

### III. After Confirmation: Country-Specific Articles

#### 1. After Confirmation: Results for Germany

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##### 1.1 Background Information

In Germany, the idea of conducting a study that refers to the time two years after confirmation was welcomed warmly by the Church. The idea of looking beyond the time of confirmation and taking account of more long-term effects clearly corresponds to the German Church's experience of growing drop-out rates from church membership as well as to the realisation that successful programs like confirmation work must also be evaluated concerning their effects in terms of adolescents' relationship to the Church. For example, church leaders consider it very important to find out what the experience of confirmation time means for the future attachment to the Church for those who participate in this program. Moreover, the earlier studies on confirmation work in Germany (Ilg et al. 2009, Schweitzer et al. 2015b) resulted in a clearer awareness of the Church that volunteers have come to play a vital role in many parishes and that an increasing number of confirmands are interested in becoming volunteers after confirmation. In 2012/2013 when the respective data were gathered, 62 000 volunteers were active in confirmation work in Germany, many of them adolescents themselves. To gain more insights into the volunteers' expectations and experiences, therefore, made sense to the Church as an endeavor important for the future (background information on the study: [www.konfirmandenarbeit.eu](http://www.konfirmandenarbeit.eu)).

In terms of general background, the situation of the Protestant Church in Germany can be characterised as stable but, at the same time, clearly under a certain pressure. For the last 50 years, there have been continuous losses in membership. More recently, in addition to the drop-out rates, demographic factors have become another source of concern. The German birth rate is especially low with Protestants. The dwindling number of children born to Protestant parents also makes itself felt in terms of the number of confirmands among adolescents. Between the first and the second study on confirmation work in Germany (2007/2008-2012/2013), the number of confirmands dropped by 10%, not due to lower participation rates but due to demographic change. In the longer run, such developments will naturally affect church membership in

general as well, which explains why the Church is very interested in trying to provide good experiences for adolescents.

## 1.2 How the $t_3$ -Study Was Conducted

Procedures in Germany built upon the sample and the questionnaires in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . More specifically, when the confirmands received the questionnaires shortly before their confirmation, they were asked if they would be willing to fill out another questionnaire two years after confirmation. If so, they had to provide their contact information (email, postal address) so that it would be possible to reach them at a later time (2015).

In Germany, the second study on confirmation work was conducted by a team of researchers at the Theological Faculty of the University of Tübingen – in a manner very similar to that of the first study (Ilg et al. 2009). Again all of the regional Churches took part in it. The original sample of parishes was selected by an independent social science institute (GESIS – Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences). The resulting random sample can be considered representative. 583 parishes had the questionnaires filled in by the confirmands resulting in a return rate of almost 45 % of the original sample. The details of the  $t_1$ - and the  $t_2$ -study can be found in a separate publication (Schweitzer et al. 2015b). The  $t_3$ -study was conducted in spring/summer 2015, with a reduced sample of only those who responded at all three times, at the beginning and at the end of confirmation time as well as two years after confirmation. The sample is fully longitudinal.

Table 27 shows the sample sizes for the three times that the confirmands filled out a questionnaire.

The response rate of 28 % in  $t_3$  makes it necessary to consider the composition of the sample in more detail. It should be clear from the beginning that the sample was not representative. The results can not be generalised. Instead, the evaluation and interpretation of the data has its focus on longitudinal developments. Therefore only the responses from those questionnaires were used that could be matched for all three times when they were administered.

The composition of the  $t_3$ -sample shows a special profile in a number of respects. Table 28 describes the sample according to a number of background factors.

If one compares these characteristics with the representative samples in  $t_1$  and in  $t_2$ , it is clear that the fully matched  $t_3$ -sample has certain characteristics that need to be borne in mind. The results reflect more the views of the girls than of the boys and more the religiously socialised than the ones without such experiences.

