workers, other church leaders, and parents not directly involved in confirmation work. The total number of participants

1. This article is the tenth in a series of 10 in this Supplementum. Like the others, this article is also a theological reflection on a concept that comes from the analysis of 123 qualitative interviews. The interviews were part of an empirical research project (Matthee 2023) on faith development or catechesis in which four Afrikaans-speaking denominations participated within the Reformation tradition.

Note: Special Collection: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Geloofsreis. Inwyding, Begeleiding en Onderskeiding nuut ontdek' under the expert guidance of guest editor Prof. Malan Nel.

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was 6777. We would have preferred more, but the sample size is statistically respectable.

We asked the respondents about their age, and we found that the average age for parents across the five denominations was 46 years, while the age of confirmation leaders – pastors and professional church leaders – was in the region of 54. Confirmands were, on average, 13 years old. These figures suggest middle-aged parents with young adolescent children, guided by church leaders in the latter stages of their professional careers. When we looked at the race or ethnic identity of those who responded to our surveys, we found some expected results: between 88% and 96% of respondents from the four Euro-American denominations were Euro-American, while 86% – 97% of respondents were from an African-American background.

When asking the confirmands about the number of close friends they have, over 40% indicated having between two and five, while more than half reported five or more close friends, which was a surprising result for us. A few respondents in any of our traditions reported having no or only one close friend.

An indirect measure of socioeconomic status, with interesting results, was the question, ‘How many books does your family have at home?’ Confirmands in the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches reported that around 25% of their families had over 500 books at home, with another 25% having between 251 and 500. By contrast, only 12% of African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) confirmands had over 500 books at home, and 16% reported between 251 and 500. These disparate numbers were also reflected roughly when we asked about levels of educational attainment of parents and confirmation leaders.

Most of the parents responding to the survey were female, with an average of 83% across the five denominations. Among confirmation leaders, gender was evenly split, except in the AME, where 70% of those teaching confirmation were female and about 30% were male. When we asked youth about their gender, responses skewed somewhat noticeably towards females, with 53% – 62% of the respondents were identified as female.

When compared, our study highlighted distinct characteristics within each denomination’s confirmation practice (Table 1). The ELCA Lutherans have the most extended confirmation instruction period, typically lasting two or more years and incorporating varied instructional methods and creative programmes across this time of instruction. The PC(USA) was notable for using non-parental adult mentors who guided confirmands and for emphasising the composition and presentation of faith statements – a unique confessional approach. The Episcopal Church in the United States of America (ECUSA) placed significant importance on the right of confirmation itself. The liturgical embodiment of confirmation held deep significance for all involved.

TABLE 1: Denominational differences.

Instruction period	ECUSA	ELCA	PCUSA	UMC
0–3 months	40%	-	31%	42%
4–6 months	27%	2%	28%	29%
7–12 months	24%	9%	36%	22%
13–24 months	7%	51%	4%	6%
> 2 years	2%	38%	-	1%
Median duration	5 months	24 months	6 months	4 months

Source: Douglass, K.M. & Osmer, R.R. (eds.), 2018, *Cultivating teen faith: Insights from the confirmation project*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI

ECUSA, Episcopal Church in the United States of America; ELCA, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; PCUSA, Presbyterian Church in the United States of America; UMC, United Methodist Church.

Interestingly, the Episcopal Church also involves participants of all ages as students and confirmation, and not just teenagers. The UMC stood out for its focus on learning through service and acts of charity to help other people outside the classroom. The AME downplayed the rite of confirmation, often favouring terms like ‘youth empowerment’ for the term ‘confirmation’ and emphasises community-focused topics such as identity and justice. When we asked parents and leaders in all five denominations about how they understood confirmation, there was an agreement that it is widely seen as ‘an affirmation of the baptismal covenant in adolescence or as renewal of the covenant at any time during life’s pilgrimage’ and that confirmation is an opportunity for youth to mature in faith and join the congregation.

Our research observed notable differences in the duration of confirmation programme sessions. Most respondents indicated that sessions typically last between 61 and 90 min, with nearly one-third of our respondents reporting sessions lasting between 90 minutes to 2 hours. This finding indicates that confirmation instruction often takes place outside regular Sunday school hours.

