Marvin Bergman

Confirmation: An Outreach Ministry?!
Imagine a confirmation class which includes Roman Catholic, Jewish and Muslim youth!¹ Think of the questions, discussion, interaction, teaching and witnessing! Years later, these young people will remember their confirmation. This is what can happen when leaders, confirmands, and their parents are grasped by a vision of confirmation as an outreach ministry and a “You gotta come” attitude.

The purpose of this discussion of confirmation as an outreach ministry is to: 1. Present a rationale for structuring confirmation on the basis of the Great Commission; 2. Identify those to whom the Great Commission is directed; 3. Highlight opportunities for outreach among American youth; 4. Examine data related to the question, “Is confirmation in The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod an outreach ministry?” ⁵. Offer perspectives on ways in which confirmation can be an outreach ministry in a congregation’s mission.

A Rationale: The Great Commission

Though references in the literature to confirmation as an evangelism ministry are few, biblical texts which address this perspective are, among others, five grace-based directives given by the Lord of the church in Matthew 28:16–20, Mark 16:15–18, Luke 24:44–49, John 20:19–22, and Acts 1:8. In the Matthew 28 passage, one sees the basis of the mission, the content of the commission, the activities or process of the command, and the promise linked to “Go and make disciples.”²

The basis of the commission is the authority of a risen Lord who has overthrown the power of sin, death, and Satan. The foundation of Christ’s authority is a messenger’s announcement on the first Easter morning, “He is not here, for he has risen, as he said” (Matthew 28:6). In suffering and dying, rising from the dead, and proclaiming Good News, Christ is exercising the authority given to him to carry out the Father’s mission-mandate, that of reclaiming a terminal humankind and world.³

The content of the commission is equally clear, that of a sending Lord who charges his apostles to go to the nations! Though go in the Greek text is not an imperative, its centrifugal force is shaped by a syntactical connection with the imperative, “Make disciples!”⁴ A contemporary restatement is, “As a disciple, your purpose in life, at work, in the family, in the church, and in the larger community is engaging in the mission of making disciples!” The pursuit of this purpose is seen in early church records which reveal that Christians often witnessed spontaneously in their relationships with relatives, friends and co-workers.⁵

Origen described a Christian who began a conversation by reporting on an event or faith experience in the Christian community while paying careful attention to anyone who listened or asked questions. When a person expressed interest, the Christian would then take one aside for additional conversation.⁶ As a church historian reminds us, the exponential growth of the early church occurred through the witness of the apostles and their co-workers such as evangelists, pastors, teachers, deacons, and deaconesses as well as traders, merchants, slaves, workers, state officials, wives, husbands, and others.⁷

The activities or process of the commission is engaging in a single mission with two sides, baptizing and teaching. Through teaching, an adult is led to the baptismal waters which connect one with the death of Christ and rise to a new life (Romans 6:1–4). Through teaching, one who is baptized is further equipped for service and witness. The relationship of teaching, baptizing and teaching is seen in the early church’s catechumenate which transformed pagans into disciples through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The promise of the mandate given to Christ’s church is a guarantee of the presence, power,
and peace of the Risen Lord. As Christians engage in their mission, attacks by many sources in hostile environments can generate fear, a lack of vision, an absence of initiative, and a disinterest in change. However, that all opponents are subservient to a living Lord means that followers are to take risks and move forward with confidence in carrying out their mission.

To Whom Is the Great Commission Given?

These perspectives on the Great Commission sketched in broad strokes probably evoke an affirming response. What can motivate dissent is the question, “To whom is the Great Commission given?” More specifically, two contentious questions are, “Did Christ commission only the apostles and, in our day, only their representatives who are ordained?” Or, “Did Christ commission every believer as his witness?”

To make the claim that the recipients of Christ’s commission are only the apostles and their representatives today, or to say, for example, as some within our circles maintain, that a Christian nurse who shares the message of John 3:16 with a dying patient in a hospital cannot present an effective witness, is a misunderstanding which ignores a basic principle of interpretation, “Let Scripture interpret Scripture.”