Table 27: German sample sizes in t<sub>1</sub> (2012), t<sub>2</sub> (2013) and t<sub>3</sub> (2015)

	t <sub>1</sub>	t <sub>2</sub>	t <sub>3</sub>	t <sub>1</sub> -t <sub>2</sub> -t <sub>3</sub>	Valid questionnaires from volunteers within the t <sub>1</sub> -t <sub>2</sub> -t <sub>3</sub> -sample
N	10191	9096	2588	1937	354
			(28% of t <sub>2</sub> )	(21% of t <sub>2</sub> )	

Table 28: Background factors of the German sample (%)

	Sex: boys/girls	Contact to the Church* age between 5-9 years/ more than 9 years	Parents interested in religion	Bedside prayer	More than 250 books at home	Parents active as volunteers**
	C/QM01	CM11/12	CJ01	CJ02	CM04	CP17
t <sub>1</sub> /t <sub>2</sub> /t <sub>3</sub>	36/64	58 / 60	29	47	43	34
t <sub>1</sub> /t <sub>2</sub> only	49/51	47 / 51	25	40	35	27

\* at least 3 times; \*\* at least one parent who is volunteering.

### 1.3 Main Results

Aside from general insights on the age group in question, the main results of the quantitative study refer to four topics in particular: view of the confirmation time and of the day of confirmation in retrospect; development of religious attitudes; relationship to the Church; pathways into volunteerism (for a more detailed account cf. Schweitzer et al. 2016).

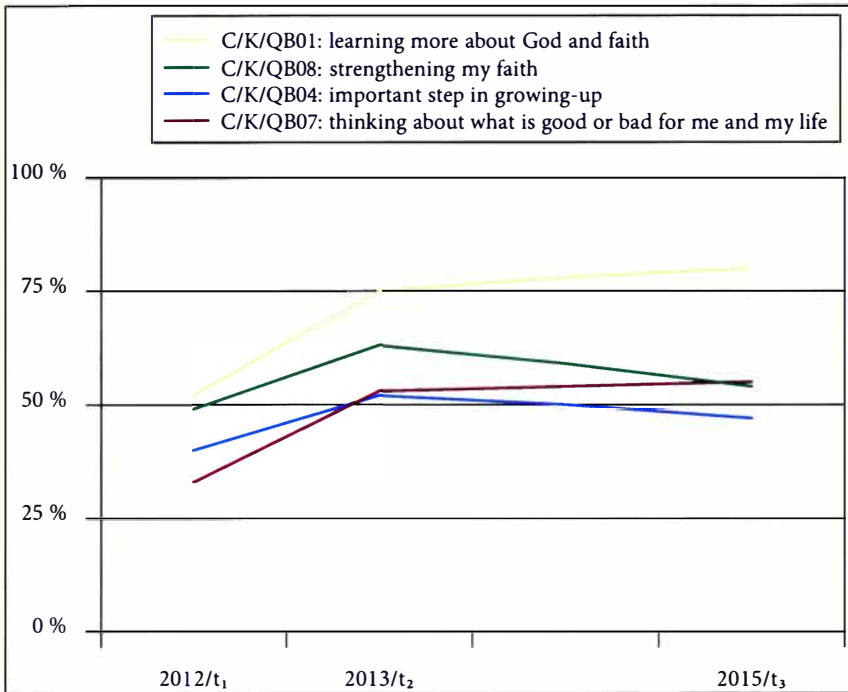
#### *Views of confirmation time and confirmation day in retrospect*

In the following, some of the answers given by the adolescents in free text fields are reproduced.

»My Confirmation time was a very important step for me on my way to adulthood.« (m)

»My confirmation time was a lot of fun. I think of this special time very often, where I learned a lot and was quite active. I am not the kind of guy who was doing the confirmation time because of the money. I did it, because my parents were pleased with it.« (f)

Figure 25: Confirmands' views of confirmation time (Germany):  $t_1$  (2012),  $t_2$  (2013),  $t_3$  (2015)



$N = 1892-1919$ ; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable). The original item wording can be found in the appendix, p. 262 ff.

Concerning the view of the day of confirmation in retrospect, the adolescents' responses indicate that this day of celebration has left a lasting impression on many of the Protestant youth in Germany. This is of interest in itself in that very few data on the experience of the day of confirmation were available in Germany before the present study. It is well-known, however, that in most cases, there is a special church service on this day with many members of the extended family taking part, some of whom sometimes travel long distances in order to be present for the celebration. Moreover, most families celebrate in private for the whole day after the church service.

Against this background, the German adolescents' responses are very interesting (see Table 29).

