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THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BIRMINGHAM

Birmingham, Michigan | Presbyterian Church (USA)

BY *Gordon S. Mikoski*

A portrait completed as part of



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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

If one were to use a metaphor to describe the confirmation program at First Presbyterian, it could well be an app for social media like “Faith 2.0.” Confirmation functions like a useful app that can be used in many different ways and with maximum flexibility. It provides a dynamic interface between Christian tradition and contemporary life, between confirmands and adult members of the congregation, and between reflection and engagement in the social context. The newly designed program utilizes an optimal blend of digital asynchronous media and face-to-face group experiences. One of the confirmands described participation in the program as “fun and I learned more than I thought I would. It’s interactive and I like when I can watch the videos when I want to.”¹ An adult sponsor also likes the flexible format because “the kids are very busy today...[my confirmand and I] have to work for about two weeks in order to find a date to get together to watch the videos. I think every year the kids get more scheduled.”² Learners, adult sponsors, and confirmation leaders interact substantively with basic elements of Christian faith in a highly personalized and flexible manner. In short, it is like a favorite app on one’s a digital device.

CONGREGATION

Driving westward across I-696 on the heavily travelled upper perimeter of Detroit before turning northward, one sees scrap metal yards, seedy restaurants, darkly shaded bars, and the abandoned Michigan State Fairgrounds. The exit leading northward away from the decay of the Motor City leads past successively more viable patchwork municipalities until it culminates in the resplendent suburban of Birmingham. Stately homes set amid verdant, gently rolling hills foster a sense of ordered beauty and pleasant living. The town’s website describes itself in this way:

Nestled amid some of the nation’s most affluent suburbs, Downtown Birmingham is a center for business, social and cultural activities. The City has a lively, pedestrian-friendly downtown offering one of the Midwest’s

¹ Interview with confirmand, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

² Interview with adult mentor, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

premiere shopping districts. Comprised of nearly 300 retailers, the City offers a wonderfully diverse assortment of restaurants, clothing and gift stores, salons, spas, antique shops, and art galleries. Movie theatres and a centrally located park complete the city center. Whether you want to stroll the streets with your family and grab an ice cream, or check out the latest in designer fashions capped off with an evening of some of Metro's Detroit's finest dining, Birmingham offers it all. Our city is truly a place to "live, shop, and play."

Our city appreciates art and culture in its many forms. Visitors to Birmingham can spend a summer evening listening to a concert in the park, attend one of our many festivals or music concerts, take a Sunday morning stroll at the Farmers' Market, browse our galleries, or take in the latest movies at one of our two theatres.... Tennis courts, two municipal golf courses, baseball diamonds, soccer pitches, playground equipment and picnic areas await you in Birmingham. A wooded trail system, urban bike paths and the Rouge River all wind their way through the heart of the City.³

Most of the adults who live in Birmingham and the immediate vicinity have well-paying white-collar jobs, often in middle and upper management in the auto industry. Residents value higher education and their youth aim for admission to Ivy League schools. The arts, athletics, and civic engagement figure prominently in the community. The average price for a single-family home in 2013 was \$393,000.⁴ The community often ranks in the top lists of places to live and to retire. In 2010, the *Wall Street Journal* ranked it fifth among "The most successful walkable suburbs in the U.S., ranked by education levels, per capita income and travel time to work."⁵ Summing up the overall impression of this community, Niche rankings, a website that ranks communities in the USA, listed Birmingham as number one for 2015 on the list of "Best Suburbs to Raise a Family in Michigan."⁶

Located less than a mile from the center of town on one of the main east-west thoroughfares, First Presbyterian Church figures prominently in the life and culture

³ <http://www.bhamgov.org/about.php>. Accessed May 20, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Richard Florida, "How SoHo can save the suburbs," *Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2010. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703735804575535880450842698>. Accessed May 21, 2016.