Questions related to the recipients of Christ’s command need to be examined in the light of the Bible’s revelation of the character and mission of the living God. The big picture in the Scriptures portrays God as a sending, calling, rescuing God who: called out to Adam in the Garden (Genesis 3:9); made a covenant with Abram (Genesis 12, 15, 17); delivered Israel through the Exodus (Exodus 14); sent the prophet Amos to a rebellious people (Amos 7); promised a Messiah (Micah 5:2); named John the Baptist as a messenger to prepare the way (Luke 1:76–77); fulfilled promises in the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:11); and affirmed the mission of Jesus in his baptism (Matthew 3:16–17). The same mission was given to the Son who commissioned 72 missionaries, who sacrificed his life on a cross for the sins of the world, who sent the 11 on a world-wide mission (John 20:21), and who, through the Holy Spirit, empowered his followers to carry the Good News to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

That the Great Commission reveals Christ as a sending Lord who assigned his mission to apostles and to every follower is seen in the Book of the Acts and the epistles of Paul and Peter. Acts tells us, for example, that when a persecution in Jerusalem scattered believers, the apostles remained in the city while “those who were scattered went about preaching the Word” (Acts 8:4; also see 11:19–20). Paul encourages the saints at Colossae to present their witness to Christ in winsome ways (Colossians 4:6). Peter names the exiles of the dispersion as a royal priesthood whose mission is to proclaim “the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

That every Christian is commissioned to live as Christ’s witness is not a new teaching. Luther, in a treatise written in 1523, describes the roles of both pastors and laity. He points out that a congregation of necessity must have teachers and preachers who administer the Word of God, with congregations calling those who are qualified and gifted to carry out the ministries of the pastoral office. He also states:

No one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priests … But if it is true that they have God’s Word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread (his word).8

Luther’s perspectives on the priesthood of believers and the call given to every believer to engage in the mission of Christ’s church are discussed in sermons and commentaries in Luther’s Works and in recent studies of Luther’s mission perspectives which correct earlier misinterpretations of Luther’s views on world mission.9
C. F. W. Walther, following Luther’s lead, describes a two-fold glory given to the spiritual priesthood of believers. The first is that a believer can approach the holy God, pray to him, and serve him. The second is that a priest can, in the name of God, make the will of God known to others by bringing them his Word, preaching and interpreting.10

On the basis of the Scriptures and teachers of the church as Luther and Walther, we can move beyond arguing about the recipients of the Great Commission by affirming that every Christian has been commissioned by the Lord of the church to follow in the footsteps of Priscilla and Aquila who took Apollos aside and “explained to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). We can assert that confirmands, as baptized people of God, are commissioned to let their light shine in the world (Matthew 5:14, 16).

"The Fields Are White for Harvest"

The context in which Christian youth, their families, and congregations can bring light is depicted in a major, definitive research study, Soul Searching, which investigated the spirituality of youth in the United States, ages 13-17.11 The study reminds one of Jesus’ exhortation to “look … lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest” (John 4:35). Here are samples of outreach opportunities suggested by the study.

1. The majority of American youth are not antagonistic toward religion and religious institutions. Instead, American teens generally regard religion as a “very nice thing” that is good for lots of people because religion provides a positive force in individual lives and in society.12 Even among non-participating youth, nearly 50 percent feel positive or somewhat positive about religion, while one-third are neutral, and only about 17 percent are negative.13 These and other views expressed by youth led the research team to observe that many apparently non-religious teens could become active through a greater initiative of sincere, committed believers.14

2. Religion for large numbers of American youth tends to function in the background of their daily lives.15 Religion is something that you grow up with during the Sunday school years and then jettison when becoming more mature. What really counts in the lives of young people is school, one’s circle of friends, sports, popular culture, family, work, fun, issues related to sex and illegal drugs, and the electronic media.16 With youth living within a socially constructed environment for five to 17 years, the culture for many is a key shaper of their lives, teaching that religion will become more important when settling down, especially if one marries, and if one has children.