First of all, these results indicate that the majority of the respondents highly appreciate and value the day of confirmation. Given the many things that are going on in today's young people's lives, this is an impressive result. Moreover, it is quite obvious that the dimension of the celebration with the family is the

Table 29: Confirmation day in retrospect ( $t_3$ , 2015), Germany

		Yes
QK20	It was one of the most important days of my life.	55 %
QB09	Having a beautiful celebration with family and friends was important for me.	66 %
QB10	The money and presents were important for me.	34 %
QB11	To receive a blessing was important for me.	55 %

N = 1902-1930; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

most important aspect for the adolescents. The material dimension of gifts, etc. is not as important, at least not for these respondents. A comparison with their earlier responses before confirmation shows that this motive has lost some of the importance from the time before confirmation. This is not equally true for the importance of the blessing received during the service which remained high after confirmation.

#### *The Development of Beliefs and Religious Attitudes*

For the following, readers should be aware that there were many changes at the individual level as well as at the group level, and that the individual changes took different directions not always following the patterns of the whole group under study.

Concerning *developments during the two years after confirmation* (changes from  $t_2$  to  $t_3$ ), tendencies measured by the items concerning religious attitudes were generally negative. This applies to faith in creation (-9 percent points, QE01) as well as to the belief in a loving God (-8, QE03) or in God in general (-7, QE09). The decrease concerning the belief in the resurrection of Jesus is marked at -8 percent points (QE04). Changes in a positive direction occur concerning the familiarity with the Christian faith (+8, QE10) and the belief in an afterlife (+3, QE02).

These changes must be seen against the background of the respective level of agreement. With the German adolescents responding in  $t_3$ , roughly three different levels can be distinguished in this respect: about two thirds affirm faith in God and an afterlife; about 50 % believe in the resurrection of Jesus or say that faith in God helps them in difficult situations; there is much less agreement in respect to faith in creation (39 %, QE01). This indicates that faith in creation appears especially questionable and difficult to these adolescents. Some statements from the confirmands can illustrate the main tendencies:

»Christian faith doesn't seem too bad to me, but the older I am, the stronger my doubts become.« (f)

»I come from a not very religious family, so my confirmation time was important for coming in contact with faith for the first time and for getting interested in it. I only hope that I am not the only one, whose confirmation time was influential.« (f)

»Today, the origin of the earth for example can be explained by the theory of evolution and a lot of dubious phenomenons by logical and scientific facts.« (f)

Concerning *developments from the beginning of confirmation time through two years after confirmation* ( $t_1 - t_2 - t_3$ ), the general picture does not change much. The positive and negative tendencies remain the same. Yet there are two observations that deserve a closer look:

- Only in the case of the item »Faith in God helps me in difficult situations« (C/K/QE08) is it possible to speak of a return of the adolescents to the values at the beginning of confirmation time ( $t_1$ : 50 %,  $t_2$ : 55 %;  $t_3$ : 47 %), with the positive responses in  $t_3$  with -3 percent points lower than in  $t_1$ . In this case, it is likely that confirmation time had a positive effect that disappears after confirmation.
- The increase with belief in an afterlife (C/K/QE02) between  $t_2$  and  $t_3$  is even more marked compared to  $t_1$  (+9 percent points in  $t_3$ ).

### *Relationship to the Church*

The relationship to the Church is characterised by small positive changes during the confirmation time and by an increase of critical attitudes two years after that. First, there is the positive image of the Church: 76 % affirm that »the Church does a lot of good things for people« (C/K/QG05); shortly before confirmation, the positive responses reach 78 %, in  $t_3$  80 %. Results concerning the general attitude towards the Church (C/K/QF02), however, show a different pattern. Although the positive responses increased between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  by two percent points from 78 % to 80 % in this respect, in  $t_3$  the value decreased to 75 % concerning the attitude towards the Church in general.

This pattern also holds true for the importance of *belonging to the Church* (C/K/QG01) – although on a distinctly lower level. While the increase between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  reaches 5 percent points (from 48 % to 53 %), the agreement to this question decreases to 45 % in  $t_3$ . The positive image does not result in a stronger feeling of belonging.