⁶ "Best Suburbs to Raise a Family in Michigan," https://local.niche.com/rankings/suburbs/best-places-for-families/s/michigan/?utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook&utm_campaign=RankingsList&utm_term=RLP Accessed May 21, 2016.

of the community. Writing in 1966, Harold F. Fredsell in *John Monteith and Detroit Presbyterianism* observed:

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, established in 1834, ...was founded in a barn by only nine members, six of whom were members of nearby Pontiac and Troy churches. The location was on the level plains of Piety Hill, which was later to become what is now known as Birmingham. The barn was owned by Deacon Fish, who was one of the original nine founders, and the name given to the First Church was “The Presbyterian Society of Bloomfield,” deriving the name from the township in which it was located. They adopted the Articles and Covenants of the Presbytery of Detroit and were temporarily served by two pastors from neighboring churches. Nine additional members were received by letter of transfer, and the church of 18 members worshipped – first, in the Davis Hotel and later in the community’s old wooden schoolhouse.

The new church’s first edifice was dedicated in 1844; it was soon outgrown and a larger one built and dedicated in 1860. In 1918, 58 years later, they built a new and larger church on Woodward Avenue, which, in turn, was again outgrown in a matter of 36 years. A new church was built on Maple Road and dedicated on Palm Sunday of 1954. Thus, the First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham has in 127 years grown from nine members to 3,853 members.⁷



As of 2016, the congregation had 870 members and a weekly worship attendance of 292. The annual budget is approximately \$1.1 million, with the average member contributing \$2,095.⁸ The congregation had 634 enrolled in its educational program in that same year. An analysis of “Ten Year Trends” for the congregation

provided by the PCUSA indicates that most current numbers (e.g. membership, worship attendance, Christian education enrollment) are down from highs in the middle of the last decade. Only “Contributions per member” and “Contributions per attendee” show marked increase during the past decade. Predictably, a shift in all

⁷ Harold F. Fredsell, *John Monteith and Detroit Presbyteriansim*, (Ann Arbor, MI: The Ann Arbor Press, 1966), 84-85.

⁸ Current statistics supplied by Rev. Amy Morgan, May 2016.

indicators occurred with the end of the tenure of one senior pastor and the beginning of another around 2008.⁹

The campus is set back a good distance from the main east-west road running through the heart of Birmingham while yet remaining prominently visible. The green and well-groomed campus has ample parking for at least two hundred cars behind the complex of interconnected worship, fellowship, and education buildings. The spacious facilities look to have been constructed in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The two and three story structures have generous proportions and clean lines. The tall, thin steeple adorned with a simple cross rises two stories above the roofline of the sanctuary.

The recently renovated sanctuary has a Scan Design feel with reddish oak floors, pews, and wall panels contrasting with white pew ends, ceiling, and wall spaces between paneling. Beautiful and highly themed stained glass windows line the narrow, yet spacious sanctuary.



A new organ with four manuals, 50 stops, and 64 ranks was installed in 2009. A large, black grand piano also graces the front of the sanctuary. Pulpit, table, and font all have their appropriate places. The approximately forty rows of pews divided by a large central aisle and flanked by narrower aisles at the outside ends can easily accommodate hundreds of worshippers on a Sunday morning. By the time worship begins, most of the pews have at least a few people sitting in them and many are full.

The adjacent education and fellowship buildings are spacious and well maintained. One finds little clutter and seemingly no space that goes unused. The many roomy classrooms have evidence of use by learners on both Sunday mornings and

⁹ http://apps.pcusa.org/tenyeartrends/report/3114/all_statistics.jsp . Accessed May 20, 2016.

throughout the week. The hallways display themed artwork, much of which pertains to the current curricular design. The fellowship hall contains a small industrial sized kitchen that is in good working order as well as a stage and plenty of space for tables and chairs. In short, the facilities seem to be well-maintained, clean, and in continuous use.

The congregation has nicknamed itself “Everybody’s Church” in order to emphasize the pervasive spirit of welcome and inclusion that characterizes this community of faith. The distinctive ethos of the congregation comes through in its various self-identity statements found on its website:

Our Vision

As Everybody's Church we commit ourselves to serving Christ by cultivating mission, inclusion and community.

Our Inclusion Statement

As Everybody’s Church, we strive to be a faithful, open and inclusive community. We welcome the participation of all people of any ability, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or any other life circumstance.

