

## **DCE NET Discussions on Early Communion, Confirmation, and "Milestones" Ministries**

**Eric Nelson, Director of Christian Education**

**Anchor Lutheran School & Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, Anchorage, AL**

About a year ago, we actually did away with "membership" and "confirmation" at Beautiful Savior. Clubs and other organizations that have members often require such things as dues and rules and regulations be followed. They are seen as exclusive. Instead, we want our family at Beautiful Savior to be inclusive and live the Great Commission by first being a disciple and second making disciples. We looked over our confirmation program and saw that we were just shoving "head knowledge" down the throats of a bunch of young people who quick frankly would rather be most anywhere besides confirmation class. There were a few that were interested, but we felt that we were turning more young people away from the Church than were growing in their faith.

We now offer Jr. High Disciple Training which is offered to those students who want to be pruned so that they may grow in their faith and produce fruit. Instead of just focusing on "head knowledge" we try to equip our youth to live their faith as disciples through service projects, active participation in the worship service, personal study, and life witnessing, among other things. The Catechism is used, but more as a springboard for further discussion and study instead of being the main focus of the class. For those that don't want to be a part of Discipleship Training, we actually encourage them not to come, but instead participate in other youth events that are more fellowship oriented. These lower-key events help them build meaningful relationships with both church staff and volunteers and their peers. In these events they begin to see that the Church is not an hour on Sunday mornings but instead a family of loving people with Christ as the head. Through this process we let the Holy Spirit work in that person's heart at God's pace rather than our pace. We know that the seed of faith has been planted and we tenderly, through the Spirit, encourage it to grow. When they are at a point of wanting to live their faith as Christ's disciple, then we equip them through either a Sr. High class or individual and family discipleship training.

We still have the Rite of Confirmation for those who have completed Jr. High Discipleship Training, which we actually celebrated this past Sunday. We held onto the Rite of Confirmation for two reasons. 1) It allows our young people to publicly share their faith through their testimony which they give during the service, and 2) it allows the congregation to see Christ's disciples so that as a family we can hold each other accountable in the faith. Also, all confirmed disciples in our congregation are considered voters when it comes to congregational business, regardless of age.

As for Communion, we don't have a formal policy in place for those younger than junior high for early communion, although we have discussed it. For those younger than junior high, we on occasion have offered a basic class with the entire family as to what Communion is and why we desire to participate in Our Lord's Supper. The same is true for those in junior high that do not participate in Discipleship Training. We offer the chance for the family to meet with either Pastor

or me for several times so they may understand the gift that is in Communion before partaking of the Celebration Feast.

While this revamped ministry area is still in its infancy, the main goal of it is to focus less on "head knowledge" and more on "heart knowledge," thus equipping our young people and their families to be active disciples and witnessing their faith through their lives in school, in the community, and the world.

**Jill Hasstedt, DCE**  
**Zion Lutheran Church Belleville, IL**

If it works to separate Confirmation and First Communion where you are then that is great! However, if you are seeking to build a whole new family life ministry at your church I'd encourage starting in places where you will build strong rapport and trust first. Faith Stepping Stones or the Augsburg version, Milestones is just such a place. Including parents and building relationships between parents is vital.

Helping parents see that the Confirmation process is one of many steps they can use to build a strong support system around their child that will help ease the way through adolescence. Anything you can do to involve more adults in the process (Confirmation sponsors, small group leaders, table hosts, retreat hosts) and build relationships between those adults and the youth is incredibly powerful in retention.

**Jim Haack, DCE**  
**Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church Omaha, NE**

For six years, my church has prepared 4th graders for early Communion. This now includes my son, who's in 5th grade. Here's what we do:

In the spring of their 4th grade year, the kids and parents are invited to participate in two learning events together. The first is a full-blown, narrated Seder (Passover) meal. All participants have the full text in front of them as the Pastor officiates.

A few weeks later, they all gather again for about 90 minutes, for an in-depth Bible study on the Lord's Supper. The study begins with reflections on the Seder Meal and the Old Testament symbolism. Then it goes into the Biblical, Catechetical teachings about the Real Presence, including "worthy" and "unworthy" reception. Finally, we touch on practical matters such as frequency of reception, etiquette, etc. After all of this, we tell the parents that the decision is in their hands. If they discuss these things with their kids, and feel they're not ready, we honor that. And if they feel the child is ready, they may commune at the first opportunity. (We offer the Lord's Supper at every Sunday worship service).