In the beginning of confirmation time, 30 % of the respondents said that »the Church does not have answers to the questions that are important to me.« (C/K/QG02). Shortly before the day of confirmation, the agreement to this statement increased by two percent points, and in  $t_3$ , even 38 % of the adolescents affirmed

this critical view. This attitude can be seen in the following statement from a confirmand:

*»The Church was always too conservative and its history is also not that kind of good. Even more, the stories are stupid rubbish.« (m)*

42 % of the adolescents said in  $t_1$  that church services were »usually boring« (C/K/QG04). Shortly before their confirmation, even 50 % said so. Two years after confirmation, this value decreased by about 5 percent points to 45 %. Accordingly, the views of worship services become more positive after confirmation. Yet although more rarely, the confirmands also express attitudes like the following:

*»Being part of the Church is an honour and a beautiful thing. Due to certain circumstances I can't attend the service regularly. Nevertheless, I will stick with the Church.« (f)*

#### *Pathways into Volunteerism*

Two important insights of the first study on confirmation work in Germany refer to the role of volunteerism for confirmation work and to the fact that confirmation work can be considered as education for civil society in general because it strengthens volunteerism (see Schweitzer et al. 2015a, 93-105).

In the present study, adolescents who had not been active in Christian youth work after confirmation as volunteers were asked about their reasons for not having done so (see Figure 26).

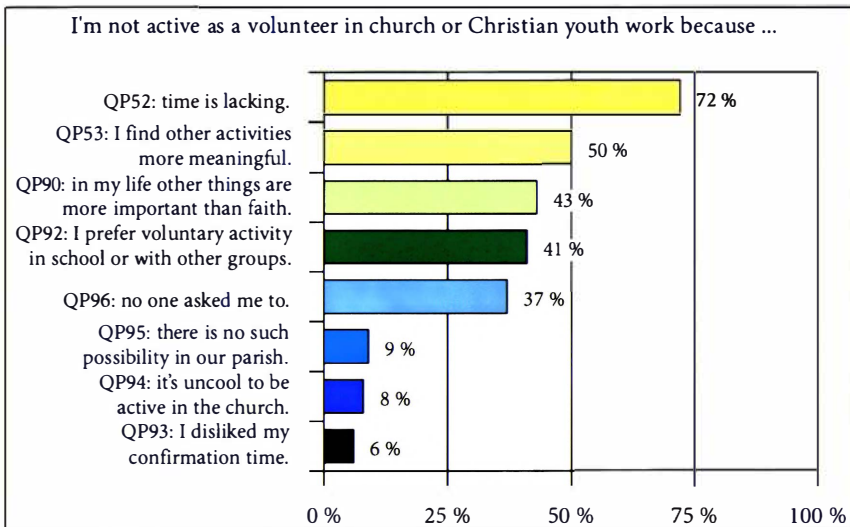
It is important to note that 37 % said they were not asked to do voluntary work, and this is why they did not become involved (QP96). It is obvious that confirmation work entails many potentials for voluntary work that have not yet been realised.

That confirmation work is indeed an important pathway into volunteerism is underlined by the agreement to the question if the adolescents could imagine becoming volunteers after confirmation which clearly increased during confirmation time. Moreover, the adolescents also increasingly affirmed that the church offers opportunities for adolescents' voluntary work.

Who had the strongest impact on the volunteers' decision to become a volunteer? Volunteers emphasised their own decision to do so (QP63: 88 %) and the influence of their peers (QP61: 64 %). Distinctly lower is the impact of pastors or other church workers or of family members (QP60: 31 % resp. QP62: 34 %). The different impacts are obviously not mutually exclusive but interact with each other.

Almost all volunteers state that their voluntary work is fun (QP32: 97 %). The social dimension is another strong motive. The adolescents liked working

Figure 26: Reasons for not volunteering in church or Christian youth work (t<sub>3</sub>, 2015), Germany



N = 1529-1544; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable).

with other people (QP66: 92 %) and enjoyed the good spirit of the team (QP70: 92 %).

*»With the help of my confirmation time I got involved in the life of my congregation, and now I am glad to be active in the congregation and in youth work. I got to know a lot of people and made some of my most important friends. I really learnt to appreciate my faith and myself.« (f)*

## 1.4 Additional Studies

### *Qualitative Study with Young Volunteers*

The study aimed at the experiences of young volunteers at the age between 14 and 18 years. It included group interviews with adolescents in a number of locations selected on the basis of the quantitative study. The aim was to capture different experiences which was the reason for selecting locations in different parts of the country, both in rural and urban contexts, in eastern as well as in western Germany. Altogether, eight interviews were conducted with groups of two to nine adolescents. A detailed account of the results of the study can be found in Schweitzer et al. 2016.



