

Confirmed and sent out: Fostering encounters with God

by [Jan Schnell Rippentrop](#) in the [May 25, 2016](#) issue



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The confirmation class was learning about liturgy by dribbling basketballs in the sanctuary. I asked the kids, “Who can show us your free-throw routine?” Several hands shot up.

Darcy came up and enacted a free throw, complete with her usual set up: she put her right toe to an imaginary line, dribbled three times, bent her knees, and shot. Throwing the ball back to her, I asked her to do it again and noted that she went through the same procedure. I asked, “Darcy, how’d you do that the same way the second time?”

“Practice,” she said.

“Why’d you do it the same way?”

Darcy said it was the shot she was best at, and going through the same motions made it more likely she would score. She did it the same way because it worked.

Then we shifted to playing at liturgy. Tony, one of the confirmation leaders, showed us his routine for settling in at the communion rail: right knee down first, followed by the left, elbows placed on the communion rail, his left hand cupping his right hand. Tony knelt and cupped his hands in the same exact pattern two times in a row. I asked him: “How? Why?”

Then we spoke the Lord's Prayer together. I asked, "How do we know that prayer so well? Why do we say it the same way every week?"

We talked about the practices our community repeats week after week to praise God and prepare ourselves for encountering God. We talked about worship as a place where we predictably encounter God. We remembered Darcy's words: we practice this "because it works." It is a pattern of praise and encounter that the Christian community has been practicing for a very long time. God has promised to meet us in it, and God keeps God's word.

One goal of confirmation is to teach confirmands *about* God, but a far more important goal is to support the confirmands' encounters *with* God. We do not aim as leaders to try to keep kids in church, but to loose them or set them free in the world with God.

The effort of trying to retain them or keep them in church creates several problems. First, it inhibits the best teaching practices. While some motivations for keeping youth in church are beneficial, it's likely that a primary motive is the fear that the church is dwindling, so it needs to retain existing members. This approach leads to treating youth as a commodity. The desire to retain members also leads us to making confirmation a form of entertainment, and entertainment is inadequate to the task of making disciples. Youth minister Jen Bradbury has argued that being part of a youth ministry does not necessarily lead to retaining youth over the long haul (see "Sticky faith," May 29, 2013). She suggests that leaders must instead "relentlessly remind [youth] that the Christian faith is one centered on the person of Jesus." Instead of entertaining youth in order to keep them in church, confirmation programs must prepare youth for encounters with God and service toward others.

Trying to keep kids in church also places a static construct on youth during a volatile time of life, marked by immense changes. The Johns Hopkins Center for Adolescent Health says: "The early teen years are marked by rapid changes. Most teens face stress from puberty, changing relationships with peers, new demands of school, safety issues in their neighborhoods, and responsibilities to their families." Youth experience both internal and societal changes. Leaders are called on to equip kids to navigate these changes and to encounter God during this time. We want to equip youth with practices that help them apply what they learn in confirmation to the multiple worlds they inhabit.

Finally, trying to keep kids in church employs a business rather than a theological model. Businesses want to keep their customers, but this is not a suitable theological *telos*. The church wants to loose people into the world. *To loose* means to release or liberate, and liberation requires encounter with the God who liberates. This is what Jesus proclaims when he says, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

A liberative approach to confirmation reimagines confirmation as encounter with God. The leaders’ task is at once straightforward and imprecise: to support the conditions under which encounter with God may most predictably occur.

One will likely recognize an encounter with God through its liberating effect. For Christians, liberation includes both what one is freed from and what one is freed for. Confirmands need to be freed from things that hold them captive. In one of the church’s statements of confession and forgiveness, the assembly declares: “We confess that we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves.”

The confirmands with whom I’ve worked have been quite aware that they, too, are captive to this human condition. Confirmands resonate with Paul when he bemoaned the fact that “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

Though leaders in the church I served did not ask the confirmands to share examples of sin from their own lives, one eighth-grade youth came to me after our class time. Becca said that at home she had practiced refraining from snarky comments about a girl who had dissed her at school. But as soon as the girl walked into English class, Becca made an under-her-breath comment that drew laughter from her friends. Becca looked at me with disbelief. “I couldn’t stop myself!” Youth get it; they understand captivities.

Youth also know about the stresses of life. One evening before confirmation class, Tyler sat down with his usual two slices of pizza—but on this occasion he sat apart from the rest of the guys. A confirmation leader sat down next to him and got an earful. Tyler thought he had done poorly on his science test and was worried that the bad grade would prevent him from getting into a good university. In a 2015 study, Noelle R. Leonard and other researchers found that students “experienced high levels of chronic stress, particularly in relation to academic performance and the college admissions process. While students described a range of effective,

adaptive coping strategies, they also commonly internalized these serious pressures" (*Frontiers in Psychology*).

Someone might retort that kids today have unprecedented amounts of freedom: time away from home, less work than previous generations, and easy access to the Internet and information. But I'm not talking about a freedom related to leisure or luxury; I'm talking about a freedom from captivity to the things that prevent one from breathing freely in the Spirit, freedom from being shackled to commodities, freedom from the burdens that weigh upon one's soul, and freedom from fears about safety.

A Christian is not only freed from captivities but for praise of God and love of neighbor. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther built his argument around this paradox: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." When youth are freed for encounter with God and service to others, they are simultaneously freed for both less and more. Being freed to do less allows kids to daydream and play and to be valued beyond commodity-centered productivity models. They are also freed for more—for more hope and less worry. Such an orientation does not remove them from community or work; instead, it leads youth to reinvest themselves in community through acts of service.