We also teach about the Lord's Supper in 8th grade Confirmation. Although it's more of a review, it does catch any kids who missed the Seder & Bible study earlier in life due to being new, etc.

Some parents hold their kids back awhile, but most feel OK to let them commune. Nobody has complained at all about anything since we began this approach about 6 years ago.

I wear two hats: I'm one of the teachers, and I'm a Dad. I really like this system!

Beautiful Savior's Confirmation program--while far from perfect--has a few unique features I'd be happy to share, although I myself am minimally involved.

Our first year program (LYFE-I), generally, but not exclusively, for grade 7, involves small groups, tons of parent involvement, and topic-intense lock-ins. It's a 100% lay-led program that is rigorous yet life-related. I'd be happy to snail-mail a complete packet for the cost of postage (I'll estimate about a buck-fifty).

Our second year program (LYFE-II), generally, but not exclusively, for grade 8, offers 2 tracks: Summer 2-week Day Camp, or "school year" Wednesday nights. Same material but different approaches. We're still working out lots of bugs, but overall a pretty effective program. I can mail a packet of this stuff, too, for about the same low, low rate.

We separate First Communion from Confirmation, so that's another whole story. I can send you the materials for that program as well.

### **Bob Brantsch, DCE**

#### **Gloria Dei Lutheran Church Hudson, Ohio**

We've had 5th Grade First communion for years. It's even in our constitution. I've sought out various types of curriculum and found none of them interactive or helpful enough for this age. So I use my own resources. We've used a number of models of instruction.

Presently our model is a half-day seminar: The schedule is:

- \* 10:00 - Community Building
- \* 10:45 - Passover discussion with DCE
- \* 11:30 - Lunch off site at Panera Bread
- \* 12:30 - Parents and children paint Communion symbols on their own ceramic chalices at a local pottery shed.
- \* 2:30 Communion, forgiveness, and a communion "once through" with Pastor
- \* 4:00 Dismissal

First Communion Sunday includes:

- \* Held the next day in worship.
- \* Faith Alive Bibles are given to each new communicant.
- \* Families commune together and I announce each family as they come forward.

This ends up being a good recognition of families and that communion is a family event as well.

- \* A welcome reception with cake and punch follows worship.
- \* The following week the glazed chalices are placed on our altar for all to see. Families than can take home their chalice following worship. I enjoy this model because it gives Pastor and myself some quality time with 5th graders and their parents. Also it's a good lead-in to 6th - 8th youth activities which starts in a few months for the 5th graders.

We still have Confirmation instruction for 7th & 8th graders with The Rite of Confirmation being in May for the 8th graders. Early Communion isn't a topic that

needs to be "received" by our congregation since it's always been a part of what we do. It has not limited involvement in Confirmation one bit.

We have had early communion for years here. We state anyone 5th grade and older can participate. It's even in our congregational constitution. We do a half day retreat with the children and their parents every year. We cover Passover, Communion, the kids paint their own ceramic chalice, and we do a communion once through. Usually we have older kids participate as well.

We still have 8th grade confirmation, although I'm presently recruiting a task force to research the theology, practice, and effectiveness of confirmation. I am using the below resources and other sources.

Having early communion here does not effect confirmation enrollment. Some might argue kids would not need to be confirmed because they can attend communion at an earlier age. That's not true here. However our confirmation program still needs to be improved immensely. My hope is to make confirmation later.

Think openly and critically about it. I appreciate the document Bill shared. Particularly about communion for very young children. A former pastor of mine does 1st grade first communion and I agree. My opinion is that the disciples didn't really fully understand the Sacrament at the time. But it still worked its power in them. And so it does with us today. The Sacrament isn't about us, our knowledge, and understanding. It's about the power and mystery of God working in us.

Below are two sources that may help your research on this topic.