When we asked about the motivations behind people’s participation in confirmation, some significant trends emerged (Figure 1). Generally, parents and confirmation leaders agreed that confirmation should provide an opportunity for confirmands to strengthen their faith, ask questions about their beliefs, and they should be encouraged to make a personal decision about faith. The confirmands themselves expressed the strongest interest in strengthening their faith and having the opportunity to question their beliefs and those of their tradition. There was noticeably less interest in allowing young people or confirmands to determine the topics covered during confirmation. Youth-determined content was the lowest priority for parents, confirmation leaders, and the confirmands themselves.

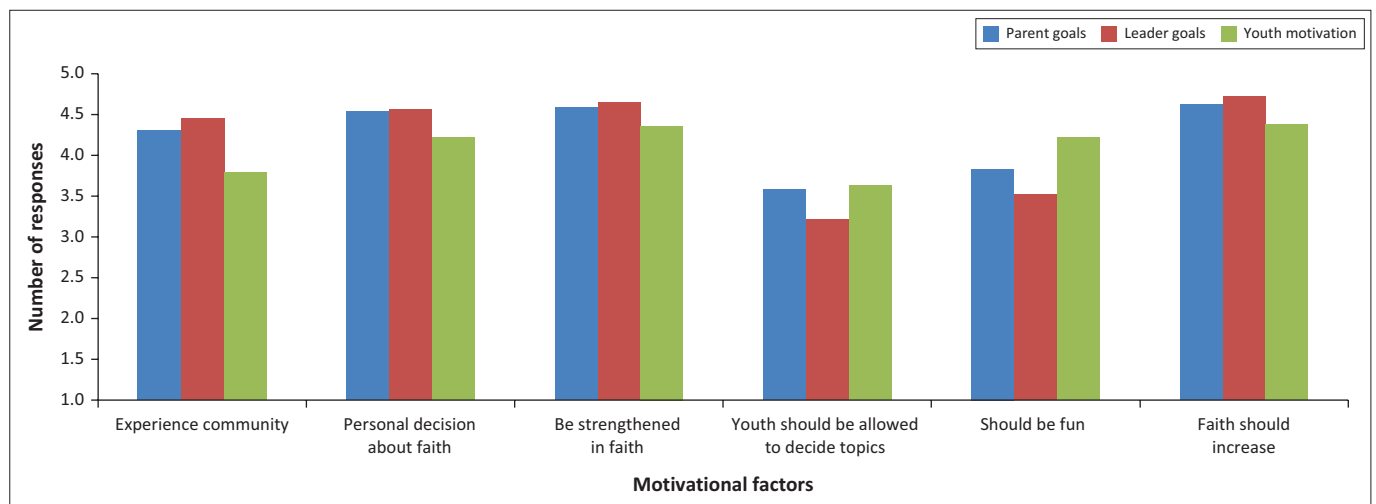
The data clearly shows that everyone involved in confirmation values the opportunity to study the core aspects of Christian belief and practice. When we explored motivations further, almost no one mentioned money or gifts as reasons for participating. Likewise, very few cited peers influence, or the idea that confirmation was fun as their motivation. Interestingly, confirmands placed slightly more emphasis than parents or leaders on confirmation

being enjoyable, although this was not their primary motivation. Evidence suggests that young people who did not find confirmation enjoyable were likely to show a decline in faith and related measures. Therefore, while enjoyment may not be the top priority, making the process engaging and enjoyable is important for its effectiveness.

We also investigated the key topics participants felt should be covered in confirmation instruction (Figure 2). Consistently, parents, leaders, and young people all expressed interest in core matters of Christian belief and practice.

