

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

EXAMINATION VARIABILITY:

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

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ABSTRACT

Examination before confirmation has been practiced since the early centuries of Christian Church history. Even with a practice this longstanding, the Lutheran Church does not have a uniform methodology or purpose for examination. Pastors and churches are diverse, and this requires practices that meet the needs of congregation. Pastors must also recognize the variability of students and determine best practices to examine each student and assess readiness for confirmation. This paper explores the overall history of examination and dives into the current practices and perspectives of examination in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The paper lays out the diversity of methodology and objectives among WELS pastors while making recommendations for how such a variety of practices might be implemented considering Universal Design of Learning (UDL). This study seeks to help pastors consider giving learners different options for expressing what they have gained through catechism instruction while still meeting the goals of examination.

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INTRODUCTION

Catechism study has been a part of the Lutheran church since the time of the Reformation. Just as Martin Luther did, the church today continues to seek the Christian education of our youth. Examination practices date back even further than Lutheranism. Yet, uniformity is not found in the methodology or purpose of examination. Pastors themselves and the churches they serve vary, and practices must be fitted to their situations. On top of that, educators continue to increasingly recognize learner variability and the need to determine and implement best practices to ensure the success of each student.

The author (subsequently referred to in the first person) sought to discover what the current state of examination is within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), specifically with regard to what methods are being used and the perspectives of why examination is done altogether. This paper begins by exploring the history of how examination came about in the Christian Church, what purposes examination has served, and what practices were previously used. Next, there is an explanation of my interview and survey process. The paper continues with an exposition on the research findings. In this section, there is first a summary of the background and setting of research participants. Then, there is a report of the variety of examination methods used. Following is an explanation of the perceived purposes of examination as well as strengths and weaknesses to various aspects of the approaches. The findings conclude with an introduction to the education concept known as Universal Design of Learning, to inform the reader before elaborating on the concept's implications. After laying out the findings, the paper ends with

recommendations for implementing diverse examination practices while taking into consideration the discussed variables.

Several factors affected the variety of examination practices and perspectives discovered among interviewees and survey participants, such as duration of ministry; ministry setting; education training; and other pastoral responsibilities. However, even two pastors who serve the same length of time in a similar ministry setting with comparable education training and pastoral responsibilities may approach examination in different ways. Because of the variability amongst pastors, churches, and students themselves, churches should consider flexibility regarding examination. A rigid one-size-fits-all approach that only makes exceptions as needed does not serve the diverse people of God in WELS congregations. With a variety of choices, students can express their learning in a fitting way for them while still attaining the goals of Lutheran examination before confirmation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of examination before confirmation has been observed across the history of the Christian Church. Literature covers when and where examination started, the changing perspectives on the purpose of examination, and what methods have been used. A summary of findings from relevant resources follows.

The When and Where of the Development of Examination

It is challenging to track the precise development of confirmation and specifically examination practices. According to one article, “As confirmation is practiced today, especially in the United States, it is cluttered with incoherent remnants of its historical development, the origins of which are rarely recognized.”¹ However, literature does provide some details regarding the history of confirmation.

As the Christian Church began in the decades following the ministry of the apostles, the early Christians were primarily Jewish. One Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastor, James E. Werner, suggests that confirmation practices may have developed out of the Jewish traditions of bar- and bat-mitzvahs.² Werner also notes that there were “a variety of practices...followed regarding initiation into church membership. There was water baptism,

1. “THE HISTORICAL, TRADITIONAL, SCRIPTURAL BASIS FOR OUR PRACTICE OF YOUTH CONFIRMATION?” (n.d.).

2. James E. Werner, “Confirmation: Is Eighth Grade the Right Age?” (St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Ixonia, WI, 1987), 2.

anointing with oil and the laying on of hands,” often occurring simultaneously.³ Arthur C. Repp corroborates that “confirmation was a part of the rite of Baptism. After the candidates were baptized on Easter Eve, they were ‘confirmed’ with chrism, prayers, the sign of the cross, and the laying on of hands, and on Easter morning they were permitted to make their first Communion.”⁴

As the church grew, the process of instruction for catechumens began. Gustav Wiencke relates:

During this period the catechumens were admitted only to the preaching service. The special acts of consecration used to admit "hearers" (catechumens) to the prayers of the church form the beginning of the present rites of confirmation... Catechumens were received by the laying on of hands, exorcism, and presentation of consecrated salt. Following a rigorous period of prayer, fasting, and confession of sins, they were solemnly baptized (generally by immersion) and admitted to Holy Communion.⁵

There was a prescribed course of study for these early catechumens in the form of the *Didache*, written in first century AD to teach Gentile converts how to live in “The Way.” However, David Rueter points out that the focus of the *Didache* “was more on right living than on right learning.”⁶

As catechesis practices developed, the church fathers implemented the practice of examination to validate what the catechumens were learning. A third century writing, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, built in the examination of a student’s “claim of faith” and of “the changes evident in one’s life.”⁷ This process looked not only at their knowledge of content but also application in living.

3. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 2.

4. Arthur C. Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 13.

5. Gustav K. Wiencke, “Confirmation Instruction in Historical Perspective,” *The Lutheran Quarterly* 7.2 (1955): 103–4.

6. David L. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home: What Does This Mean? How Is This Done?* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2016), 9.

7. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 9.

When the Christian Church split into East and West, the Eastern churches continued the early practice of having confirmation, baptism, and first communion (all three considered sacraments) in the same service.⁸ The Western Church made baptism and confirmation separate. In addition, local priests were authorized to baptize, but only the bishops could confirm. Due to the extensive responsibilities of a bishop, he only came to a parish to perform confirmations once a year or less, especially moving into the medieval ages.⁹ The Council of Florence in 1439 established confirmation as a sacrament in the Western Church, and the Council of Trent in 1547 affirmed this as official doctrine.¹⁰ As a sacrament, “confirmation was said to ‘bestow grace and a “certain spiritual and indelible sign” necessary for salvation, equal in power to all other sacraments.’”¹¹ As infant baptism increased in Christianity, catechesis shifted to primarily be instruction of these baptized children instead of preparing adults for baptism,¹² and confirmation was thought to supplement the initial grace from baptism as individuals affirmed their baptismal vows.

Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, and the Lutheran Confessions all stood in opposition to the Roman Catholic view of confirmation as a sacramental supplement to grace.¹³ Many Reformers saw little scriptural evidence for confirmation and avoided the practice altogether.¹⁴ Luther sought to restructure confirmation to focus on instruction. The goal of the

8. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 2.

9. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 2.

10. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 2.

11. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 3.

12. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 11.

13. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 3.

14. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 3.

teaching was to prepare people for proper reception of the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ However, Lutherans still avoided the term "confirmation" due to its connection to Catholic distortions.¹⁶ As Luther developed his own theology of catechesis that was distinct from Rome's sacramental view, he came up with a model that involved three stages: "1. Learn and remember the basics. 2. Understand the basics. 3. Make applying the fundamentals a lifelong practice."¹⁷ While much of early Lutheran catechesis focused on memorization, recitation, and quizzing through question and answer, Luther also sought the application of these teachings in Christian living and lifelong learning.

As seen, the history of examination is sparse and foggy. Rueter relates that, likewise, the present is murky. "A diversity of forms and models mark the current practice of confirmation in Lutheran churches in America. What was once uniform... is now a multifaceted and creative mix of denominational, independent, and local church developed curriculums."¹⁸ The Lutheran Catechesis Series, put out by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), incorporates catechism instruction starting in third grade to ingrain the material well before eighth grade.¹⁹ Meanwhile, the WELS has put out the Faith Foundations curriculum for fifth and sixth graders which sticks to the Small Catechism, and recently published Catechism Lessons for seventh and eighth graders to go through the Catechism's questions and connect the material to their personal lives.²⁰

15. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 3.

16. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 3.

17. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 15.

18. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 16.

19. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 17.

20. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 17.

The Purpose of Examination Across History

As the practice of confirmation and examination developed, so did the purpose. Werner reports six emphases in the history of Lutheran confirmation.²¹ The first, catechetical, focused on educational preparation, and it was most common for generations following the Reformation. Next, the hierarchical emphasis came from Martin Bucer. He “combined the educational and subjective concerns of Erasmus together with the disciplinary and pastoral concerns of Luther” and “introduced the vow taken by the confirmand to submit himself to Christ and to the discipline of the church.” This idea of submission to the church is why this form is called hierarchical. Third, the sacramental view of confirmation was similar to that in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions. It came from “the idea that confirmation made you a member of the Christian church[,] not just the local congregation” and likely was “as a result of unclear wording in the rites of confirmation which Martin Bucer developed.”