- Report of the Joint Commission on the Theology and Practice of Confirmation © 1970 [\\_www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/573\\_](http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/573_)  
(<http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/573>)
- A Study of Confirmation & First Communion in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod. © 1998  
[\\_www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/DCS/confirm.pdf](http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/DCS/confirm.pdf)  
(<http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/DCS/confirm.pdf>)

Our Constitution states: "*Communing members are those baptized who have reached at least the Fifth Grade and who have been instructed in the Sacrament of Holy Communion.*" Early Communion has been a part of what we do, from when we started in the late 1960s.

We used to have a 6 week, one hour class. We now do a 6 hour Saturday retreat instead. Pastor & I team teach it. We require parents to attend the entire day with their child. In the afternoon we go to a local pottery shop and kids paint their own ceramic chalice. The following Sunday we display the colorful, fired chalices on the altar. On Sunday they commune with their families for the first time. We also have a little reception after worship to welcome them and congratulate them. Not all families choose to commune in fifth grade and usually we have other ages go through the experience as well. If they cannot commit to the entire experience we encourage them to attend next year. This has worked well here.

First Communion has not diminished interest in Confirmation or its importance here. However we still have the dreaded Confirmation drop out in 9th grade.

Since Pastor & I don't get a lot of chances to interact with this age group, we love spending the day with them and their parents. Also it helps get the kids interested in middle school youth and confirmation.

Below is a link about the 1970 study on First Communion and Confirmation, Lou Jander mentioned: <http://www.ctsfw.edu/library/files/pb/573>

Attached in a scanned file is the article "Rite of Confirmation" from **Lutheran Education Journal, November/December 1987, pages 96-105**. It's about distinguishing Confirmation from First Communion.

We use our own materials and worksheets. If you want any copies of worksheets we use, I can send you more information. There are enough attachments in this e-mail.

**Sarah Wittrock, DCE Minister of Youth & Education  
Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church Olathe, KS**

We currently offer an Early Communion class during the Lenten season so that first communion can take place on Palm Sunday (this year we will offer it in January/February w/ first communion at the beginning of Lent because of the earliness of Easter and Spring Break for our community). We have set up a 5 week format for parents and youth that runs from 1 - 3 pm each Sunday. We use "Come to God's Table: Preparing for Holy Communion" by Stanley N. Olson (Augsburg Fortress). Our program is set up as an optional program and is offered to youth and their families beginning in the 5th grade.

Families can choose to participate as a 5th grader, wait and be invited again the next year (or subsequent years), or wait until the youth is confirmed. We make it an optional program because some youth are ready early and some are not. We have had some families where one youth participated as a 5th grader and the other youth waited until they were confirmed. We usually have 5 - 6 participants which have included 5th - 7th graders. If a youth waits until the 8th grade year they usually don't go through the class as first communion and Confirmation Sunday are within a month of each other. Our elders also participate in the program either by assisting with the instruction or just being present.

We run our Confirmation program for 7th & 8th grade. We also have a pre-Confirmation program for 5th & 6th graders that runs the same schedule as Confirmation. The Early Communion program happens separate from the pre-Confirmation program.

We have not had problems with youth not wanting to participate in Confirmation because of going through the Early Communion program. What we do have are people who are strongly opposed to the Early Communion program, but they keep their opinions primarily to themselves and do not cause unnecessary fuss. Our EC program was adopted by our voters assembly in 1998.

**Korey Wysocki Assoc. DCE  
Immanuel Lutheran Crystal Lake, IL**

I have attached our program booklet (and some other forms) that outlines all the basic requirements (components) of the program. Some tweaking of the program is being made this year including a new format for the booklet, but the objectives of the program will remain.

An overview - the program is 3 years. 7th grade through 9th grade (we find the 9th grade year to be a huge transition when students really need a solid support system of Christian friends and mentors - hence the 3rd year. Not to mention the maturity levels are much different from Junior High to High School, too). There are 2 week long retreats during summer, Sunday morning classes with attendance requirements, service projects, acolyte times, sermon applications, and memory work. Each element has rationale to it in the program booklet. 7th grade focuses on the basics of the catechism, and Bible overview with Crossways See Through the Scriptures (the kids really get into this by the way). The retreats are on a 2 year rotation. Year one - Sacraments and 10 Commandments Year 2 - Lord's Prayer and Creed. Sunday classes follow the same material on retreat but in a more life application way in small group settings with adult and high school "mentors". We confirm in May of 9th grade.