3. The mainstream religion of American youth is described as “Deistic, Therapeutic, and Moralistic.” For the majority of youth, God is seen as someone who is “up there,” controlling and directing the cosmos, and watching. The character of the Triune God revealed in the Scriptures is largely absent. Instead, God is a butler or therapist who solves problems when one is in trouble. Another feature of this popular mindset is that God is a lawgiver who spells out rules which are good for other people, but not for one’s self, since each person is the source and authority of moral knowledge which is to help one to reach the goal of self-fulfillment.17

4. Opportunities for faith communities to connect with youth are many. For example, about one-half of non-religious teens say that they believe in a god, while another one-third are open to the possibility of expressing such belief. Only a minority, about 17 percent, reject a belief in God. One in four of non-religious youth believes in divine miracles and the existence of life after death.18 Only 46 percent of young people who consider themselves to be Christians report that they had confirmed their faith or had been baptized.19 (This statistic does not include infant baptisms.) Nearly one-half of American youth have attended religious retreats, conferences, or rallies at some time during their lives.20 Forty-four percent of non-religious teens are incorporating aspects
of Christian practices, such as prayer, in their own spiritual lives. Of the non-attending teens, nearly one out of four says that if it were a personal decision, attending religious services regularly would be their choice. Though only 2 to 3 percent of young people report that they are active spiritual seekers, the level of positive attitudes toward religion and religious institutions suggests that as many as one-half of American young people could become spiritual seekers. Conversations with youth suggested to the research team that more non-Christians are seeking Christianity than Christians seeking non-believers.

5. What is missing in the lives of the majority of American youth is a firm foundation and the resources for believing and living as committed persons. The biggest blocks to faith are an intellectual skepticism regarding faith and other vague reasons for dropping out. Nearly one-half of the non-attenders could not think of a reason for not attending. An ignorance of the basics of the faith is evident in the inability of many youth to respond to questions regarding specifics of the faith, such as the authority of the Scriptures and the reality of miracles reported in the Bible. The researchers note a great deal of slippage in the effectiveness of Christian education, even among conservative Christian denominations.

6. The study identifies a minority of committed Christian youth whose faith is making significant differences in their lives. Highly committed youth, about 15 percent of American youth, say that their faith is very important to them; their parents are engaged in a faith community; they attend religious services weekly or more often; they participate in youth groups; and they pray and read the Bible regularly. Data show that these youth are doing much better in their lives than less-religious youth, reporting, for example, better relationships with parents and higher levels of satisfaction at school. Though faith is not to be seen in an instrumental way of improving one’s chances of success as defined by society, such differences are the result of being transformed by what Paul describes as the renewal of one’s mind (Romans 12:1-2).

7. While opportunities to connect with this age group are many, the challenges are significant. Though the Millennial Generation (born 1984–2002) is seen as fairly traditional in their religious beliefs, they are less religiously active in a number of ways. They are less involved in any particular faith and attend religious services less often than older generations at a comparable point in their life cycles. Religion is less important for this generation than it was for members of Generation X at a similar age. However, the intensity of the commitments of Millennials who value faith is as strong as it was among previous generations when they were young, which points to the importance of equipping this younger generation for service, witness, and leadership roles in the church.

Is Confirmation an Outreach Ministry?

A multitude of outreach possibilities among American youth raises the question, “Is confirmation in the LCMS an outreach ministry?” Responses by a random sample of confirmation leaders (mostly pastors and DCEs), confirmands and their parents in a study conducted by the author describe the extent to which confirmation is equipping young people to be messengers of Good News.

When confirmands are asked, “Is it okay for a person to share one’s faith with others, or should one leave others alone?” their responses to four options are:

- One should share faith with others whenever possible: 81%
- One should share faith with others only when someone asks: 15%
- One should leave others alone and not discuss one’s faith: 1%
- I’m not sure: 3%

How confirmands view the content of their witness is seen in responses to the question, “What is the most important teaching of the Bible to share with a person who is not a Christian?”