Our Statement of Discipleship

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we live and grow in God’s Word as peacemakers, faithful stewards, and compassionate neighbors.¹⁰

The congregation affirms the core theological commitments of the Reformed tradition in its Neo-orthodox expression while embracing liberal social commitments. Unlike many other large, affluent, mainly white congregations in the PCUSA, this congregation has opted not to pull out of the denomination as a result of recent policy changes about the ordination of gay and lesbian members and about gay marriage performed by its clergy. In short, it has embraced a robust left-wing Barthianism that aims to integrate dynamic, orthodox worship with engaged witness for Christ in local, regional, national, and international arenas. In addition, the congregation generously supports the arts and has made a major commitment to ministries of inclusion as well as adoption and foster care. In keeping with its vision and values, the congregation has an ongoing and sustaining commitment to the FAR Conservatory for Therapeutic and Performing Arts (serving the special needs

¹⁰ <http://www.fpcbirmingham.org/our-vision-and-values.html>.

community) through providing space for the program as well as financial and volunteer support.

The congregation supports nineteen staff members, including a senior pastor, two associate pastors, and four parish associates (ordained pastors who serve as adjuncts to the pastoral staff). The pastor for pastoral care and the Director of Christian education both have special responsibilities for attending to matters of inclusion and special needs. The pastor for pastoral care and inclusion also serves as Co-Moderator of Presbyterians for Disability Concerns at the national level of the denomination. The staff also includes a Director for the early learning center that is sponsored and housed by the congregation. Various assistants and coordinators round out the full compliment of staff.

OVERVIEW OF CONFIRMATION -----

The long-established confirmation program needed to change. For decades the program transmitted fairly traditional content mainly through direct instruction. The pastors struggled to engage learners and to retain confirmands in the life of the



church subsequent to Confirmation Sunday. A growing consensus emerged that a new approach was needed in order for confirmation to function as something more than a formal process that functioned as graduation from church. Through a period of a few years of experiments

with changes to content, format, and methods of instruction eventually a new model emerged that by all accounts – from confirmands, adult sponsors, parents, and staff alike – works very effectively. The new model runs for a single year from September through May and involves several components: a “flipped classroom” approach to pedagogy, a mission trip, a retreat, adult sponsors, and creative methods of instruction during face-to-face meetings. The process culminates with confirmation

Sunday, often on or around Pentecost. In brief, the program involves several interrelated components:

- Flexibly scheduled monthly meetings of dyads of a confirmand and an adult covenant partner in order to watch and discuss a YouTube video made by the pastoral leader of the program that communicates new material using direct instruction
- Monthly gatherings of the whole group of confirmands and their adult sponsors to share insights from the work done in dyads and to build community
- An intensive weekend experience in Chicago in January involving mission work at a shelter and lectures from faculty at McCormick Seminary on what it means to be Presbyterian
- A retreat in April at a camp for the purpose of writing semi-structured statements of faith
- An examination of confirmands by the church session (board of elders)
- A culminating celebration in worship on confirmation Sunday in May.

The following analysis of the roles of the people involved, the aims, the methods, and the curriculum will provide a working sense of how this program works.

Roles of the People Involved

The young people (and their families) who are part of the First Presbyterian community lead exceedingly busy lives. With their sights set on admission to Ivy League universities, middle school and high school students work hard at school and spend many hours each day doing homework. Most of the students involved in the program also have one or more extracurricular involvements that take up significant discretionary time. The biggest extra-curricular involvements involve athletics and sports teams. One confirmand said, “Diving basically takes up my life.” Some students participate in band or chorus. Many, but not all, participants in confirmation make time for some weekly combination of worship, church school, and youth group; only a minority of confirmands participate in all three. The members of the pastoral staff report that “Kids [in this church] are very driven for

success and in an achievement-oriented society...trying to get into Ivy League schools. Church isn't going to win by competing with extra-curriculars because confirmation won't get them into the Ivies."¹¹