Any words of wisdom I have - allow confirmation to be more a time of faith exploration and discovery. Help them experience what it means to be a follower of Jesus, not just what to know. And don't indoctrinate them. Be true to correct theology and offer them a safe place to ask questions and wrestle with what they believe. Ultimately we try to get them to understand that this is their choice to confirm what took place at their baptism as an adult. They don't really grasp that concept coming in to the program and sometimes fight us on all the requirements. But every year the 9th graders say to us they get it now and understand why they did all the things they did and can truly say they want this day for themselves, not just because mom and dad made them do it.

### **Christine Eid, DCE**

#### **St. Matthew Lutheran Church Columbia Heights, MN**

We do confirmation a bit differently. We have it in grades 5 & 6. Confirmation in the spring of 6th grade. We are in our 5th year of this program, and it continues to amaze me at how much fun teaching confirmation is at this age, and the impact on faith life that happens with not only our 5th and 6th graders but also our high school kids.

We have found that our middle schoolers appreciate the tools of living out their faith while they are still in the middle school. By confirming in 6th grade we also alleviate the 'graduation' concept that goes sometimes with 8th grade. Our juniors and seniors in high school serve as mentors for our younger students which we've found to be helpful as a confirmation material review. The youth begin discussing things at a different level the second time around.

Our program is 2 years, breaking at lent and advent. First year is a 10 week Old Testament time line review, 5 week Means of Grace, 5 week Apostle's creed. Second year is 5 week 10 Commandments, 5 week Lord's Prayer, and 10 week discipleship unit. We do a retreat at the completion of the Means of Grace unit, and one at the beginning of the fall of the 2nd year.

Materials that we use were created in house - adapting the teaching of many transparencies from Crossways, The Divine Drama.

**Leah A. Helmrichs Director of Christian Education  
St. Luke's Lutheran Church Oviedo, FL**

While I don't have any fantastic wisdom or a perfect program to share, I will share an idea that we have just begun discussing. We currently run a topic-based, two year Wednesday night program. We have discussed the possibility of having two years of Bible overview--something along the lines of Bethel or Crossways for kids. When these two years have been completed, students can sign up for a 12 week confirmation program, similar to our adult confirmation program. This could add an element of ownership and choice in the confirmation process. I would value any input on this theory.

**Paul Schoepp, Director of Church Work Programs  
Concordia University College of Alberta**

I like the concept that you've laid out here, Leah--a parallel instructional process for adults and young adolescents. I don't think young adolescents are entirely blind to the double standard we have in regards to confirmation. There's the issue you mention of different lengths of confirmation instruction for youth and adults as well as the issue of the confirmation vows we use. I don't hear many adult confirmation liturgies that ask adults whether they will "continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it." It's not that I think that is a bad question--the question is a very powerful one. It's just that we aren't consistent in how we treat adults and young adolescents when they confirm their faith and how they prepare to confirm their faith.

It seems to me that we ought to parallel what we do with kids and adults in confirming their faith. I'm all for an approach that gets people (adults and young adolescents) into the Scriptural story before we give them the doctrinal teachings of our church--we should be biblically literate as a foundation for doctrinal literacy. I'm also for any approach that helps remove the graduation mentality that confirmation has taken on over the years. How about calling your reception of new adult members a confirmation service? How about having it on the same day as your junior confirmands so that both young and old alike can confirm the faith that God gave at baptism or through His Word? How about having multiple confirmation experiences in the life of congregational members and recognizing individual after they have grown through any extended growth period (say after Crossways or Lifelight)? How about putting together the confirmation events and worship services in ways that reduce the parallels to graduation ceremonies?

Another issue that sometimes enters into the graduation (I'm done learning) mentality is first communion. When reception of first communion is tied to confirmation the mentality of being done is often reinforced. When first communion is separated from confirmation the possibility of presenting confirmation as one more step in a lifelong process of learning and growth is, in my opinion, enhanced.