Then, there was the traditional view, which tried to return to Catholic forms and teachings. Congregations that observed this type of confirmation “emphasized the laying on of hands and especially the instruction which preceded this.” Werner next notes that in the late 1600s and early 1700s confirmation was made to conform to the conversion theology of Philip Spener. He saw “baptism as more of a covenant between God and men than as a means of regeneration.”²² To Spener, baptism did not have lasting power. Confirmation would allow an individual to be fully converted. “The vow became an occasion to renew one’s baptismal

21. Werner, “Eighth Grade,” 3–4.

22. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 4.

covenant. The confession of faith became subjective in nature as did the examination, the preparation for the Lord's Supper, and the confirmation blessing. The age of confirmation was also advanced because the confirmands were supposed to 'feel' their new life."²³ This emphasis was called pietistic confirmation. Finally, there was rationalistic confirmation "in which a person made his public declaration to become a member of the church."²⁴ As the philosophy of Rationalism sought to prove truths, a rationalistic view of confirmation "sought to lead the child to grow and develop and so discover new religious truths for himself. Instead of memorizing and then developing an understanding, the order was reversed."²⁵ Confirmation made baptism meaningful for a person and allowed him to receive congregational rights. It was during this movement that confirmation was "firmly established" in the church,²⁶ and some of the graduation practices that people associate with confirmation today were introduced: wearing robes and its timing at the end of elementary education around age thirteen or fourteen.²⁷

As noted above, some following the way of Spener have viewed confirmation as an affirmation or renewal of the baptismal covenant. Werner notes that the revision of Luther's Small Catechism by David Kuske removed the emphasis on such a renewal. Rather, the Kuske Catechism indicates that confirmation is a "ceremony following instruction in which Christians confess their faith and are acknowledged as sufficiently instructed to receive Holy Communion."

²⁸ Arthur Repp said that the need for instruction before being confirmed was recognized by all

23. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 3.

24. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 3.

25. "Basis for Youth Confirmation?," 4.

26. "Basis for Youth Confirmation?," 4.

27. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 3-4.

28. Werner, "Eighth Grade," 4.

Lutheran forms of confirmation. He goes on to point out that “the home was considered primarily responsible for the instruction implied by Holy Baptism.” Supplemental instruction could be provided in schools or through catechetical sermons or service readings from the Catechism. Any direct instruction by the pastor was typically “a matter of review or a preparation for the questions required by the rite,”²⁹ perhaps a precursor to examination.

During the period of Lutheran orthodoxy, the “purpose for confirmation became the equipping of children with the ‘armor of Luther's doctrine in all of its aspects.’”³⁰ At the same time, churches drifted toward two extremes: either they refused to change old catechetical practices as people became more literate, or they raised the intellectual level of instruction so high that the “intellectualized summary of Orthodox doctrine... became wearisome and tedious for many catechumens.”³¹

The Lutheran Agenda carries over several purposes for confirmation from the past: to “confirm the solemn covenant which at your Baptism you made with the Triune God,” to “confess their faith” through the Apostles’ Creed and by acknowledging the canonical books of the Bible and the teachings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as true, and to express “desire to be a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and of [that] congregation.”³²

The vows recorded in the Lutheran Agenda provide further insight. “The first is a promise to, as a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, continue steadfast in the confession of this Church, and suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it,” and “the

29. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 3.

30. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 6.

31. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 4.

32. “Basis for Youth Confirmation?,” 7.

second vow is a promise to faithfully conform all of one's life to the rule of the divine Word, to be diligent in the use of the means of grace, to walk as it becometh the Gospel of Christ, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to the Triune God, even unto death."³³ Together, these vows show that a confirmand should desire to remain steadfast as a lifelong learner in the Word. This article also points out that these vows "or promises that we make to God come always and only as a response to God's grace and the covenant he has already made with us. Furthermore, these vows, or any vow for that matter, are voluntary responses produced by the Holy Ghost."³⁴

While Scripture does not prescribe a form of confirmation or examination, Christian education practices do have biblical founding. As Rueter notes, Jesus commanded his disciples to go out and make more disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching them (Matt 28:19–20).³⁵ Since there are no methods of confirmation prescribed in the Bible, the church forms these teaching practices based on scriptural principles. In Deuteronomy 6:4–9, "the family is placed at the center" of instruction.³⁶ In the New Testament, the early Christian Church was marked by their devotion to the apostles' teaching about Christ (Acts 2:42). Therefore, faith formation among Christians involves both family (2 Tim 1:5; 3:14–15) and the house of worship (Acts 2:46).³⁷ While there are ties to Christian education and its principles in Scripture, there is little to indicate the practice of examination. One can only establish what a pastor might hope to teach and look for in students: to know Christ crucified for the forgiveness of their sins (1 Cor 2:2); to

33. "Basis for Youth Confirmation?," 7.

