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COLLINGSWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Collingswood, New Jersey | Presbyterian Church (USA)

BY *Sylvia Bull*¹

A portrait completed as part of



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¹ Laura Hannah served as research partner for this site visit. Her participation and insights were extremely helpful and contributed to this portrait.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

In addition to a national survey, researchers from The Confirmation Project visited congregations, using the research method of Portraiture to understand how confirmation and equivalent practices are practiced in congregations. Portraiture is a method of inquiry that shares some of the features of other qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, case study, and narrative, but it is distinctive in its blending of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life. Portraiture first came to prominence in the works of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. This Portrait is one from a gallery that can be found at www.theconfirmationproject.com/gallery.

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ABOUT THE CONFIRMATION PROJECT

The Confirmation Project seeks to learn the extent to which confirmation and equivalent practices in five Protestant denominations in North America are effective for strengthening discipleship in youth. These denominations include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the United Methodist Church. It seeks to provide Christian leaders with examples of good practice and with strategies that are effective in helping young Christians grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. Strengthening discipleship includes nurturing faith in Jesus Christ and facilitating youth encounters with Christian traditions (Scripture, creeds, confessions, and practices) to support lifelong Christian vocation. This project is funded by the Lilly Endowment, Inc. and housed at Princeton Theological Seminary.

INTRODUCTION

“You are loved here [at church] for who you are, not what you achieve.”¹
 – Pastor Kate Killebrew

“Our job is to stump Pastor Kate!”² - confirmand

“We want to come back and have our friends come back.”³ - high school youth

Confirmation at Collingswood Presbyterian Church is small, with all the challenges and opportunities that come along with it. The small size of the program brings unique opportunities, such as individualized and personal instruction, the chance to form deep bonds with other students and with the pastor, and a safe space to ask difficult questions. Despite the difficulties of scheduling with such a small group (events often get canceled if one or more of the students cannot attend), the flexibility and intimacy of a small confirmation class helps contribute to an enriching confirmation experience for students at Collingswood.

CONTEXT

Driving toward Collingswood on NJ-70, I passed through all kinds of neighborhoods in a short time: urban, distressed urban, booming suburban, and finally into lush small town residential before reaching downtown Collingswood. Small businesses and restaurants of all kinds lined the main street of downtown. Just one block over sits Collingswood Presbyterian Church, right next to Holy Trinity Episcopal Church and only a stone’s throw away from the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. A few blocks south, one can find United Methodist, Lutheran, and Catholic congregations, among others. Collingswood Presbyterian is surrounded by residential housing to the north and west. This is the older part of town, with larger, single-family homes that have mostly been kept up or restored to good condition. Beautiful trees and landscaping surround the houses and the church.

¹ Kate Killebrew, email communication to author, July 4, 2015.

² Tim, conversation with author, April 2015.

³ High school youth, focus group led by Sylvia Bull, April 2015.

The borough of Collingswood is located in south Jersey near Camden and Philadelphia and is home to about 14,000 people. It is whiter, and slightly wealthier and more highly-educated than the average for New Jersey.⁴ Parents from the congregation told me that the town is solidly middle class, with a mix of people working in fields such as accounting and finance, healthcare, and education. Collingswood, one said, is not a “Mercedes/BMW town, but a Prius and minivan town.”⁵ Students and parents also reported that many of the Christians in Collingswood come from the Roman Catholic tradition and that the town has many churches, including four new churches that have sprung up in the past few years. Another interesting feature of the town is its relatively large gay and lesbian population. At one point, there were about 20 gay and lesbian members attending Collingswood Presbyterian.

CONGREGATION

Collingswood Presbyterian Church (CPC) is a large and beautiful stone building on the corner lot of Fern Avenue, just off of Haddon Avenue. The sanctuary is large with a great deal of carved woodwork, stained glass windows, and a stone baptismal font at the front. On a spring Sunday morning, the lighting is beautiful! CPC has been through much in its more than a century of ministry. Conflict wracked the congregation in the 1930s



Collingswood Presbyterian Church, Collingswood, NJ

when Rev. Carl McIntire left, taking most of the congregation with him down the

⁴ United States Census Bureau, *American Fact Finder*, “2010 Demographic Profile Data - Collingswood borough, New Jersey,” http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml.