**Dr. Steve Christopher, Director of Discipleship**  
**Our Savior Lutheran Ministries -- Livermore, California**

**5th/6th Grade = First Communion Class** held on Wednesday evenings in Lent following Lenten Vespers for students *and* parent(s) with the celebration of their 1st Communion with their families on Maunday Thursday at the first table that evening. Class is taught by the Pastor or DCE. We use Dean Nadasdy's book "This is the Feast" by CPH as the curriculum. We have had significant growth over the past two years in doing First Communion in this format and it has not caused a decline in Confirmation enrollment.

**7th/8th Grade = Confirmation Program** we do in a "youth ministry" format. Meet on Wednesday's at 7:00 for games and fellowship in the gym lead by the "young" DCE, followed by snacks provided by parents, then 45 minutes of instruction, Year 1 taught by the "older" DCE and Year 2 by the Pastor. We finish up by 8:30 pm so it's not a late night for them. We follow the six chief parts, 3 in year one, 3 in year two. Each instructor creates his/her own lesson designs around each part of the catechism. Confirmation is the first Sunday of June. Kids give "faith statements" at the banquet held the night before Confirmation. In doing Confirmation as "youth ministry" we have actually had kids *bring their friends* to Confirmation! Each of the last two years we have had a baptism of one youth on the day of Confirmation, which caused us to realize that Confirmation is not just a youth ministry program, but an outreach program for us. How's that for a changing paradigm?

For us, I think people in our community are looking for the church to act like the church and do "churchy" things, like the sacred act of Communion instruction, teaching the faith, and to celebrate with "ceremony" that comes with 1st Communion and Confirmation. It has not become a tired or worn out tradition by any means. It is indeed the means of grace and people have sensed it, and have responded to it. Thanks be to God.

**Tim Rippstein DCE Assistant Professor & Internship Site Coordinator**  
**Concordia University Seward, NE**

What an exciting topic to be working on. At Prince of Peace, not too many years ago, we had also developed a Stepping Stone model to enhance what the congregation was already doing as well as help them see that reaffirming (confirmation!) baptism was a life-long process.

The mile markers were pretty much already there, we just brought them all into focus.

- Baptism - (first miles stone) entrance into the family of God
- Receive first Bible - 3rd Grade. A celebration before the congregation and with the family as a fulfilled promise made at baptism
- First Communion - 5th Grade (also optional). Taught by DCE and pastor, parents did much of the teaching at home with child then had a Saturday class

session. First Communion rite followed and again parents were part of the celebration with the congregation.

- Jr. High - two years of education focusing on OT, NT, Luther, etc. Also covered were personal devotions, family discussions, etc. A rite of Reaffirmation of Baptism followed for kids and parents in front of congregation.
- High School - Series of short 10-13 week Covenant Groups focusing on Biblical topics, individual books of the Bible. At the end another Rite of Reaffirmation of Baptism celebration with parents and congregation.
- Adult - Adult baptisms fit here as well as an adult ed. program leading to PoP Certification (a series of adult ed. courses designed to lead to this certification). Upon completion of the certificate program a rite of reaffirmation of Baptism to celebrate with the congregation.

One of the keys was that much of these components were already in place (i.e. giving Bibles at 3rd grade, first communion, Covenant Groups, etc.) We just wanted everyone to see it connected to the life-long reaffirming of their baptism.

**Gary Truwe, DCE**  
**Trinity Lutheran Indianapolis, IN**

Our Confirmation program is very diversified. Our pastor uses the Divine Drama material in his eighth grade class in our day school, and a somewhat revised portion of that for our Sat. class for the students not in our school. I teach the 7th grade class, of the kids not in the school, and use catechetical material basically, so they get that foundation. Our breakdown of students in school and not in school, is about 70%-30%, depending on the year. I have included some field trip or servant events into the Saturday program, but the students in the school have not done that as much, but do get involved in service projects aimed generally at the students in school, not just the Confirmation age students. Our youth program and Sun. morning classes also fit into the entire program, as we include some basics of the catechetical units, and try to make our Sun. AM emphasis connect with the devotionals that are part of the youth fellowship on Sun. evening. The leaders overlap these programs, so it is pretty easy to take one and expand it to the other, because they see the same adult mentors doing both. Most of these are men, which is tremendously positive, because of the lack of male spiritual guides most of the time.