34. "Basis for Youth Confirmation?," 7.

35. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 27.

36. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 29.

37. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 33–34.

know God and to hold his commands in their heart (Deut 6:4–6); and, being rooted and established in God’s love, to desire further knowledge of the greatness of that love throughout their life (Eph 3:17–19).

Methodology of Examination

The multiple purposes for examination often resulted in a variety of practices. Within the catechetical type of confirmation described above, Repp points out that a catechumen who wanted to partake of the Lord’s Supper for the first time needed “to confess his faith, be questioned as to what he desired to receive in Holy Communion, and be examined in respect to his Christian life.”³⁸ Eventually the practice came about that parents or sponsors would bring a child to the pastor for examination if they deemed him or her ready. The pastor might examine children privately at his home or in front of the congregation through a “brief review” that could last several days or up to a few weeks.³⁹ The hierarchical form required catechumens “to be examined publicly... in the presence of the elders” and “to answer certain prescribed questions pertaining to the Christian articles of faith. [They were] also required to promise to remain in the fellowship of the church.”⁴⁰ When it was determined that the catechumen’s answers were indeed a proclamation of his faith and that he “promised to submit himself to the discipline of the church,” the rite concluded with the laying on of hands.⁴¹ The laying on of hands was also part of

38. Repp, *Confirmation*, 22.

39. Repp, *Confirmation*, 24–25.

40. Repp, *Confirmation*, 33.

41. Repp, *Confirmation*, 35.

examination in the sacramental and traditional types of confirmation.⁴² When Spener's pietistic confirmation came about, he wanted to do away with "stereotype questions and answers" and emphasized more analytical questions that would give more credence to the covenant renewal that he saw in confirmation.⁴³ This led to a more subjective emphasis in examination.

As Lutheranism moved into America, several of the examination practices continued.

Repp records one examination done by Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg, "the father of Lutheranism in America":

I commenced with the examination of the confirmands.... There followed: 1) The recitation of the five chief parts of the Catechism without the explanations. 2) Questioned them on the gist of the chief parts, in order, from the first to the fifth. 3) Went through the *Glaubens-Lied*,⁴⁴ *cursorie*, with them. 4) Had them recite a number of *dicta probantia*.⁴⁵ 5) The Order of Salvation by articles. 6) Had them answer questions concerning the steps from natural theology, (a) Of the creation of the universe, (b) Of Man in particular, his state of innocence, fall into sin, guilt, etc., (c) Of redemption through Christ, (d) Of sanctification, (e) Of the means of sanctification, namely the Word of God, Old and New Testaments, and the two Sacraments. 7) Finally I had them kneel and renew their baptismal covenant and pledge their faithfulness; then prayed and commended them to their faithful Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. 8) After this I had [them] kneel around the altar and laid hands upon them for the blessing...⁴⁶

While certain practices carried over, there was not an agreed upon form for confirmation among American Lutherans until an agenda was approved by the Pennsylvania Ministerium in 1787.

Regarding examination, it "was to be held separately [from confirmation] if at all possible" to let the confirmation rite stand on its own, and it "was to last no longer than an hour and a half."⁴⁷ If

42. Repp, *Confirmation*, 41, 45.

43. Repp, *Confirmation*, 70–71.

44. "Song of faith."

45. "Said evidence."

46. Repp, *Confirmation*, 98.

47. Repp, *Confirmation*, 101–102.

held separately, the examination could happen in a service on a preceding Sunday or in an evening service in the week leading up to confirmation, and the congregation and the family members of the student were expected to be there.⁴⁸ Occasionally, the examination was broken into several periods in order to cover the entire Catechism, but this made the examination “much more pedagogical than confessional” and went “far beyond the original intent of confirmation examination.”⁴⁹ Repp noted, “The concept that the examination is to be a testing or a probing of what the catechumen knows and believes is a product of Pietism. Originally, the examination was a brief confession of faith drawn from the catechumen through catechization.”⁵⁰ Examination as it was being practiced did not always seem to follow that purpose of seeking a confession of faith. Rather, it appeared to be a test of right or wrong knowledge. Repp concludes that this questioning is not the way examination should be understood. “All the children who participate are expected to pass, that is, to be confirmed... If any screening has to be done, the pastor will have already taken the necessary step.”⁵¹ Repp’s reflections from 1964 still ring true today. There continues to be no prescribed method of examination within the WELS due to varied perspectives on the purpose of examination and thoughts on how best to “screen” the students for confirmation. Nonetheless, several of these examination practices discussed carry on today.