⁵ Helen, focus group led by Sylvia Bull, transcript, April 2015.

street to the new Bible Presbyterian Church of Collingswood. According to current pastor Kate Killebrew, it was a difficult and “vicious” time in the congregation that split families. The congregation views itself today as “open, friendly, and diverse in a traditional setting.”⁶ Once a large church, CPC dwindled to “very small and nearly dying.”⁷ The congregation today is small, with about 180 members and an average worship attendance of 80. In the past 10 years, CPC has added about 125 members and lost about 75. Membership, according to the pastor, is always moving, due in part to the high rate of mobility in the Collingswood population. This has made leadership in the congregation “difficult,” with much of the energy coming from the pastor, assisted by the boards of deacons and elders, which “have steadily grown in strength.”⁸

About 10 years ago, the congregation underwent a building and capital campaign to refurbish their large and beautiful sanctuary. The congregation is a redevelopment congregation (Pastor Kate has a Doctor of Ministry degree in congregational redevelopment from McCormick Seminary). Pastor Kate explained: “CPC is a growing church, seeking to redevelop [its] mission and ministry in a changing community. Most of the elders and deacons are members that have only been at CPC in the past 10 years.”⁹ They are currently in the process of establishing a preschool to meet a need for childcare in the community.

In response to the large gay and lesbian community in its area, CPC has been open and affirming for many years. They ordained gay persons “before it was really allowed,” and everyone in the congregation supports this stance.¹⁰ Pastor Kate reported that the congregation had, at its height, about 20 gay and lesbian members, but now only around 8 as the community is very mobile and has a unique set of pastoral concerns. However, it is clear that the congregation and the

⁶ Collingswood Presbyterian Church, “About Us,” www.collingswoodpres.com.

⁷ Kate Killebrew, email communication to author, July 4, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kate Killebrew, interview by Sylvia Bull, transcript, April 2015.

community make welcoming gay and lesbian individuals and couples a priority. The evening I visited, several parents were disappointed that they missed a town photo opportunity in support of marriage equality earlier in the day.

Worship at Collingswood Presbyterian is generally traditional, following patterns of worship common to many PC(USA) congregations. Worship centered on the preaching of the Word in the sermon. The Sunday I visited (Confirmation Sunday), the hymns were chosen by confirmands and represented more contemporary choices. However, the choir and bell choir wore traditional satin choir robes, and music included a sung *kyrie* and the Doxology. The Psalm for the day was read responsively. Despite the traditional feel of the worship service, members were dressed relatively informally, apart from the confirmands and their families. Pastor Kate wore a white alb rather than a preaching robe, with a rainbow stole.

As members gathered for the service, I sensed the family feeling that parents had described to me on my earlier visit.¹¹ Every age group from the very young to the elderly was represented, and members greeted each other warmly. Before the service, people talked and wandered around the sanctuary, checking in with one another and greeting each other by name. The three confirmands banded together before the service, and their families had them take pictures together and with Pastor Kate. It was very clear to me that this is a congregation in which people know each other well and care about each other.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

Pastor Kate has led the confirmation program at Collingswood Presbyterian during all of her ten years of ministry at the church. Because it is a small program, it is primarily pastor-led. Students, usually in 8th grade, meet with Pastor Kate most Wednesday nights all year long. Each year, confirmation kicks off with a night when

¹¹ Welcoming members in worship and inviting them to be a part of the church's mission and ministry is a part of the church's redevelopment goals. However, the family analogy "can be problematic" for churches in redevelopment. So, although members of the church often use the metaphor of family, Pastor Kate "intentionally uses other metaphors for church such as [the] Body of Christ, [the] welcoming community, and partners in mission." Kate Killebrew, email, July 4, 2015.

parents and students come together for group-building and discussion of expectations. The curriculum for the year, adapted from PC(USA) curriculum, moves according to the biblical narrative and the church year. Topics include: The Exodus, Psalms, Prophets, Who is Jesus?, Discipleship, Who am I?, and What is the Presbyterian Church? Discussion questions range from “what does it mean to be a prophet today?” to “why do we need a savior?”

Pastor Kate reported that while confirmation at other churches she has served revolved around a lot of “head knowledge and tests,” she has moved away from that model at Collingswood.¹² Now, she only makes students internalize the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed.

The focus instead is on asking questions and connecting the biblical story and traditions of the church with students’ lives. Toward this end, she uses a variety of learning methods, including singing, art projects, field trips, YouTube videos, movies, and journaling. Each



Pastor Kate with Confirmands

week, students have time for journaling. They write questions, comments, anything they like. Pastor Kate reads them and writes back to the students, answering questions and engaging in conversations with students about the topics they bring up. Students know that the journals are confidential and sometimes share personal stories or difficult questions they are really struggling with.

