

Confirmed to a Sustainable Faith

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When I was 6 years old, I moved from a suburb of Chicago to Beloit, Wisconsin. One of the first people I met was a girl named Dara. We attended school together and she lived around the block from me, so we became fast friends. In first grade, Dara and I got some friends together to perform a Cinderella play for our friends and family. Seeing that I enjoyed drama as much as she did, Dara asked me if I wanted to join the drama group at her church. I did, and I started going every week. The youth minister of the church, Cindy, ran the group. She immediately took me under her wing. After just a few weeks of attending the group, Dara and Cindy asked me if I wanted to go to church on Sunday. My family never attended church, so I didn't quite know what that meant, but I liked Cindy and Dara so I agreed to go. And I loved it. The people were so nice and welcoming and immediately started caring about me- a complete stranger.

For the next 10 years, Dara's parents drove me to and from church every Sunday. One year after my very first church service, I asked to be baptized. My parents did not want to participate in the ceremony and my mom did not even attend, so instead of my parents being the ones pledging to walk with me in the Christian life, my pastor asked people in the congregation to be my sponsors. And I will never forget having all those people stand up, one by one, popping up all over the sanctuary, pledging to love me and care for me and be there for me on my

journey. I continued regularly attending this church- going to Sunday School, singing in the children's choir, participating in Vacation Bible School, joining the youth group.

When it came time for confirmation, the church paired me up with a mentor, Dara's dad, Denzil, with whom I already had a great relationship. Confirmation consisted of Denzil and I meeting each week to talk about a book that we read together called "Joshua: a Parable for Today." Sometimes we talked about the book, and sometimes we just talked about life, religion, God, or whatever else was on our minds.

I learned a lot at church- in Confirmation, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School classes, even choir and play practices—probably well over 1000 hours of learning. And I have to be completely honest with you- I remember very, very little of the details. Not until I started seminary and worked at churches did I start to remember facts like the books of the bible, the 10 commandments, the names of Jacob's sons and Jesus' disciples. I don't profess to know, even now, after 10 years of working in churches, every single bible story, character and reference (much to the chagrin of my friends who expect me to be the bible expert on trivia nights).

All of these details, these "facts and figures" as I like to call them, do not rank amongst the top lessons I learned at church, especially during those wonderful Confirmation discussions. I learned, and still remember and hold dear in my heart to this day, about love- how to be loved, how to love myself, how to love others, how to love even when it's hard. I learned the importance of acceptance, welcome, inclusion. I learned the value, worth and dignity of humanity. I learned what it meant to have a family- in my case, a church family- who genuinely loved and cared for me when I felt like no one else did. I learned that in my church (and thankfully in most churches I have ever been a part of), people could hold different beliefs, even

radically different beliefs, about everything under the sun, but still be welcomed and included and loved and cared for in the community.

I'll never forget the day that Denzil and I talked about the resurrection during one of our confirmation sessions. He admitted to me that he did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There was something very freeing about that conversation- knowing that it was okay to be under the same roof, sitting at the same table, with people who are different. It was comforting to know that I would still be welcomed at the table, even if I was different than others. Now I know this is not the case in a lot of churches, so I consider myself immensely blessed to have grown up at the First Congregational Church of Beloit, and ever since those very informative years, I have had an immense passion for religious education.

At Harvard, my primary focus was religious education, specifically Confirmation. I studied all kinds of different confirmation programs that churches use and the different reasons that churches have confirmation. Confirmation as a ritual used to be for adults-- immediately after baptism there was a laying of the hands, as I read about in Acts, whereby people received the gift of the holy spirit. Nowadays in many churches, babies are baptized and young people later confirm their baptism during Confirmation. Confirmation also involves an educational program that can serve many purposes-

- to teach of the values and traditions of Christianity

- to help youth explore their relationship with Christianity and the church

- to prepare youth for church membership,

- to keep youth engaged in the life of the church which they are joining

- to create in youth a sustainable faith that will last beyond high school.