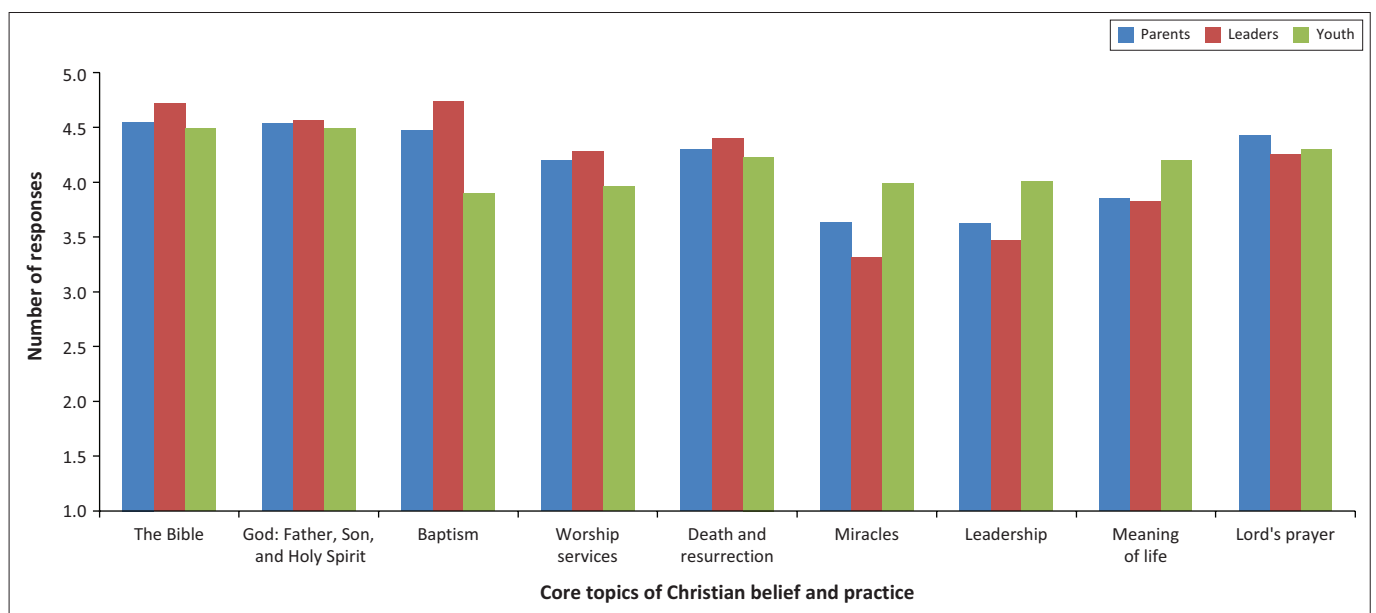
There was comparatively less interest in topics like miracles or church leadership. Specifically, young people identified their top four areas of interest as the Bible (its nature and how to read it), the specifically Christian nature of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the meaning of the Lord's Prayer, and

the Ten Commandments. Parents of confirmands expressed a desire for their children to learn about the Lord's Supper, the Bible, the Trinity, and the meaning of baptism. Confirmation leaders shared similar priorities with parents, highlighting baptism, the Bible, Holy Communion, and God as Trinity. Interestingly, confirmands showed a greater interest in learning about the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments than the sacraments. Conversely, among parents, leaders, and confirmands across the five denominations, the topics of least interest for confirmation were abortion, gay marriage, drug abuse, and church governance. No one we surveyed was particularly interested in including these 'hot topics' as core elements of the confirmation curriculum. Our findings suggest that for confirmation, all parties are focused on the heart of Christian belief and practice. In other words, Americans involved in confirmation within Protestant churches are keen to 'keep the main thing the main thing'.



Source: Douglass, K.M. & Osmer, R.R. (eds.), 2018, *Cultivating teen faith: Insights from the confirmation project*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI

FIGURE 1: Comparison of motivation of parents, leaders and confirmands.



Source: Douglass, K.M. & Osmer, R.R. (eds.), 2018, *Cultivating teen faith: Insights from the confirmation project*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI

FIGURE 2: Importance of topics covered in confirmation.

In our empirical research, we also examined the instructional methods used in confirmation programmes across the five denominations (Figure 3). Over recent decades, there has been a significant shift. Traditionally, confirmation was taught through direct instruction, typically in lectures by the pastor. While direct instruction is not entirely absent, it is now a primary method for only about two-thirds of confirmation teachers. The most widely used methods of teaching today are group discussions (94.5%) and group Bible reading and study.

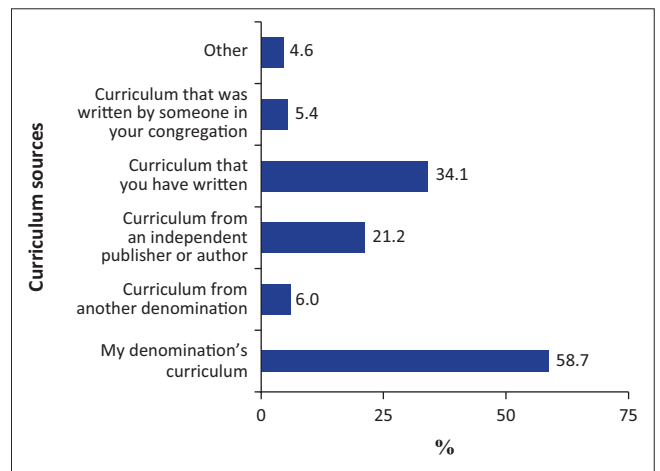
Our findings indicated that inquiry-led discussions, or discussions driven by questions, play a significant role in confirmation programmes. Video materials, including YouTube clips were also used quite frequently, along with games, which feature prominently (60%). This means that confirmation instruction in the United States has become significantly more interactive and dialogue-based in recent decades. At the other end of the spectrum we found limited use of memorisation quizzes and tests, and somewhat surprisingly, interreligious dialogue. These trends stand out, especially when compared with classical Protestant confirmation instruction or even catechetical instruction in the Early Church. Today, confirmation instruction actively involves learners in engaging and creative interactions with the subject matter, with most programmes using multiple instructional methods rather than relying on a single approach.