According to Pastor Kate, “building relationships” with the students is “a main goal” of confirmation. She wants students to know that “they are loved here [at church] for who they are, not what they achieve.”¹³ This is especially important given the emphasis in sports and school on achievement and success. Small class size

¹² Kate Killebrew, interview.

¹³ Ibid.

contributes to the goal of building relationships. This year, there were three students in the confirmation program, all boys. After a year together in confirmation, meeting weekly and going on trips together, the three confirmands had developed a good rapport with each other and with Pastor Kate. They checked in with each other, kidded around, and asked when the others would be able to make it to the session.

The night I attended their class, the three rotated in and out throughout the evening due to sports and other commitments. The students wanted the others to be there, and one of the students, who had to leave part-way through, tried to convince his mother to let him stay. Pastor Kate reported that relationship building is somewhat easier since Collingswood is a small church. She already knows the students going in, and they know each other and “are comfortable with each other.” This allows them to “start to have questions and wrestle with them” as part of the group.¹⁴ One parent indicated that she initially did not know whether her son would warm to confirmation or enjoy it, but was happy to discover that he loved being with the group and attending each week.

Trips taken together as part of the curriculum had been significant to the group’s bonding, as evidenced by frequent and fond references to them. These trips form a significant part of the confirmation curriculum. One is a mission trip to Virginia, which parents attend as well. Students are encouraged to attend a middle school retreat in December at Camp Johnsonburg. The other main trip is a day trip to New York City, during which students visit churches throughout the city as well as Central Synagogue. By visiting Lutheran, Catholic, and Presbyterian congregations, students have a chance to visually explore differences in theology and worship practice, opening up discussions about why they do things the way they do in their own congregation. They also visit Central Synagogue, which is one of the oldest and largest in the United States. There, they discuss differences between Judaism and Christianity as well as the history of persecution of the Jewish people. These multisensory experiences and ensuing discussions made a significant impact on the

¹⁴ Ibid.

students. All three of this year's confirmands listed the trip to New York City as a highlight of their confirmation experience and spoke more articulately about the trip than about any other area of their confirmation training. They remembered particular differences among the churches visited and talked about how those differences helped them understand more about worship in the Christian tradition. It was clear that the architecture and majesty of the churches and synagogue had made an impression. One student even showed me a picture of a stained glass window they saw on the trip that he keeps on his phone. Although one of the spring sessions covers the history, traditions, and polity of the Presbyterian tradition, the most impactful learning about the Presbyterian tradition appears to have occurred in this context of learning about other Christian traditions and religions.

In addition to attending the trips, confirmation students are also required to do at least three mission projects. Options include a 30-hour famine in the spring, baking casseroles for the homeless, serving as hosts when CPC hosts homeless men at the church, tutoring students in Camden, or gathering food for food pantries. They are also expected to attend worship on Sundays and are required to turn in 15 sets of worship notes for the year. The form asks students to identify and reflect on various parts of the worship service, including summarizing the Gospel text for the day and writing down something that they did not understand from the sermon that day. Toward the end of the year, students complete several projects in preparation for confirmation. One is a faith plaque, which is a piece of wood decoupaged with a favorite scripture verse and images that reflect their faith. The goal, Pastor Kate says, "is to get them thinking about 'who am I?' in relation to their faith." Another project is a statement of faith, in which Pastor Kate asks them to reflect on the question, "What does your faith mean in daily life?" She believes that "questions are where faith begins," so she encourages students to be honest and ask questions in their statements of faith.

One week prior to confirmation, confirmands meet with the session to present their faith plaques and statements of faith. Pastor Kate requires session members to ask questions of the confirmands because she believes that it "shows that they care and

are paying attention.”¹⁵ In the confirmation service, students are asked to affirm their faith using the order for confirmation found in the Book of Common Worship. A slide show is also presented with pictures students take representing where they see God, and quotations from their statements of faith. It was clear during the confirmation service that the congregation was glad to welcome these three young men as confirmed members of the church. Pastor Kate’s sermon spoke both directly to the newly confirmed and to the whole congregation as mentors and fellow members of the Christian family. A reception after the service (with cake) was well-attended and had a family feel.