48. Repp, *Confirmation*, 121.

49. Repp, *Confirmation*, 122.

50. Repp, *Confirmation*, 212.

51. Repp, *Confirmation*, 212.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to studying the history of examination, I sought to discover current examination practices and rationale among Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastors and congregations. To find this information, I used a twofold approach. The first component was an interview process. I conducted thirteen individual interviews. Twelve were with pastors; ten are currently serving at parishes, while two are campus pastors for area Lutheran high schools. Of the ten parish pastors, three currently do not teach catechism class. Two have an associate who teaches, while the other is in a mission setting and does not have catechism students. My thirteenth interview was with an education professor from Martin Luther College. My selection of interviewees largely came from previous connections through ministry experiences and churches or schools I have attended. However, over the course of the research process, some individuals recommended others for me to contact. While I had prior connections to many participants, I attempted to consider a variety of ministry settings and locations, as well as ages and personalities of pastors.

I contacted all interviewees initially by email. As necessary, I introduced myself, and then I gave background to my research and asked if they would be willing to participate in my study. As they agreed to be interviewed, I scheduled an interview with each of them and sent ahead two documents: an “Informed Consent Form” and a list of preliminary questions to guide our conversation. The questions were primarily short answer form, with a few “Yes/No” and statistical questions. See Appendices 1 and 2 respectively for blank copies of each document.

The Informed Consent Form told the interviewee the purpose of my project and gave a summary of my area of study. The form detailed what consent was needed. First, the interviewee was asked if willing to have the contents of the conversation shared in the paper. The interviewees were told they would remain anonymous unless they chose to be named; none did so. To maintain anonymity, each interviewee will be referenced as “Interviewee A, B, et cetera.” Secondly, the interviewee was asked if willing to have the conversation recorded. They were informed that any recording would be deleted at the completion of the project. Participation in the interview was completely voluntary, and the individual could withdraw at any time in the research process. All interviewees permitted the conversations to be recorded and returned a signed and dated consent form.

Every interviewee also received a document with guiding questions in advance of our interview. The interviewees were told that these questions provided the structure for our conversation, but any additional thoughts were welcomed. Some chose to fill out the document before our interview. A few began the interview by sharing thoughts spurred by the given questions and the topic in general. In some conversations, certain questions were lumped together so that individual answers were not provided for every item. While the questionnaire was designed with pastors in mind, I also sent the document to the education professor so that she could view that aspect of my study as well.

Some of the interviews were done via video conference meetings using Zoom or Google Meet. Some were done through a phone call. I was able to interview four individuals face-to-face with the individual. All interviews were done one-on-one. They were either recorded using Zoom capabilities or through a voice recording application on my phone.

The second component of my information gathering was a survey via a Google Form. Most of the questions were identical to the questionnaire used in the interview portion, with a few of the short answer questions either removed or modified due to the limitation of this mode of data collection. The survey participants were told they would remain anonymous. The survey did require an email address so that I could follow up with an individual if I desired. I emailed the twelve district presidents of the WELS and asked that they distribute the survey to the pastors within their district. Upon analysis of the survey results, one hundred twenty-six pastors completed the survey representing eight of the twelve districts.

The results were compiled in a Google Sheet and analyzed to provide general statistics. Knowing that the WELS has 1,250 congregations,⁵² this sample represents roughly 10% of the Synod. This sample size is not representative of the whole. One must consider limitations to the scope of the study and particular circumstances of the individuals interviewed. For instance, some of the participating pastors serve multiple congregations, and others are associate pastors in larger congregations. However, even the small sample can provide some insights into the current practice of WELS churches in various settings.

52. "WELS Numbers," WELS, accessed December 12, 2023, <https://wels.net/about-wels/history/numbers/>.

FINDINGS

Following is a collection of the statistics and information gathered from the interview and survey processes. First, there will be a summary of examination methodology and rationale from present pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). This section will begin by establishing the setting for the interviewees. It will continue by listing approaches used by these interviewed pastors and those who participated in the survey. Then, there will be discussion of rationales in choosing examination methodology and of the benefits and challenges that come from following various approaches. Finally, there will be an introduction to Universal Design of Learning in preparation for discussion of its impact on examination practices.