The “flipped classroom” approach – delivering content through videos available for viewing at any time during a several week window of time combined with face-to-face discussion about the meaning of the video content in sponsor-confirmand dyads and in periodic large group gatherings – demands active involvement on the part of each learner. This involvement has three aspects: engaging and reflecting upon the video material developed by the pastoral leader of the program, interacting conversationally with an adult sponsor, and actively participating in learning activities during face-to-face sessions of the program and the intensive off-campus weekend experiences (i.e. the Chicago trip and the faith statement retreat). Extensive efforts are made by the pastor in charge of confirmation and the adult sponsors to help confirmands to reflect upon subject matter and experiences had in the off-campus trips. Reflection provides the grist for dyadic discussion with adult sponsors, which, in turn, prepares learners to interact dynamically in sessions when the whole group of confirmands and sponsors convene. Notably, the pastoral staff of the church emphatically stated that “The key to this program is the Chicago trip, not the “flipped classroom” approach because relationships are crucial. Busy people can access the videos whenever they want to do so, but it doesn't replace face-to-face interactions and relationships.”¹²

Adult sponsors play a key role in the confirmation process in this program. Confirmands may select a sponsor with whom they feel comfortable. Many choose adults that they already know from family interaction or through other social networks. In cases where the confirmand does not know a non-family adult in the congregation, the pastor provides a list of potential sponsors and, sometimes, will play matchmaker. Because confirmands have a high degree of agency in selecting

¹¹ Focus group with staff members, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

¹² Ibid.

sponsors and because many have a prior relationship with their chosen sponsor, the interactions between confirmand and sponsor tend to be positive and productive.

The pastor provides instruction on the role and work of sponsors at the beginning of the confirmation cycle and equips them with a working knowledge of the goals, content, and processes of the program. Most sponsors interviewed expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the process and particularly enjoy the dyadic interactions with their confirmands. Several sponsors confessed to needing the confirmation material themselves as they have a relatively unformed understanding of the basics of biblical content and interpretation, core Christian beliefs, and working understanding of what it means to be Presbyterian. Typically, sponsors agree with what one of them shared in an interview, “I have learned as much as my confirmand [through this process].”¹³ In interviews, several parents and sponsors expressed a strong desire for an adult-level confirmation-like course since they too need to learn the basics of Christian faith and church membership as well as develop more meaningful connections with the larger congregational community.

Theoretically, sponsors play an active role beyond the dyadic interactions with their confirmands; in reality, the sponsors play only a peripheral role when the whole group of confirmands and sponsors convenes for face-to-face sessions. During the large group sessions, sponsors tend to sit on the periphery and provide only a little encouragement and a coaching from time to time.

Parents play almost no role in the program, often to their surprise or disappointment. While there is some encouragement for parents to watch and discuss with their confirmands the instructional videos posted on Youtube, this task is essentially left to the adult sponsors. Some parents report having watched the videos on their own – just to get a sense of what their daughter or son is learning – and, like the adult sponsors, have expressed some interest in having confirmation-like instruction on the basics of Christian faith offered for them. One parent said

¹³ Interview with adult mentor, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

that this program was “helping her relearn what Presbyterians believe.”¹⁴ The only required role for parents in the process involves providing lunch on a rotating basis for the two hour face-to-face sessions that take place once a month following corporate worship on Sunday morning. The parent or parents whose turn it is to provide lunch for a particular session tend to stay for the whole session and observe the process from the sidelines along with the sponsors.

The Associate Pastor for Missions and Community, Amy Morgan, superintends and provides primary instructional leadership for the whole confirmation process. She developed the curriculum materials, recorded the YouTube videos, and architected the multi-faceted model for confirmation currently in use.¹⁵ She also works with individuals and families in the process in order to make things work, particularly when challenges arise related to learning or scheduling. She also functions essentially as the biblical interpreter, theologian-in-residence, curriculum specialist, and lead teacher for the program.

Other members of the staff like the Youth Ministries Director, the Senior Pastor, the Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care and Inclusion, and the Director of Christian Education and All Abilities Inclusion Ministry all play supporting roles for the program. At the end of the process, the session (governing board of ruling elders) plays a largely formal role in examining and voting to change the ecclesial status of confirmands based on a combination of their oral and written statements of faith.

