***Sample Theological Blueprint for Ministry Remodeling: Confirmation Process***

In our church, Confirmation is a significant rite of passage for students. Every year, students in sixth grade come together for six weeks to learn the basics of the Christian faith, and also the specific beliefs of the United Methodist Church. At the end of these few weeks together the students are brought before the congregation as a sign that they understand all that they have learned and in order to officially be confirmed into the congregation.

Over the past several years Confirmation has been led by our senior pastor during the spring semester. The reason it has been held in the spring is because a local UMC camp sponsors a Confirmation retreat in January. This event has always been used as the kick-off event for the students. Following the retreat weekend, there are usually six class times that the senior pastor leads to finish the work that was started at the retreat. These class times focus on teaching the basics of the Christian faith in addition to the specifics of the United Methodist Church. Most of the time, discussion has not been a large part of the curriculum. Instead, the students listen to and internalize all of the information given to them.

Traditionally, every student has an adult from the church as a mentor throughout this process. The student and his or her family choose this person, so usually the mentor is a family friend who the parents know well. However, the mentor has not typically been very involved in the actual process of confirmation. Of the six weeks of class, the mentors have only been present for typically one or two of the meetings. As a result, the relationship between the student and the mentor never really has a chance to develop past what is already established between the two to begin with. There doesn’t seem to be much of a chance for any significant times of mentoring to happen.

At the end of the six weeks, the church hosts a dinner for the confirmands, their families, and their mentors the Saturday night before Confirmation Sunday. Some mentors decide to give their confirmands a small gift, other mentors do not. On Confirmation Sunday, the students are brought to the front of the church and are officially confirmed by the senior and associate pastor by laying hands on and praying over them. The congregation loves this, as they are able to see, and possibly meet for the first time, these new adolescent members of the church.

The issue at hand, however, is that Confirmation doesn’t seem to be having any real effect on the students that go through the process. If the sixth grader returns to church at all as a seventh grader, his or her knowledge of the faith, let alone his or her commitment to it, is no different after Confirmation than it was at the start. Ultimately, Confirmation just doesn’t matter. As it stands now, it is a waste of six weeks.

There are many nuances to the answer to the question of why Confirmation is the way it is, but the easiest way to frame it is by saying it is this way because of tradition. Confirmation has always been done this way.

For the families of the church, Confirmation is seen as a rite of passage. Parents plan for their child to be confirmed in the sixth grade, period. It is akin to graduating from elementary school and entering middle school. A sixth grader learns what it means to become an adolescent, they hit puberty, and they get confirmed. These things are a given. Though the student has complete power to decide not to be confirmed, to do so would be socially unacceptable.

This may seem like a bad thing that parents are so adamant about their kid being confirmed in the sixth grade, but I’m not so sure. Of course, to virtually take away the student’s ability to say no to being confirmed is an issue, but the fact that the parents hold confirmation as a priority is good. Misguided or not, the student is brought to confirmation, even if that is the only time we see him or her.

Of course, it is not ideal if the parents of the students see confirmation as important, but do not see consistent church involvement as such. In her book, *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean quotes the National Study of Youth and Religion that says, “parents generally, ‘get what they are,’ in religion as in most things.”[[1]](#footnote-1) If parents bring their child to church in order to get confirmed, and then just as easily disappear again once it is over, the students will simply mirror that action. So, though it is good that the parents are adamant about bringing their child, it is only a starting point. It is not enough.

Therefore, it seems that the bigger issue is how confirmation is currently conducted. Following the Confirmation retreat in January, there are six weeks of class. The confirmands are taught what it means to be a United Methodist Christian. It seems that this method not only bores the students to death, but also simply feeds a consumerist mentality among our families. Parents want our church to provide the product of Confirmation for their kids. The students therefore come in, and for six weeks are given the information needed. The students are then confirmed, and become full members of the church. It is a clear cut transaction.