My confirmation program as a child touched upon all those things, but the ultimate goal was helping me own my faith and keep it with me even after graduation. I learned how to ask questions, how to think about my faith and how to use my faith in my life. We didn't focus on bible memorization, or church history dates and facts. I've seen some confirmation programs that use tests and quizzes about the nitty gritty details of Christianity- more like a college course than a Confirmation program.

Ultimately, I have come to believe that confirmation should be a program that gives youth a faith that will help them through high school, college, and adulthood. The program can help youth internalize church teachings that can influence their decisions and support their lives. Confirmation can help youth understand the importance of the church community- when a young person inevitably asks- why in the world would I choose to go back to church at age 20 or 30 or 40- confirmation can teach them that the church is a loving, caring community of value, a place to discuss, ask questions, think and reason together. A place to learn about and experience God.

So how exactly do we do this in a confirmation program? I spent a year at Harvard trying to figure that out, and ended up writing a Confirmation curriculum for my Senior Thesis. The curriculum focuses on teaching young people through actions more than words- instead of lectures, youth have experiences- discussions, small group activities, hands-on learning, field trips, and most importantly, mentors who model love and faith. .

What influenced me most for this curriculum was a quote by William Ellery Channing, in his Sunday School Society Address of 1837:

“the great end in religious instruction is, not to stamp *our* minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own...not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth...not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought...not to *tell* them that God is good, but to help them to see and feel his [sic] love in all that He [sic] does within and around them.”

That's it! That's religious education! Not indoctrination, not forcing facts and memory verses down the throats and into the brains of our precious children, but facilitating experiences of the divine. Ultimately, it is not important whether the facts and figures are remembered, but it is important that our children remember the implicit messages of love, openness, and respect from the method of teaching and meaning behind those facts and figures. And these messages are not only taught during confirmation- but in every aspect of the church- from Sunday School class to how people treat each other.

Children may not remember all the facts and figures of the Bible, but they will remember the love they experienced at church, the acceptance, the openness, the respect, and the grace that was shared. They will remember their experience of God.

But children will also remember any hate, exclusion, closed-mindedness, pain, or fear they experience at church. In cases, at church dinners, at fellowship hour, in the sanctuary- our actions speak louder than our words. We can preach and teach all we want about love, but if we don't actually show love, we teach nothing.

One of my favorite sayings has always been, "Preach the Gospel, if necessary, use words." I've been asked to preach a sermon today, and have been using words for the most part, but this is not the only way, or I would argue, the best way, to teach and preach the love of Jesus. It isn't the facts and figures that move our children to know Jesus, it is *our* relationship with Jesus that moves our children to know Jesus. If we want children to have self-worth, to be ethical, to have an appreciation of right and wrong, a sense of the good and the true and the holy, and the saving grace of justice and empathy and equity; a sense of the sacred center both in themselves and in all of creation, we cannot rely on books, lectures, tests and memory verses. We must give our children the experience of a "community of love" in which to learn.

Amidst the struggles and difficulties I have had to face, I found a church family, a welcoming and loving community, and a rich, deep, practical faith. I discovered the grace of God to lift us out of life's most difficult circumstances. I felt more and more the beauty of God in our dark world. I know that without the church I would not have been able to make it as far as I have in life. And this is still true today. As I continue to experience life's ups and downs, I am continually blessed by the people, the churches, the communities, and the love in my life. As a youth minister, I want to pass this wisdom, this knowledge, this faith, this love of church to others. I did not learn these things by memorizing the 10 commandments. I learned by experiencing God at church in the lives of loving people. Teaching the love of God is the task of every member of the church-every single one of us- whether we teach Sunday School, mentor a confirmand, greet people at the door, welcome a new visitor, help serve a church dinner, or talk to the stranger sitting next to us. Let us lay our hands upon the world in love. Amen.