The confirmation program has effectively addressed and made accommodation for learners with special needs. Last year, a confirmand with Down’s Syndrome participated meaningfully in the program. Changes were made to the program aimed at maximal inclusion like the production of a video “Welcome Book” that helped the learner to connect names and personalities with each person in the group. The mother of this learner (who also has a confirmand in the current class)

¹⁴ Focus group with parents, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

¹⁵ Confirmation videos can be accessed by selecting the “Resources” tab, then the “Videos” link, and then the “Confirmation videos” link from the dropdown menu.
<http://www.fpcbirmingham.org/confirmation-videos.html> Accessed May 21, 2016.

expressed a great deal of appreciation – to the point of tears – for the efforts that were made by the church and the leadership team made across the year to help her daughter to feel included and to learn in ways that matched her learning capacities. The current group of confirmands includes a learner who has significant behavioral challenges arising from extremely painful family dynamics. The sponsor, the pastor, and the unique features of this program make it possible for this learner to participate meaningfully. The flexibility characteristic of this model works exceptionally well for the chronically over-scheduled and for a wide range of learning styles.

Aims

The confirmation program at First Presbyterian has several aims. The program intends to provide a context in which confirmands can explore their relationship with God through Jesus Christ and grow in a personal faith relationship. One of the confirmands talked about how this program is all about “how to relate Christian faith to your life.” In the opening video of the five-part series, the theme of personal relationship with God is stressed as more important than disconnected religious knowledge. To this end, confirmands are encouraged to ask lots of questions about Christian beliefs and practices. The adults leaders and mentors work to provide a safe and supportive environment for exploration of questions related to Christian faith.

Related to the aim of deeper relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the program also seeks to help confirmands learn how to relate biblical teachings and basic Christian beliefs to their daily lives. One confirmand expressed it simply, “...everything in the Bible is relatable. I did not know that before.”¹⁶ Principles of basic biblical interpretation serve to help confirmands get to a place in which they can see the relevance and practical value of overarching biblical themes and key texts.

¹⁶ Interview with confirmand, conducted by Gordon S. Mikoski, March 14, 2015.

The aims also include an ecclesial concern. The program offers a way for confirmands to both learn what it means to be Presbyterian and to enter more deeply into the life and work of the church. It fosters reflective and intentional engagement with the church and with the tradition of Protestantism within which this particular congregation stands. It does not promote a narrow tribalism, but works at developing a clear sense of Presbyterian Christian identity that values openness to other religious traditions as an important expression of hospitality and care for one's neighbor. Developing positive, caring relationships with other confirmands and with adult sponsors functions as one of the key strategies for fostering deeper ecclesial commitment and engagement.

Methods of Instruction

The most innovative aspect of this confirmation program lies in the area of instructional methods. For reasons already mentioned concerning a shift from passive, disengaged learners to active, engaged learners, the hallmark of this program is the “flipped classroom” approach to pedagogy. The pastor delivers new subject matter primarily through direct instruction that is captured in a series of 12-17 minutes videos. The videos can be accessed either through a link on the church's website or directly through YouTube. Each confirmand-sponsor dyad has to watch together and discuss a particular video presentation within a specified four to six week window of time. Each dyad works out for themselves when and where the dyad will meet to watch and discuss the new content. Most often, participants mentioned meeting in a local coffee shop for their periodic viewing and discussion meetings.

Each of the brief instructional videos follows roughly the same format. The pastor conveys new content through direct instruction using a very conversational tone. After introducing the new material for three or four minutes, the pastor asks the dyad to stop or pause the video in order to reflect, discuss, and, in the case of confirmands, write down thoughts as prompted by one or more generative questions. Sometimes, participants are instructed to look up a particular passage of the Bible and interact with it along the lines of one or more prompts. The dyadic interaction has value in and of itself, but it also primes the pump for dialogical

interaction among confirmands during the upcoming face-to-face session focused on further digesting and applying the new content encountered in the videos.

The asynchronous character of the video assignments seems to function as one of the keys to the success of this program. This strategy for delivering direct instruction concerning core content allows for maximum flexibility in scheduling while also evoking a high degree of active engagement with the material. Since shifting away from lecturing at confirmands during several face-to-face synchronous sessions spread over the course of the year, the quality of interaction and reflective engagement has increased dramatically on the part of the learners.