This ideology of consumerism convinces youth and their families of the lie that teenagers are defined as nothing more than consumers. In the book *Consuming Youth*, John Berard and his fellow authors say,

*Youth are viewed by our advanced capitalist system as buyers of goods and services. Not only that, but they’re also aggressively targeted as both a present and future market. Their value stems from the understanding that they have large, disposable incomes that they’re more than willing to part with for things that are cool, look good, sound good, or taste good...[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Though Confirmation is not a product that they are purchasing from the church, it is a service of sorts. We are offering the youth full membership in the church, and as mentioned above, this is a culturally valuable commodity in the eyes of our students’ parents. But just as with buying the services of a car wash, relationships do not matter. There is no actual relationship built between the student, family, and church; there is only Confirmation. The result is that there is no difference seen in the students. There is no engagement with the church by the family or student after Confirmation Sunday. The church provides a service, and once the service is done, the relationship ends.

This clearly is not compatible with what Confirmation truly should be. Confirmation is the time when a person decides to claim their baptism for themselves. In the United Methodist Church, most infants are baptized. Once they are old enough to make the decision for themselves, they can decide to be confirmed in the faith in which they have been raised. They confirm the work of grace in their lives. God has claimed them as God’s child through baptism, and through confirmation the Christian claims God as their God.

Further, Confirmation is about becoming a part of the body of Christ. It is about becoming a family member in the family of God. Confirmation is about becoming an active participant in the work of God through the Church. It is about becoming a witness to Christ in the world.

When we read Ephesians, we see a framework for what Confirmation should be about:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Confirmation is about claiming the fact that God’s grace has been at work in our lives, bringing us salvation. Therefore, our identity is found in Christ, not through our consumption. Again, *Consuming Youth* says, “According to Erik Erikson, identity formation is a key task during adolescence…In this environment [of advanced industrial societies], youth are prone to manipulation by corporate enterprises eager to provide them with an identity for a price.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Should the church not recognize the developmental significance of adolescence and offer youth an identity rooted in the free, unmerited grace of Christ, not in the whims of corporations and the culture industry?

Also, this grace has called us into more than just a stagnant life, but an active way of life that is marked by our good works. Confirmation is not about us passively consuming the product of church membership, but is about us learning to respond to God’s call to be on mission as the community of faith, the body of Christ in the world. It is about helping youth realize that “they can do far more than [people] give them credit for – especially given the reality that youth can, right now, live into their calling with practice.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Confirmation, then, is about helping youth practice what it means to be a witness to Christ in the world.

If Confirmation should be shaped by our commitment to Christ and Christ’s mission in the world through the Church, and not by our desire to gain something for ourselves, what must be different? I propose that the role of mentors and community worship must be held in high regard, along with the actual participation in good works.

If students are going to learn how to be Christ’s witnesses to the world, they need a good example to follow. Mentors must play a vital role in the Confirmation process, not just a formality who may or may not give a gift at the end of it all. Also, participation in corporate worship on Sunday mornings is vital in the practice of being a witness to Christ in the world.

Also, if Confirmation is about becoming a participant in the work of God through the Church, then the bulk of the time spent should not be in class gathering information, but should be in service to others. Mentors and confirmands, and preferably the families of the confirmands too, should go out and practice doing the good works that “God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” It is in the context of this activity of the church that the information will finally mean something. Does it not make more sense to teach the students about John Wesley’s love for the poor by going out and serving the poor?

In Confirmation, the student should practice taking part in the worship and work of the Church. And with the mentor’s guidance, this practice will be in the context of the community of faith, who is teaching the confirmand who God is, and what it means to be a member of the body of Christ.

***So...What Now?***

The question now is how to move the Confirmation program at M\*\*\*\*\* M\*\*\* UMC from its current structure to where it should be as discussed above. The following pages will act as a blueprint of how to achieve this transition.