When I listen to a youth tell me about an encounter with God, I notice that the encounter tends to have reorienting effects. Stressors that once seemed so prominent are put in their proper place, exposed as not having ultimate sway. One preteen returned from a church mission trip and suddenly decided to clean out his room. His dad asked the boy why his beloved Pokémon cards were heaped on a pile of items to be given away. "My friends and I don't *play* with these cards," Joe said. "We *compete* with them. That doesn't seem so important now." After seeing what God was doing on the mission trip, the competition lost its appeal. Encountering God reorganizes priorities into a pattern that is more livable, more hopeful, and truer.

Confirmation should seek to free youth from whatever weighs too heavily upon them and to free them for abundant life in relation to God and others. In order to do this, leaders need to find ways to tenaciously insist, show, and proclaim that God encounters them in their daily lives.

Is encounter with God really possible? If so, how does it work? How can confirmation support encounter with God?

Encounter does occur. Aidan Kavanagh identified worship as a site of regular encounter with God:

Christians do not worship because they believe. They believe because the One in whose gift faith lies is regularly met in the act of communal worship—not because the assembly conjures up God, but because the initiative lies with the God who has promised to be there always.

Encounter with God is not limited to worship. As Thomas J. Davis says in *This Is My Body*, “God’s Word as revelation . . . is not vocalization or a spirit’s voice or a disembodied will; it is Jesus Christ. . . . If one would know God, one must know Christ; what is more, one must know Christ in his humanity.”

Since God chose to disclose Godself in Jesus, the word incarnate in human flesh, other kinds of matter have the potential for disclosing the divine. For the two disciples in Emmaus, it occurred in the breaking of the bread. For the Ethiopian eunuch, God was revealed through the words of the prophet Isaiah and the witness of Phillip. For confirmands, it may happen in scripture, teaching, prayer, sacraments, blessing, or the enactment of a confirmation lesson.

Kavanagh insists that “primary theology” is a transaction with the active real presence of God, “there to affect, grace, and change the world.” Encounter with God creates new life, freedom, and hope. It’s the only thing that can truly liberate people.

The New Testament shows God as the primary agent in the creation of freedom. Jesus stood in a synagogue in Nazareth and read a scroll from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Paul wrote, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

Leaders can support confirmands’ encounters with God by viewing confirmation as a site of primary theology. They can prepare confirmands to expect that God will be made manifest, and they can support the conditions under which encounter may

most likely occur.

One way to foster encounters with God is to explore the practice of blessing and sending. The church has long bestowed God's presence on an assembly. Confirmation rites often rehearse this action, with leaders citing Isaiah 11:2-3 and laying hands upon confirmands, saying, "Stir up in [*name*] the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever." The blessing here is God's presence in the power of the Holy Spirit. One can make a case to confirmands, through stories and actions, that God bestows God's presence on them always. Blessings like this one can be used frequently.

In liturgies, blessing gives way to sending, which is in many ways similar to releasing or loosing. Assemblies are sent forth from worship with words like these: "Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness . . . strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people; love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit." This sending looses the assembly into the world in order to "honor all people; love and serve God." The sending frees assemblies *for* the other.

In one setting, the leaders created a laminated sheet with these blessings printed on it:

- The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.
- God, bless you with hope during disappointment, peace during turbulence, and friendship through it all.
- May Christ, who out of defeat brings new hope and a new future, bless you and fill you with new life.
- The God of all grace bless you now and forever.

Confirmands would use these sheets to offer blessings to each other, perhaps by using water at the font or by making the sign of the cross. Confirmation sessions could then ritually end with a formal sending—for example, "Go in peace. Remember the poor." Leaders or confirmands could write their own sendings.

Informal blessings can take many forms. Leaders can help parents think through how they offer blessings to their children. Small groups can help youth notice what blessings they most value. What language would confirmands use if they wanted to

bless someone—a grandmother before surgery, a friend before moving? Informal sendings can also take many forms. Confirmands can explore what Moses was sent to do, or what Esther was sent to do. As they discover that the direction of God’s in-breaking in the world—in Egypt and in Persia—affected the direction God sent Moses and Esther, confirmands can question how they might notice God’s in-breaking and how they might experience God’s sending.

Another way to foster encounter with God is to find ways to enact the content of the curriculum. Instead of talking about the content, leaders can allow youth to apply concepts to themselves, and plan experiences that solidify these concepts. If the curriculum includes the Lord’s Prayer, for example, then in a study of the first petition, “Hallowed be your name,” a leader might brainstorm with the group about ways to dishonor people, write the comments down on cards, then turn the cards over and ask for ideas on how to honor people.

Confirmands might then choose someone in the congregation whom they know, like the organist. The confirmands could choose one of the ways to show honor to the organist and then carry it out. They can consider how they honor the president or their favorite teacher. Each confirmand can choose one of the ideas and figure out how to put that form of honor into action.

“The Lord doesn’t look at us all together, en masse,” said Pope Francis. “He looks each one of us in the face, in the eyes. His is not an abstract love; it is concrete. The Lord looks at me in a personal way. Letting ourselves be encountered by God means just this: letting ourselves be loved by God!” John Milton wrote: “Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.”

Churches can prepare kids for everyday epiphanies and help them learn their own ways of knowing God. The liberation inherent in the Word of God will free confirmands from the captivities that encumber their lives and free them for love of God and service to the other.