- The Bible is the inspired Word of God: 15%
- God is the Creator of all things: 14%
- The Holy Spirit fills one’s life with power: 4%
- Jesus died for my sins and is alive: 69%
The extent to which confirmands actually engage in outreach is the focus of two items. “In the last year, how many times have you invited a non-Christian friend to a church event such as worship or youth group?”

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 times</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 times</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 times</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one</td>
<td>50%</td>
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</tbody>
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A second statement asks about the frequency of speaking this gospel message: “That Jesus died for one’s sins is a message which I have shared in the last six months with.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 5 persons</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 persons</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 persons</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one</td>
<td>20%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

When confirmation leaders are asked to identify “Opportunities for confirmation ministry to equip youth to share their faith,” they see their opportunities as:

- Many: 17%
- Some: 48%
- Limited: 32%
- None: 3%

Confirmation leaders’ responses to the question, “What are the opportunities for a confirmation ministry to reach youth not connected to Christ?” are:

- Many: 6%
- Some: 43%
- Limited: 43%
- None: 8%

When confirmation leaders are asked about the number of “Senior high school youth, not confirmed, who one knows could begin confirmation,” their responses are:

- Many: 5%
- Some: 14%
- Limited: 31%
- None: 51%

In reflecting on the question, “How much attention was given to ‘Sharing one’s faith’ as a topic in the confirmation curriculum?” leaders indicate that the level of attention is:

- Major: 34%
- Some: 61%
- None: 5%

The data suggest a number of observations. That eight of every ten confirmands assert that one should share faith with others whenever possible, and that about seven of ten confirmands identify the Gospel as the central message of the Christian faith, reflect intentional teaching by parents and leaders. Their impact is significant in a society which sees that faith and spirituality are personal, private matters, and that good works merit God’s favor.

Responses by three of every ten confirmands who do not identify the Gospel as the most important teaching of the Bible to share suggest the need to give this central teaching greater attention. A lack of clarity regarding the Gospel among some confirmands also appears in their responses to the item, “Although there are many religions in the world, most of them lead to the same God.”

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<th>Agreement Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I strongly agree</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>I agree</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I disagree</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I strongly disagree</td>
<td>26%</td>
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</table>

That 41 percent of the confirmands endorse a universal view of salvation perhaps is related to the level of parental agreement with the same statement, the 31 percent who agree that most religions lead to the same God. This finding deserves attention, for an absence of a clarity of the Gospel message impacts motivation for outreach.

Two findings, that 81 percent of the confirmands affirm the view that one should share faith whenever possible, but that 58 percent shared this message two or fewer times within the last six months, suggest addressing the challenge of translating stored information into actions by practicing the telling of one’s own story and The Story. (See “What is Lutheran Missional Education?” by Huneke and Steinbronn.)
With 48 percent of the leaders describing opportunities for confirmation ministry to equip youth to share their faith as "some" and another 35 percent identifying their opportunities as "limited" or "none," one wonders why the confirmation experience cannot equip every confirmand to share one’s faith. That only one of five leaders knows "many" or "some" non-confirmed high school youth who could begin confirmation suggests an opportunity for leaders to "scan the horizon" in looking for youth who do not confess the Name. The 66 percent of the leaders who identify the level of attention given in the confirmation curriculum to "Sharing One’s Faith" as "some" or "none" suggests a consideration of an evaluation of the curriculum in order to find more opportunities for making this topic a priority.

**Perspectives on Structuring Confirmation for Outreach**

How a confirmation ministry can expand the mission of Christ’s church by engaging confirmands in outreach is seen in four goals. One aim is for parents, leaders, and congregation to assist young people to be "grounded" in the faith. A second purpose is to enable every confirmand to demonstrate and articulate one’s faith relationship with Jesus Christ. A third goal is to engage confirmands in outreach events throughout the confirmation experience. A fourth target is to seek opportunities to involve non-Christian youth and/or their families in intentional outreach events.

The following perspectives on structuring confirmation for outreach are intended to suggest possibilities rather than program prescriptions.