The periodic face-to-face sessions assume that confirmands have already had a running start with the subject matter under consideration. As a result, the subject matter is less conveyed than explored during the large group sessions. Each of those meetings begins with a common meal shared by confirmands, adult sponsors, staff

members, and at least one family who have provided the meal. After lunch the group begins to engage the subject matter through one or more active games that both reinforce a main idea from the subject matter and



foster positive relationships. The middle part of the face-to-face sessions involves exploring deeper meanings and life applications of the subject matter. Each confirmand is encouraged to participate. Even those who are a bit reticent will contribute their thoughts or questions on a particular topic because they bring into the interaction experiences of watching the video, discussing it at some length with a sponsor, and writing down some thoughts in response to prompts related to the matter at hand. The large group gatherings close with a reiteration of key themes, aims, and processes of the confirmation project as well as any administrative announcements and reminders about the next steps of the process.

The videos, the dyadic interactions between confirmands and sponsors, and the large face-to-face gatherings find significant supplementation in two off-campus intensive weekend experiences. In January, the group travels together from the Detroit area to Chicago for a weekend of service, learning, and fellowship. The group develops strong internal bonds through creative games and through working together in small groups to provide meals for the whole group. The group stays in the facilities of Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago and goes out from there to serve in an area soup kitchen and to McCormick Seminary to learn from a faculty member or two what it means to be Presbyterian. Every participant interviewed indicated how formative and central the Chicago trip had been for forming relationships with other members of the group and for deepening their understanding of what it means to be Christian. Some expressed the desire to have the Chicago trip take place at the very beginning of the program so that group bonding could happen earlier in the process. Interestingly, the pastoral and program staff members involved in this program say that it is the Chicago trip, not the “flipped classroom” approach to pedagogy, that makes the program successful because of the richness of relationships that develop among the participants on the trip.

After the final face-to-face session and prior to the culminating activities of meeting with the session and participating in Confirmation Sunday, the confirmands and their sponsors go away for a weekend retreat at a nearby camp and retreat center. This provides opportunities for consolidation of learning through the drafting of statements of faith guided by the overall curricular themes of the program and for further deepening of relationships among confirmands and between confirmands and adult sponsors. The structured faith statements are eventually assembled and put together into a booklet that is distributed to the session and to the confirmands at the end of the process.

The process of confirmation culminates in May in two steps. The confirmands and their sponsors meet over dinner with the members of the session so that the session can meet the confirmands and vice versa. Here again, the relational dimension of

the program matters more than the explicit curriculum associated with the program. On Confirmation Sunday, the confirmands and their sponsor come forward and receive special recognition, are blessed, and prayers are offered on their behalf. The closing phase of the confirmation process involves a rich and meaningful participation in the drama of Sunday morning liturgy.

Curricular Content

The confirmation program takes its cues for curricular content from the larger curricular framework developed and used by the congregation. The “Five Part Story” permeates the entire educational program at First Presbyterian Church. The confirmation program provides opportunities for those who have participated in church school to explore the five familiar themes in greater depth. For those who have been on the periphery or not involved at all in the educational program of the congregation, the five themes provide a foundation for understanding the basics of Christian belief and practice.

The overarching message of Scripture conveyed in the five core themes include these basic messages:

- God loves the world
- The world wandered from God
- Jesus is the way to God
- The Spirit leads us to God
- We follow the way of God’s love

Throughout, the development of these themes emphasize the relational, inclusive character of Christianity. Propositional content is always set within a context of living, dynamic relationships with God and with one’s neighbor. The Scripture passages used for the explication of five big, interrelated themes tend to be taken from evangelical “greatest hits” like Genesis 1 and 3, John 3, John 14, Matthew 28, and Romans 7. Learners are encouraged to explore the meaning of these texts in relation to their own life experiences and to explore their implications for daily life and for the mission of the church in society and the world.

CONCLUSION

The faith app that is confirmation at First Presbyterian Birmingham opens up many creative possibilities for adapting curricular content and methods of instruction for busy confirmands and their adult sponsors in the digital age. Rather than attempting to outcompete a myriad of extracurricular activities or to guilt families into participation in a traditional confirmation program, the approach developed in this congregation has altered several basic assumptions and adjusted a few key variables in order to adapt effectively to a specific context. It has the added advantage of increasing the bandwidth for differentiated instructional plans, particularly for learners who have special challenges on one kind or another. The hybrid approach – combining asynchronous digital media and synchronous face-to-face interactions – likely points the way toward many more possible experiments for adapting confirmation to changing contexts in the future.