Our quantitative findings also offer important insights into curriculum use in confirmation pedagogy (Figure 4). In past decades, it was common to use materials produced

by one's own denomination. Today, however, only slightly more than half of the confirmation programmes still use or rely on denominational curricula. More than a third of programmes now follow curricula developed by educational leaders within particular congregations.

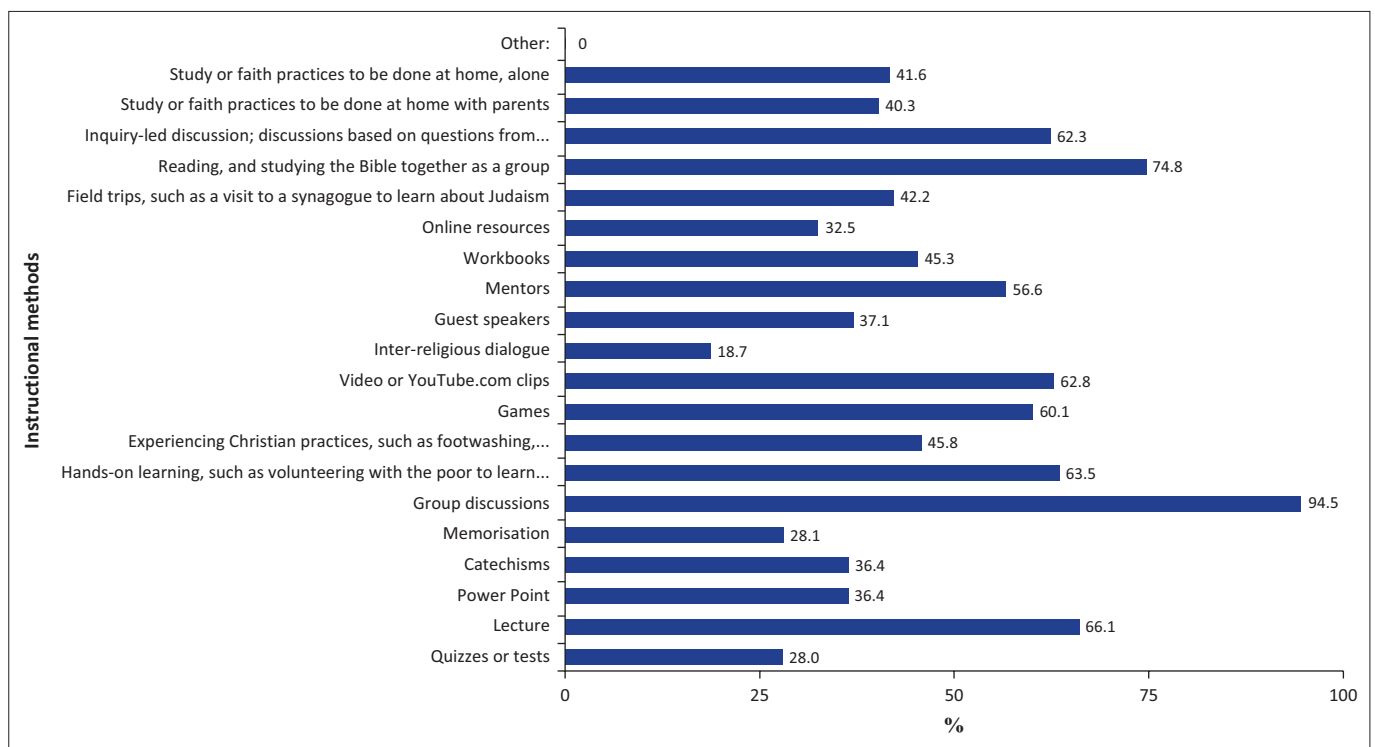
There is little evidence that confirmation programmes use curricula from other denominations; only 6% of our respondents indicated using confirmation materials developed by a different tradition. One in five programmes, however, use a curriculum developed by an independent publisher or author.

