

After Confirmation Keeping Youth Inspired and Connected

"The word of the Lord came to me, saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.' 'Ah, Sovereign Lord,' I said, 'I do not know how to speak; I am only a child.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord. Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, "Now, I have put my words in your mouth." —Jeremiah 1:4-9

Whether your church is large or small, when confirmation comes around, you will see young people you haven't seen in "a month of Sundays." It is wonderful if their appearance is the result of a true spirit of call. You are still lucky if they have reappeared because of peer pressure and not wanting to miss a special tradition; but there will most likely always be the youth who is there because "my parents made me come."

The PC (USA) has a very healthy theological position on Confirmation. No longer do we call it "communicants class" and dangle participation in the sacrament as the goal. So, with the table now open, what is the draw to confirmation?

We teach our youth that they are invited to confirm for themselves the vows taken on their behalf by their parents and church family at their baptism. After confirmation they will move from the roll as a baptized child of a member to the adult membership roll. We tell them they are taking responsibility for their own Christian growth and church responsibilities. But in the real world of a teenager, what does that mean? How will their life at church change? We are all aware of how common it is for some confirmands to disappear again after the act of joining their church. We need to find ways to ensure this isn't a rite of passage that means to the parent, "I don't have to make him get up anymore; I did my part." And to the youth, "Now I can skip church whenever I feel like it and my parents won't bug me."

The lifestyle of a new confirmand should be one of new responsibilities and excitement about what they may do as an adult member. Some of that enthusiasm should come out of the curriculum content and class experience, but what really changes for these young people at your church? Being confirmed should make a difference in how a young person experiences the church. For that difference to be positive, you need to be diligent in follow-up, but sensitive to the gifts and personality of the individual. Don't think of them as beginners who can be handed the simple tasks that have become a drag for others. Give them your best opportunities, support them in new challenges, and respect their responses. Your church and the church of the future will be blessed by the gifts and passions of these young people.

Ten Post-Confirmation Ideas

Here are a few suggestions, but be creative and add to the list based on your unique congregation:

- 1.** Every confirmand is invited to choose a committee to visit. If they enjoy the experience, they are invited by the chair to become a full member of the committee. This means being given voice, vote, and responsibilities. (Arranging this could be a part of the elder/sponsor's role following confirmation. Hopefully this person has gotten to know the youth well enough to suggest a place s/he could serve and use his/her gifts well.)
- 2.** If you don't have a youth choir, youth who love music and have musical talents could be invited to join the adult choir.
- 3.** Put these new members into the rotation for ushering and reading scripture during worship.
- 4.** Confirmed youth should be invited to be full-fledged teachers of children, not just helpers anymore. Most youth will not choose to leave their peers during the education hour on Sunday morning, but there are often those who are bored, don't fit in, or simply aspire to be teachers, who thrive and grow as teachers of young children. Be sure you have a supportive teaching partner in place so this is a positive experience for the young person.
- 5.** Invite a newly confirmed youth to help upgrade your church's technology. They are likely to know how to create a web site, an e-mail group, Twitter, Facebook, or simply create a spreadsheet for tracking attendance patterns.
- 6.** Brainstorm with them and let them give you suggestions for how to make your congregation more accessible and user friendly to members and nonmembers.
- 7.** Communicate with them as individuals now. Send your church newsletter to their personal e-mail address. Don't assume that their parents/guardians will tell them what's happening at church. Use their cell phones instead of their family's home phone to inform them of youth group events, changes, etc.
- 8.** Lift up the involvement of older youth when the younger youth are being confirmed. Invite them to speak at confirmation class or to help charge the new confirmands in worship. Role models need to be made visible to all.
- 9.** Establish a way to connect confirmands with adult members who can mentor them in their decisions about colleges and career goals.
- 10.** If your congregation elects youth as elders and deacons, cease referring to them as the Youth Elder/Deacon, some lesser, junior hybrid of the office. In our polity ordination makes every elder an elder for life. Be sure they understand that principle before they stand for election. Treat them seriously, help them go to a presbytery meeting, give them real responsibilities in committees, ask their opinion and respect their ideas.

If your congregation does not already have youth serving as elders and deacons, get that conversation started with other staff and pastors.

Ideas for Elder Sponsors

Though your official responsibility may end when the young person you sponsor is confirmed, this is a wonderful opportunity to continue the relationship and continue to be a positive role model and mentor in their life. This relationship will be life giving to you and the young person, as we all learn from each other throughout our life journeys.

1. Call or text them to check in a month after confirmation. Anything new in their life? Exams coming up? Is there a concert or sporting event you could attend soon to see them?
2. Send an email or card for their birthday, graduation, etc. If you'd like, give them a small gift for special occasions, or at the end of final exams week. Perhaps a gift card to Target, their favorite restaurant, iTunes, or coffee shop.
3. Depending on when your congregation confirms youth, some may be learning to drive soon after confirmation. If that's the case, get them a gift card to a local gas station.
4. Invite them to have lunch or dinner with you once a month, your treat, for casual and informal conversations. Let them choose the place and offer to pick them up instead of having a parent drop them off to support their independence. Or, meet them there if they are already driving age.
5. Learn about their interests for college and offer to write a character reference for college or job applications. Also, if you know a church member in the same field as the area of study the young person is interested in, offer to put them in contact with each other. Be sure to make the contact with the adult so the youth doesn't have to call or email someone they may not know well.
6. Invite them to join you for an event at the church-Advent workshop, serving at the soup kitchen, etc. Be sure they know they are always welcome at all events, not only youth group.
7. Be someone they can trust, and honor that they choose to trust you. And, always follow through if you have plans, or reschedule in a timely fashion as you would with anyone else. Let them know that they are valued and respected.

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