Equipping confirmands for living as messengers of the Good News begins with vision, God’s vision portrayed in the Scriptures which proclaims Christ’s redemption of the world. Leading confirmands who develop a missiological perspective of the narratives of the Old and New Testaments, the chief events, key people, the important messages, the timelines of the Old and New Testaments, and the basics of the Six Chief Parts of Luther’s *Small Catechism* (easily possible by grade six) will enable young people to stand on a foundation for seeing their role in the larger mission.

A second component in confirmation as an outreach arm of the church is to help young people and parents to see their identities as disciple-servants of Jesus Christ. A study of discipleship depicted in the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, can help young people to move beyond viewing confirmation as a time for becoming a church member (a view still current) or the church being an option in the life of a disciple. When one sees daily living, going to school, interacting with family, spending money, being with friends, playing sports, and engaging with the media as contexts for living as Christ’s disciple, this identity enables one to see multiple opportunities for service and witness.

Another way of expanding opportunities for ministry and outreach is for parents and confirmation leaders to help young people connect faith and vocation. Since many confirmands are beginning to think about their future, confirmation ministry is an opportune moment for exploring an array of biblical and theological teachings that highlight faith in everyday life, such as the priesthood of believers, the ministry of every Christian, and Luther on vocation. As one who has interacted with students in a church university, this writer has observed that only a minority of young adults beginning their university studies reflect an understanding of Christian vocation. By doing a better job of connecting faith and vocation, parents and confirmation leaders can help young people to connect their gifts and opportunities to live as Christ’s disciple throughout the life stages.

A fourth approach is to help young people and parents develop a clear perspective of the nature and mission of the church. While young people largely reject the distinction made by Boomers and the Busters, "Oh, I’m a spiritual person, but I’m not religious," the majority of American youth, including
believers, see one’s connection with a church as an option. By exploring the many corporate images of the church in the New Testament and by identifying the center of congregational life as Word and Sacraments, young people will be able to see the false dichotomy, “I’m Christian, but I’m not part of a church,” and affirm the mission of the Body of Christ as well as their personal roles in this mission.

Confirmation can serve as a launching pad for mission by assisting young people and their parents to be supremely clear on the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls, justification by grace through faith. The need for a more clear Law-Gospel perspective among confirmands is seen in their responses to the statement: “In order to be saved and have eternal life, I must obey God’s rules and commandments.”

I strongly agree—19 percent; I agree—38 percent; I disagree—27 percent; I strongly disagree—16 percent. While the statement asks for a discerning eye, agreement by nearly 60 percent of the confirmands (as well as 41 percent of their parents) with this salvation by good works statement calls for a commitment to find ways in which the heart of the Christian faith can be communicated and assimilated more clearly by confirmands and their parents.

A sixth approach to structuring confirmation as an outreach ministry is to teach the Six Chief Parts of Luther’s Small Catechism through a missional worldview by following Luther’s ordering of the Six Chief Parts. For example, viewing the Ten Commandments as God’s radical diagnosis of the human condition can serve to create a sense of urgency for personal restoration and healing. The missional thrusts of the...
three articles of The Apostles’ Creed present exceptional opportunities for confirmands and parents to see God’s character as a gracious, sending God. That the Lord’s Prayer is missional can be made clear by examining each of the seven petitions as a prayer for seeking and receiving God’s gifts which empower for mission. A missional view of Baptism and Holy Communion transforms one’s perspectives on the sacraments and leads to a deeper grasp of the relationship of sacraments and mission. Conceptualizing how Confession and Absolution play an essential role in everyday living as well as in conflicts in the life of a disciple and in the church will lead to healing which motivates for mission. As a bonus, exploring applications of “The Table of Duties” can foster commitment to vocation as disciple-living.

Another facet of implementing confirmation ministry as an outreach ministry is to help parents and youth to develop a storehouse of Gospel images, narratives, concepts and teachings. Learning the language of faith as expressed in biblical images and teachings, the creeds of the church, and Luther’s Small Catechism provides one with tools that can be used in a variety of contexts. Confirmands who are given opportunities to practice speaking the language of faith and translating into the idiom of their hearers will have resources for sharing their stories and the stories of the Gospel. (See the article by Huneke and Steinbronn.)