METAPHORS -----

Confirmation as a Modern Family of Faith

Confirmation in the CPC context is first and foremost about being continually nurtured by and welcomed into the family of faith. The small church context of CPC contributes to this family feel, as does its intergenerational character. An explicit goal of the program is relationship-building, making students feel a part of the congregation and loved by it. Although the services and appearance of CPC are traditional, this is very much a modern family of faith. CPC’s history of being open and affirming of gay and lesbian members sets them apart and contributes to the assessment by youth that this church is “not that strict,” but rather is a place free from judgment where they can ask questions and get explanations.¹⁶ CPC and its confirmation program is also a “modern” family in that, like many US families, its members come and go, either because they cannot attend every week or because they move into and out of Collingswood. They check in where they can but often end up passing each other like ships in the night. Confirmation perhaps feels like a busy family dinner table where everyone eats, but someone usually has to leave early or arrive late. Yet the family members still support and love each other, coming

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Youth, focus group led by Sylvia Bull, transcript, April 2015.

together when they can for nourishment and refreshment from the harried pace of modern life.

The Boomerang Effect

In terms of expectations for youth faith formation within confirmation, parents and students alike talk about “coming back.” The parents I spoke with talked about “a hope that they’ll come back, when they have kids, getting back to their roots” and an expectation that faith will be important to get them through “tough times.” “Youth group,” said another, “is creating a great experience at church that makes it easier to step back in.” One parent felt that, realistically, her children would be in “different places with church at different parts of their lives,” so she expected that they would be “in and out” of church. She recognized that there are “lots of choices of things to do,” so young people will not always choose church. Former confirmation students, now in high school, also spoke about “coming back” to church and wanting friends to “come back” as well.¹⁷ The current confirmands imagined that faith and church would “maybe” or “probably” continue to be an important part of their life, but could not articulate for me what this would look like. In this context, it seems that the hope is that confirmation will form students enough that they will be a sort of Christian boomerang, coming back to church at different points in their life such as when they have children or are going through a difficult time. My sense is that this comes from a desire to be realistic about the future, based on past experiences. And the power behind the boomerang, at least as it has functioned so far, is likely the sense of love and family that CPC attempts to foster in its ministry.

AUTHOR'S LEARNINGS

Collingswood Presbyterian has much to teach others about the opportunities and challenges of running a very small confirmation program, especially in contemporary suburban America. Scheduling poses a constant challenge for CPC, especially since – unlike with a large program – events often are canceled if one or

¹⁷ Parents, focus group led by Sylvia Bull, transcript, April 2015.

two students cannot attend. Students want to attend confirmation and church events, but other commitments to school, sports, and other activities get in the way. A small confirmation program, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for nimbleness and flexibility in tailoring curriculum to meet students' needs and questions. This kind of flexibility can be difficult or impossible for larger programs. The one-on-one attention and relationship-building of a small program can make students feel loved and valued in their individual uniqueness. In such a setting, relationally-driven confirmation is easier to achieve than with a large program. Churches of all sizes can consider what challenges and opportunities their program size brings. CPC embraces its size and can serve as a model for other small churches in making the best of the opportunities that affords.

Another strength of confirmation at CPC from which others can learn is the emphasis on making worship make sense. Two of the three confirmands said that they appreciated that in confirmation, activities of worship that had previously been unintelligible to them began to make sense.¹⁸ In part this new-found knowledge came from their trip to New York City, in which they learned more about other Christian traditions as well as their own. The rest came from a walk-through of their own sanctuary, in which they discussed “the practicalities of church.” Their experience of corporate worship was enhanced by being able to understand why certain things are done, why certain words and objects are used, and why the service follows a particular pattern. Pastor Kate talked about this as “making connections between what they’ve been doing their whole life and what it means.”¹⁹ Arguably, some of this orientation to worship can, and perhaps should, be done at an earlier age. However, its inclusion in the confirmation curriculum was viewed by students as important preparation for their reception into the confirmed membership of the church.

CPC is also an excellent example of how to incorporate interfaith and ecumenical learning as part of confirmation. Multisensory site visits to other houses of worship

¹⁸ Youth, informal survey by Sylvia Bull, April 2015.

¹⁹ Kate Killebrew, interview.

sparked conversations about the variety of Christian practice and the differences between Christianity and Judaism. Students were encouraged to ask questions, which were engaged seriously by the pastor and the rest of the group. These visits gave students a better understanding of the practices of their own church and the practices of their numerous Catholic neighbors. The visits are conducted sensitively and with an eye for the beauty and sacredness of the traditions explored. In the case of the interfaith visit to Central Synagogue, the group also explored the persecution of Jews throughout history, opening up conversations about religious tolerance and how Christians relate to other religions. Leaders of confirmation in other settings could use a similar model of respectful visitation and conversation to explore religious diversity in their communities and help students learn more about their own tradition through engagement with other traditions.