When reflecting on patterns observed across our quantitative empirical research, we discovered some significant trends.



Source: Douglass, K.M. & Osmer, R.R. (eds.), 2018, *Cultivating teen faith: Insights from the confirmation project*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI

FIGURE 4: Curriculum use in confirmation pedagogy.



Source: Douglass, K.M. & Osmer, R.R. (eds.), 2018, *Cultivating teen faith: Insights from the confirmation project*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI

FIGURE 3: The instructional methods used in confirmation programmes.

Our data shows that relationships are a significant dimension of the confirmation curriculum. Interaction between youths and adults, as well as among youths themselves, is pivotal in the confirmation process. The quality of these relationships may even outweigh the importance of the printed curriculum. Today's confirmation programmes are designed to convey content in relationally engaging ways, with adult mentors emerging in recent decades as crucial in many of the programmes we studied. As one would expect, we found a strong correlation between strong faith environment at home, support for religious beliefs and practice, and the development of high levels of commitment among confirmands. By contrast, confirmands from homes with weaker or ambivalent faith engagement tend to show relatively low commitment to Christian beliefs and involvement in the wider congregation. Those from highly connected and deeply committed Christian homes demonstrate commitment levels nearly double those of confirmands from weak or ambivalent faith-oriented homes. This suggests that the most effective confirmation programmes are integral to the whole constellation of educational programmes and faith-building ministries within a congregation.

Qualitative empirical research

As mentioned at the outset, our empirical efforts aimed to understand current practices in confirmation programmes today through both quantitative and qualitative empirical research methods. The qualitative empirical research helped us to bring into focus things that related to the quantitative findings but also gave us some greater depth of insight and context. Our research team conducted moderate participant observation in 24 confirmation and equivalent practice ministries. We sought exemplary cases in each of the five denominations that demonstrated effectiveness and creativity, identified through social media, denominational leaders, and academic recommendations in the field of religious education. The specific profiles of the cases that we examined can be found on our website.² Four key learnings emerged from our qualitative work: custom-designed approaches, the importance of leadership, and an integration into a larger constellation of education formation and relationships.

Custom-designed approaches

As practical theologians, our research team took it as axiomatic that context always matters. This was certainly validated in our study, where it became clear that 'one size does not fit all'. The most effective programmes always had a custom design element to them. The specific demographic features and cultural norms of a congregation and the community in which it is located, were treated as design parameters and not merely as accidental contingencies. Tools from congregational studies in practical theology and of the theory and practice of ethnography in cultural anthropology proved to be invaluable in designing or adjusting programmes for contextual relevance. Three team

2. www.theconfirmationproject.com.

members later published an article in *Lutheran Word and World* quarterly journal, detailing methods for developing contextually suitable confirmation programmes.³

Leadership matters

Confirmation programmes do not function autonomously or algorithmically. Effective programmes require leaders who are deeply committed to and knowledgeable about confirmation theory and practice. Furthermore, establishing dynamic confirmation programmes often involves team leadership. Those teams often consist of a pastor or a staff member specialising in education and youth ministries as their primary responsibility, alongside adult volunteers, usually serving as mentors, and often parents. In some cases, youth who have completed a confirmation programme contribute to the leadership team. Successful confirmation leaders have articulate to the wider congregation and compromise themselves with a compelling vision for what the confirmation process is all about. They also have a solid grasp of the subject matter and possess some ability to use multiple methods of instruction, particularly those centred on discussion, inquiry, and discovery. Effective leaders for confirmation also seem to have an orientation which leads them to empower and equip young people for a life of faith and service.

One aspect of a larger integrated whole

There is a dynamic relationship between the congregation's culture of discipleship and its ability to have confirmation ministry play a significant role in young people's lives. Confirmands with high commitment in belief and practice typically have prior involvement in educational and discipleship formation activities within the congregation, such as church school, vacation Bible school, camp and camp experiences, and specialised educational activities. In addition, many dynamic confirmation programmes we studied make an effort to integrate confirmands in the congregation's worship life. Many dynamic confirmation programmes encourage or require active participation in the congregation's worship life, with some confirmands even taking leadership roles in regular worship services.