An eighth strategy of planning confirmation ministry as an opportunity to equip youth and their parents as witnesses to the Gospel is to assist confirmands and parents to reflect on their social networks. Doing an audit of one’s relationships of who is and who is not connected to Christ and his church can result in naming dozens of individuals. With youth engaged in networks that include six to eight close friends, school and community contacts that may number as many as or more than 150 individuals, and the social media which may involve thousands, a vision of witness opportunities in one’s relationships can lead to identifying surprising possibilities.

Engagement in service projects within a congregation, in one’s community and in national and international settings can provide confirmands and parents with opportunities for connecting service and verbal witness. As a church leader observed, service is the soil that prepares for sowing the seed of the Word that creates receptive hearts. That 43 percent of the confirmands in the confirmation study report that they had engaged in three to six service events in the congregation or larger community during a year reflects leader and parent awareness of the value of service learning.

A tenth perspective is the recognition that welcoming guests, assimilating visitors, and engaging non-Christian youth and possibly their families in the confirmation experience involve responding to a number of challenging variables. Such factors include the motivation of seekers, quality of relationships, an understanding of the culture and beliefs of others, the ability to engage in dialogue, and the readiness of parents, youth, leaders, and congregations to commit to outreach. It is understood that any or a combination of factors may at times make an assimilation of non-Christian youth in a confirmation experience difficult.

**Confirmation: An Outreach Ministry?!**

While challenges may be many, some confirmation leaders and congregations are shaping confirmation ministry for outreach. In an informal survey, leaders identified a number of strategies, such as: confirmation classes that meet after school so that confirmands can invite their friends; monthly “Jam” events with a focus on “bring a friend”; seminars for young people who desire to explore the Christian faith; small group leaders who nurture non-connected youth; retreats and lock-ins with an emphasis on bringing non-church friends; sports and musical events for confirmands and their guests; confirmation as a summer introductory experience that targets non-members; seminars on parenting during
the teen years for the larger community; confirmands and parents who host a VBS in a neighborhood apartment complex or a trailer park; group service projects that connect with a youth organization in the community; helping confirmands to develop an enthusiastic mindset for growing in the Word and introducing others to Christ. 36

Think of the benefits of structuring confirmation both as a faith-forming and a sending ministry! That 93 percent of LCMS confirmands, 98 percent of their parents, and 96 percent of the confirmation leaders say that confirmation is “very important” or “important” points to the power and potential of this educational ministry to shape and ignite faith. 37 For millions of Lutherans, confirmation is the major educational event in their lives, especially when followed by one’s continuing growth through the Word. What an extraordinary opportunity for confirmation leaders, parents, and congregations to equip young people for service and witness in a society in which 85 percent of American youth do not express faith in a living Lord! What a window of opportunity to equip young people as leaders in the church’s mission! What a special time to engage a generation which, among six living generations, could have the greatest impact on the church’s mission for years to come. This will happen when “?” becomes “!”

Notes

13. Smith, 104.
15. Smith, 129.
16. Smith, 159.
17. Smith, 173.
20. Smith, 53.
21. Smith, 82.
22. Smith, 103.
23. Smith, 79.
24. Smith, 76.
25. Smith, 82.
27. Smith, 104–105.
28. Smith, 44.
29. Smith, 110.
30. Smith, 263.
32. Marvin Bergman, “What’s Happening in LCMS Confirmation?” a non-published study (2009). Major financial support was provided by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, with additional support given by the Departments of Youth Ministry and School Ministry of the LCMS, the Board for District and Congregational Services, Concordia University, Nebraska, and the Nebraska District.
33. Smith, 149.
34. See Charles Arand, That I May Be His Own: An Overview of Luther’s Catechisms (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 129–132.
35. Bergman.
36. The author expresses gratitude to the DCEs and pastors who responded to the survey. Thanks also to Terry Groth for sharing a number of perspectives related to confirmation and outreach.
37. Bergman.