**Plan of Action**

1. Approach the senior and associate pastors with the proposed plan as laid out below. (To be accomplished prior to June 1.)
2. Approach the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) with the proposed plan as approved by the senior pastor. (To be accomplished prior to end of June.)
3. Once approved by senior pastor and YAC, begin recruiting and training adult mentors and planning service opportunities in conjunction with the Confirmation Coordinator.
4. Hold a meeting with the parents of all incoming sixth graders to outline the details of the plan. (To be accomplished by mid-July.)
5. Confirmation will begin with the new school year programing in September.

**Proposed Plan for Confirmation**

**Key Programmatic Components**

*Sixth Grade Sunday School Class*

* This class will use Sparkhouse Publishing’s Re:form curriculum for the entire school year. This curriculum allows for good discussion across a broad spectrum of the basics of the Christian faith.
* We will recruit two (2) adults to teach this class on Sunday mornings, one female and one male teacher.

*Monthly Mission Projects*[[6]](#footnote-6)

* Once a month on a Saturday morning, the Confirmation class (confirmands, mentors, and confirmand families) will take part in some form of mission project.
* Projects may be serving the MMUMC family, or may be serving the greater O\*\*\*\* B\*\*\*\*\* or Memphis communities.

*Annual Camp Lake Stephens Confirmation Retreat*

* In January, the confirmands will take a trip to O\*\*\*\*\* for the Confirmation weekend retreat.

*Basics of United Methodism*

* In the spring semester, following the Confirmation retreat, there will be four non-consecutive weeks of class on Sunday afternoons in which confirmands and mentors come together to learn the basics of what it means to be a United Methodist.
* These classes will use Sparkhouse Publishing’s Re:form Traditions curriculum. This curriculum offers a good overview of Wesleyan theology and its practical implications.

*Community Worship*

* In the fall semester, there will be four non-consecutive weeks of class on Sunday afternoons in which confirmands and mentors come together to learn the basics of the significance of various aspects of our church’s worship services including the sacraments, different creeds, the liturgical calendar, etc.
* In conjunction with the Director of Worship and pastors, confirmands will consistently attend Sunday morning worship and participate in the service in meaningful ways.

**Key Persons**

*Confirmation Coordinator*

* This person will assist the Youth Director in coordinating aspects of Confirmation such as:
  + The planning and scheduling of mission projects
  + Scheduling and coordinating details for various meetings and class times
  + Communicating with parents and mentors

*Director of Worship*

* We will work in conjunction with this person in regards to:
  + Teaching about our community worship
  + Having the confirmands actively participate in worship

*Adult Mentors*

* Each confirmand will have (at least) one mentor
* The confirmand and his or her family will have the option of choosing who their mentor will be, but the church will also help recruit possible adult mentors
* Mentors will be responsible for attending all monthly mission projects, all eight Sunday afternoon meetings, and are expected to be present for Sunday morning worship in order to greet and encourage his or her confirmand on a weekly basis
* Mentors will have an initial training prior to the beginning of Confirmation

**Requirements for Confirmation**

***Each Confirmand will be required to do the following in order to be confirmed:***

* Be present along with their family for Sunday morning worship for three out of four weeks of the month during the school year.
* Participate along with their family in all of the monthly mission projects. (If they are unable to make it, the family will inform the Youth Director.)
* Be present for all eight Sunday afternoon meetings throughout the school year. (They should not miss any more than one meeting per semester.)

1. Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2010, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Berard, John, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett. *Consuming Youth: Leading Teens Through Consumer Culture*. Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2010, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ephesians 2:8-10 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Berard, John, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett. *Consuming Youth: Leading Teens Through Consumer Culture*. Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2010, p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., p. 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. These projects will follow the framework as suggested by Chap Clark and Kara Powell in chapter 6 of their book, *Deep Justice in a Broken World* (Clark, Chap, and Kara E. Powell. *Deep Justice in a Broken World: Helping Your Kids Serve Others and Right the Wrongs around Them*. Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2007.). They promote a five-step process that aims to move students into what the authors call ‘deep justice,’ through the steps of Focus, Action-Reflection, Support-Feedback, Debrief, and Learning Transfer. These steps involve the “combination of Scriptural reflection in the context of social action.” (p. 111) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)