



# Shaping theFuture

Summer 2011

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## Confirmation: So What's Really Going On?

By Rev. Dr. John W. Oberdeck

These blogs originally appeared on the PEN network page of the LEA website. Contribute your thoughts!

**Posted October 20, 2010** We never seem to tire of that question; primarily because confirmation for many of us is either the source of our most affirming satisfaction or the font of our deepest frustrations. But now, thanks to the dogged pursuit and meticulous examination of confirmation ministry by Dr. Marvin Bergman, Emeritus of Concordia University Nebraska, just about every conceivable question has an empirical answer. My own romance with confirmation began early.

My junior confirmation experience was a major factor guiding me toward ministry. As a vicar and parish pastor I taught confirmation classes. For several years I taught the venerable elective *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* first designed by Arthur Repp, author of the classic by the same name, at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. I was part of the task force that published *A Study of Youth Confirmation and First Communion in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (1998). My own dissertation consisted of a comparison of how pastors and teachers approach the teaching of religion; a very self-serving project in that it revealed that “P-120 Pastor as Educator,” a required course that I taught, was the only class on campus for which there was empirical evidence that it actually made a difference in pastoral practice.

Those research projects pale in comparison with the comprehensive work of Bergman, whose own research into confirmation ministry has now spanned at least four decades. [What's Happening in LCMS Confirmation? A Summary of Findings Based on Nine Populations](#), made available on the Internet in July of this year, is simply massive. This project surveyed pastors and DCEs, confirmands, parents of confirmands, high school youth recently confirmed, pastors and DCEs identified by their district officials as having excellent confirmation programs, confirmands and parents in those excellent programs, and presidents and education leaders from the districts and the CUS system. Bergman reports on 375 different questions answered by nearly 2,500 respondents. The survey had a response rate of 45.6%, making the study the envy of all who do survey research!

Anything surprising come out of all this work? To try to summarize the 117-page raw report – Bergman supplies the data and statistical results without drawing conclusions – in a blog would be criminal. Nevertheless, next week I'll share with you several results that shocked, troubled, comforted, or confirmed my own presuppositions about confirmation. I invite you to join me.

**Posted December 15, 2010** Did you look at it? – The [study by Dr. Marvin Bergman](#), Emeritus from Concordia University Nebraska? Very impressive, isn't it? To be sure, it does take some effort on our part to draw conclusions from the study that we can actually apply in our own ministry contexts. Nevertheless as we look through the data, we can see where our individual rock is strewn on the rolling, and often arid, plain of confirmation instruction.

A lot of information confirmed my suspicions and established, once again, the incredible consistency of human nature. For example, the major frustrations of confirmation leaders include lack of commitment by parents, scheduling and time constraints, student apathy and dropouts, and the graduation syndrome – nothing new or surprising here.

What is surprising, however, is the complex nature of the relationship of parental involvement and the

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*What is surprising, however, is the complex nature of the relationship of parental involvement and the effective instruction of their children.*

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## Review, Reflect, Resolve

We'd love to hear from you! How did your confirmation experience help or hinder your future in ministry?

What were your assumptions about confirmation before reading Bergman's research?

How have your views on confirmation changed during your ministry?



Other articles you might be interested in in this issue of **Shaping the Future:**

[Taking a Turn in the Road by Ron Royuk \(EncourAGEnet\)](#)

[Crossing Over from Fear to Hope by Rev. Dean Nadasdy \(Feature\)](#)

[A Hanoi Tiger Rises by Steve Winkelman \(GLEnet\)](#)

effective instruction of their children. Through Bergman's statistical analysis we learn the factors that are not related to parents being more involved in the confirmation classes. What factors are not related? – Get this... confirmand level of interest, confirmand assessment of importance of confirmation, help given by confirmation in class to live as a Christian, and confirmand current level of activity in the church! Doesn't this indicate that the role of the leader still does have influence? Leaders need to be well prepared and well equipped with multiple learning strategies at their fingertips.

My bias in this matter is supported by the question that asked high school students about their frustrations when they were in confirmation class. The third most frequent response was "Classes that were boring and/or not organized." (The second frustration was "Having to memorize all that stuff which we quickly forgot." Coming in first was "Disruptions during classes caused by other confirmands." With that response we find ourselves in a discussion on classroom discipline management. When did we receive training in classroom management?)

*Leaders need to be well prepared and well equipped with multiple learning strategies at their fingertips.*

On the other hand Bergman's study clearly points out the positive effect high levels of parental involvement have on confirmation instruction. Positive attitudes on the part of involved parents correlate at a high level with leader satisfaction with parental involvement. This simply tells us that when parental involvement is working, it really works well. This may account for the fact that when confirmation leaders were asked about changes in confirmation that are needed, the number one response was "More parent involvement."

Do you get the sense that I haven't even scratched the surface of this rich gold mine of information? This vein runs thick and deep. I didn't even come close to the big questions – the questions about faith development, the purpose of confirmation, and growing trust in the cross of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. A blog can have only so many words, you know. Happy digging!

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## COMMENTS

We have larger confirmation classes and "table hosts" at each round table of students who help keep discussion on track and/or help with in class tasks as needed. They don't have to be super Christians or even Lutheran because the pastor or DCE does the guided teaching. These hosts more often than not are parents. A frequent comment falls along the line of "what a great review" or "I didn't remember most of this" or "I never knew that." A few years ago, one dad who was not a member came consistently as a table host and was even "confirmed" with the class the same day as his son.

We also have several "modules" that are taught by a pastor or DCE that require participation by at least 1 parent for every student: The baptism module and Lord's supper module (taught with a mini seder), and the Learning about Sexuality modules. These have been very popular.

We try to use the latest educational techniques and do benefit from having trained educators in the planning process for this curriculum.

My mom always said it was a sin to bore people with the Gospel.... I agree... but oh how much work it takes to truly teach and not just "talk at." I have great empathy for the lone wolf pastor struggling to do it all alone.

## Jill Hasstedt, DCE

### Do you have thoughts to share? Contribute here:

Name

E-mail address

I'd like my contribution to be anonymous.

Your message



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