Qualitative studies can rarely be summarised in brief points. Their particular strength that also shows up in the present study lies in rich contextual insights to be gained by carefully listening to individual people or groups and by trying to render their experiences in a manner that is as faithful to their own views as possible. Since the interviews were conducted with adolescents who, at the time of the interviews, were active as volunteers in the context of confirmation work, all results of this part of the study refer to this context.

The results of the qualitative interviews and their interpretations can be seen in relationship to how they became volunteers, their motivations, experiences and what competences developed in their work, visions for confirmation work.

Altogether, the interview material includes many encouraging impulses for voluntary work in the field of confirmation work. According to the young voluntary workers, it is not only the confirmands who enjoy the participation of young volunteers. The volunteers themselves also appreciate the experience of working with younger adolescents and of being responsible for their own work. Moreover, they enjoy working together in a group of peers as well as with pastors who take them seriously as partners in this work.

While the adolescents' vivid reports make it clear that the involvement as volunteers has many potentials and can be quite attractive to all parties involved, they also indicate a number of problems that should be addressed in future work. A few examples can make this clear. Some of the young volunteers feel that the confirmation work they encountered in their parishes should be more oriented towards the needs and interests of the confirmands. Others feel that the respective pastor tends to make use of the volunteers for aims and purposes that were not discussed with the volunteers or agreed upon together with them beforehand.

Such critical observations and remarks do not change the overall picture that is also very positive from the perspective of the qualitative part of the study. Instead, they show that the interviewees were willing to share the whole range of their experiences and insights, instead of only drawing ideal pictures. Moreover, the critical suggestions from the young workers are of value for future work.

#### *Research on Confirmation Work and Volunteerism with 18- to 26-Year-Old Germans*

At this point, this study is still under way. The results will become available in 2017 and will be published in a later volume in this series. Three sets of questions are guiding the study:

- What are the possible long-term effects of the confirmation work experienced in terms of religious practice and relationship to the Church?
- What are the presuppositions for becoming active as a volunteer in terms of having encountered volunteers in confirmation time or other experiences?

What are the trajectories of voluntary commitment within and beyond the Church? What are the motivations of young people active or non-active as volunteers?

- What are the differences between different groups in society of those who participated in Protestant confirmation work and of those who did not, in terms of motives, values, beliefs, etc.? What are the effects of possible equivalents in other denominational or religious traditions (like Catholic confirmation, etc.)?

The study involves young Protestants who are active as volunteers as well as young people with different religious backgrounds.

### 1.5 Challenges for the Future

The different studies on confirmation work in Germany (Ilg et al. 2009; Schweitzer et al. 2015b) resulted in a number of perspectives for how confirmation work should be improved in the future. The present study has its focus on the time after confirmation. It indicates that there also is a need for asking about possible improvements from what comes after confirmation and that there are implications of these perspectives for confirmation time itself as well.

Concerning the time after confirmation, the results of the study indicate a clear need for new programs addressing the adolescents at this time of their lives. In many cases there seem to be no programs available for them that they would consider attractive. It is true that not all Protestant adolescents express an interest in staying in touch with the church and in participating in such programs. Yet the number of those who, according to their responses, would in fact be interested appears to be higher than the number of those who report that, from their perspective, such programs are actually available.

In many respects the growing number of former confirmands who become active as volunteers after confirmation is a very hopeful development. Yet it is also obvious that many of the adolescents who do not become active in the church after confirmation, also feel that they have never been asked to do so. More efforts should be made to include more young people in this work, including the training programs offered for young volunteers which, at the same time, should also become more widespread in the future.

Concerning implications for confirmation time itself the results show that whatever is to come after confirmation should be in view before confirmation, not only in general but in terms of concrete activities. In other words, if the aim is more participation in Christian youth work after confirmation, for example,

the confirmands must be familiarised with respective possibilities and programs during their confirmation time.

Altogether then, two challenges can be identified: there is a clear need for making the years immediately after confirmation the focus of new initiatives from the Church. At present, the day of confirmation is treated too much as the end of confirmation time and not as the beginning of something new. Another challenge is to improve confirmation work, for example, in regard to co-operation between confirmation work and youth work.