Pastor has them do a personal testimony in the weeks leading up to Palm Sunday, which is when we do Confirmation. On the outside this sounds very disjointed, but it actually works very well, because there is so much overlap. They get a consistent picture of what disciples are all about, and the modeling is much better than what the "curriculum" would dictate. It is the relationships that make the major difference in building authentic young disciples. Thanks, Gary T.

**Duane Tweeten Director of Discipleship**  
**Outreach Brookfield Lutheran Church Brookfield, WI**

We have been using the FaithInkubator model for the past five years. Our ages are grades 6-8. We use a three rotation of topics, Year A: Old and New Testaments, Year B: Ten Commandments and Creed, Year C: Lord's Prayer-Luther-Baptism-Confession. We cover Holy Communion with 8th graders and parents during Lent culminating on Maunday Thursday. Confirmation takes place after three sessions with 9th graders and parents on Reformation Sunday.

As part of the system, youth are in small groups of 3-5 with an adult leader. They alternate between doing a service project and a fellowship activity each month. We also have a one day retreat in the fall and a lock-in during Lent to build large group interactions.

We do have a day school and switched to this model to mix together our day school and public school youth. We have been pleased with the results and the relationships that have been developed through the process.

We have around 850 members, confirm 15-25 youth each year, and 168 in grades K-8 in the day school and over a hundred in preschool. Brookfield Lutheran (suburb of Milwaukee) has an 8 year confirmation program finishing when they are seniors. From what I have been told, it is broken into 4 2-year segments with a 'mini-confirmation' after each. I think the segments could be broken into Bible, Catechism, Discipleship, and Evangelism. They have the resources to send every Junior on a mission trip as part of the process. Probably not really feasible for most places, but an interesting concept. It seems to really be an attempt to get past the "confirmation as graduation" mentality and moves towards the growth and development as a process rather than a day. Pastor Al Klatt runs the ministry there and can probably help you more. Hope that helps....Regarding a previous e-mail on the 8 year confirmation program at Brookfield Lutheran, Pastor Al Klatt has recently taken a call and is no longer on staff there. While Pastor Al initiated and wrote the Life in Jesus curriculum, it is presently being evaluated and re-worked this summer. Conceptually it is a good structure that promotes on-going discipleship beginning in the 5th grade through 12th grade. Although the completion of the 8th grade year is largely considered "being confirmed" there is a growing mentality that 4 more years of discipleship training/experience follows.

Unfortunately at this point there really isn't a curriculum sampler to share with other congregations that may be interested in seeing it. We may get to that point in the coming year or so.

**Pete Hiller – DCE Jr. High Youth Minister**  
**Family of Christ - Ham Lake, Minnesota**

Family of Christ - Ham Lake is a congregation of 2000 members in the north suburbs of Minneapolis. We confirm 40-50 each year. Currently we use a combination of large and small groups. We teach in the large group setting and then break into established small groups for discussion. Small groups are lead by adult/parent mentors. We close the evening in the large group using music and upbeat activities. The variety of settings allows both intimacy and nurturing as well as opportunity to celebrate in a large group environment as well.

We offer confirmation to student in grades 6-8 and then confirm in the Fall of their 9th grade year. We use a variety of curriculum surrounding the Six chief parts

with our second and third year students. Our first year students complete a Bible Basics course that takes them through the Old and New Testaments as well as instruction on the background of the Bible and its usage. We continue to have students complete sermon notes and service hours each year.

Each year we offer a variety of retreats, conferences and servant events. Some of the events are required and others are encouraged.

This model has worked fairly well for us up to this point, however we are exploring another concept as we continue to grow. We are currently working on a model that will incorporate classes that are offered in a variety of required short courses and electives while holding on to our small groups in some fashion. It is still in the works, but we hope that we are better able to address the ever increasing needs and demands of our increasingly diverse group of students.

**Tracy Krueger Director of Children's Ministry  
St. Andrew's Lutheran Church Stockton, CA**

We are currently using a program from Faith Inkubators called "Faith Stepping Stones." This program has milestones at baptism, preschool, entry into school, first Bible, first communion, adolescence, high school, and graduation. We also use their confirmation curriculum, which works out very well. Both of the programs are designed to help parents bring the faith into the home and continue the learning and they are fun for the kids as well.