Relationships matter

Interactions between people and confirmation programmes seem more significant than the printed curriculum itself. Like the church more broadly, confirmation is a fundamentally relational endeavour. Relationships of trust and care enable meaningful engagement with curricular content, fostering affirmative and active commitments. It is important to get this matter correct. Programmes that overemphasise purveying propositions or theological content without a matrix of relationality between persons, run the risk of functioning merely as a hoop through which one must jump or as 'doing time' before one can be liberated from the church at the end of confirmation.

3. Elton, Kimball and Mikoski (2018).

Interestingly, two factors – congregation size and budget for educational ministry or confirmation – have little bearing on the effectiveness of the youth confirmation programme. Rather, it is the congregation's discipleship ethos, the calibre of its leaders, and the quality of relational interactions within confirmation programmes that determined their success. Even small programmes with a single confirmand can be impactful, while large programmes are not guaranteed success based on numbers alone. Effective programmes blend quality relational interaction with carefully chosen content and instructional methods.

The duration of the programme also varied widely across the five denominations. We found no ideal period for effective confirmation, although longer programmes generally offer more opportunities for relationship-building, exploration of faith that leads to bigger questions considering Scripture and tradition, and integration of core Christian beliefs and practice into daily life. Although some long programmes can be quite tedious rather than an exciting transition into more fulfilling Christian discipleship, our research find that it is hard to imagine confirmation programmes that would be effective in under 2–3 months. In fact, confirmation programmes can be successfully completed within a period of 3 months to 2 years. Confirmation as a major opportunity to reflect on the Bible, the triune God, the Christian life, the church the sacraments, et cetera, requires enough time for relationships to develop and for questions to be explored and answers to be integrated. While the length of time is not the primary factor, the quality of interactions and engagement with core subject matter is crucial. Although funding is not the highest priority for programme success, it is not an insignificant factor either. Ultimately, confirmation should be an engaging, interactive, and enjoyable process.

A few concluding theological thoughts

St. Augustine offers valuable guidance for designing effective and enjoyable confirmation programmes for today and in the future. Someone wrote to St. Augustine asking him what should be taught about Christianity to people who were inquirers. Augustine's response was clear in *The First Catechetical Instruction*, or sometimes translated as *On Teaching the Unlearned*. In that book, he emphasises two key aspects: content and method. In terms of content, Augustine stresses that the most important lesson for inquirers about Christianity is rooted in I John 4:8 – God is love. With that key theological conviction, Augustine provided a proto-curriculum based on the entirety of Scripture. He omits and includes biblical stories in a way that underscores, reinforces, and builds towards the conclusion provided by 1 John 4:8. Beginning with creation and ending with the hope for the future, Augustine says we must teach the Bible in a way that keeps the main thing the main thing. In other words, we must teach the Bible in a way that helps us to see the radical love of God for humanity and our call as humans to respond to that love by loving God with all our heart,

soul, mind, and strength, loving ourselves and our neighbours – even our enemies. That insight alone is worth the price of admission to the book, but Augustine also makes the point in this little treatise that teaching well-chosen themes and stories from the Bible must be done in a loving manner. It does no good, Augustine says, to teach about love in a harsh or unkind way. In fact, teaching the content of love in an unloving manner, negates the content that one is trying to purvey. So those who teach must teach with the power of creative love for the learners to be able to hear the message about God's love and about our response to that love by becoming loving people.

In *On Christian Doctrine*, another one of Augustine's smaller books he extends this idea, suggesting that the goal of Christian instruction is the 'enjoyment of the Trinity'. What is the aim for our teaching and confirmation and more broadly all teaching in the church? It is, to be sure, to encourage a sense of apprehension of God's love for us and our call to become loving people toward God, toward ourselves, and others. Yet, *On Christian Doctrine* pushes the matter one step further: the aim of all our teaching is a joyful relationship with God. In the end, confirmation should guide young people toward a life of worship, praising and experiencing the mystery of God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the ultimate point of confirmation teaching is not our erudition, our effectiveness, or our ability to make things happen. The ultimate point of our effort is to help young people enter a doxological way of life, singing the praises of God and enjoying that ineffable mystery forever.

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Competing interests

The author reported that they received funding from Lilly Endowment, Inc. which may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed publication. The author has disclosed those interests fully and has implemented an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from their involvement. The terms of these funding arrangements have been reviewed and approved by the affiliated University in accordance with its policy on objectivity in research.

Author's contribution

G.S.M. is the sole author of this research article.

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Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Pretoria, Faculty of Theology and Religion on 01 December 2022 with ethical clearance number T111/22.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are openly available in the University of Pretoria research data at <https://doi.org/10.25403/UPresearchdata.28182179.v1>.

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