Current WELS Methodology

Background Information of Participants

Interviewee A is an associate in a Midwestern suburban congregation which operates a Lutheran Elementary School (LES).⁵³ His associate, Interviewee K, has been at the congregation for a few years and is the pastor responsible for teaching catechism classes.⁵⁴ Both have previously served other congregations in the Midwest. Currently, the pastor teaches eleven seventh and eighth grade LES students, half of whom are members of a neighboring WELS congregation.

53. Interviewee A. Anonymous interview by author. Phone call, October 11, 2023.

54. Interviewee K. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 16, 2023.

Interviewee A has previously taught classes up to twenty-three students, while Interviewee K has generally had classes of about the same size as his current class.

Interviewee B currently serves a rural congregation in the Midwest. He has previously served as a dormitory supervisor and instructor, at a dual parish in a rural setting, and at a church in a metropolitan area in an outlying district. He currently teaches two students; the average size of his previous classes is one to three students, and his largest class had eight students.⁵⁵

Interviewee C currently serves a congregation in an urban setting in an outlying district, and he has four students with one more being added soon. Three of those five students attend an LES attached to a neighboring WELS congregation. They attend catechism class at the school as well, but they are not required to do memory work or tests for that class. These students do most of their work with Interviewee C at the congregation where they are members. His prior call was also in an urban setting, but that church operates an LES, so his class size averaged fifty students between seventh and eighth grades.⁵⁶

Interviewee D serves with two associates at a large congregation in an urban setting. Their catechism class currently has twenty-four students. The congregation used to have an LES, but since its closing, their members have sent their children to neighboring WELS schools. Of the church's twenty-four current students, seventeen attend Lutheran schools and seven are public school students. Interviewee D has not consistently taught catechism class at his congregation; for the bulk of his ministry a staff minister or associate pastor would teach, and he would supplement when needed.⁵⁷

55. Interviewee B. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 12, 2023.

56. Interviewee C. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 27, 2023.

57. Interviewee D. Anonymous interview by author. Personal interview, October 19, 2023.

Interviewee E also serves a large congregation with an LES in an urban setting. His catechism class currently has thirty-two students in eighth grade and around forty in seventh grade.⁵⁸ Interviewee E noted that the majority of these students are not members of the congregation. On average he confirms nine to ten students a year, roughly thirty percent of a class, based on the number of current eighth grade students. Interviewee E previously served a smaller congregation in a suburban setting of an outlying district. This church did not have an LES, so all his catechism students were public school students who were typically members of the congregation.⁵⁹

Interviewee F is not currently a parish pastor but serves as a campus pastor at an area Lutheran high school. He previously served larger congregations in suburban Midwestern areas, all of which had schools. His catechism classes averaged between twelve and fifteen students including both LES and public school students.⁶⁰

Interviewee G is in his first assignment as an associate at a multi-site congregation in a rural Midwestern setting. He and his associate are also covering a vacancy for another dual parish in their area. The church he primarily serves has an LES. Between the four congregations, Interviewee G currently teaches sixteen catechism students. Six of those students attend the LES, and ten go to public school. In his own congregation, the average number of students in previous catechism classes is six to seven, with ten being the highest.⁶¹

58. Interviewee E. Anonymous interview by author. Personal interview, November 1, 2023. Note that this statistic is not exact as the interviewee does not teach 7th grade on a regular basis.

59. Interviewee E.

60. Interviewee F. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 19, 2023.

61. Interviewee G. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 30, 2023.

Interviewee H is also a campus pastor at an area Lutheran high school. He previously served at a new mission start in an outlying district, so for the first few years the church did not have a catechism class for youth. Eventually, the congregation was able to start an LES, and there was an average of four to six confirmands a year. Many of his students went through the LES, but there was a significant number of public school students as well.⁶²

Interviewee I currently serves in a mission setting in an outlying district. The congregation is composed primarily of older members with few younger families, so there is not currently a catechism class. Earlier in his ministry, Interviewee I served a congregation in an urban setting in an outlying district. This church has an LES, and the catechism classes had an average of twelve to fifteen students. On average, about three quarters were students from the LES and one quarter was public school students.⁶³

Interviewee J currently serves as an associate at a large congregation in a suburban Midwestern setting. This church has an LES. He previously served at a dual parish in the rural Midwest, and at another suburban Midwestern congregation with an LES. His current catechism class has twenty-five students between seventh and eighth grades, four of whom attend public school. His previous classes have varied between four and twenty students.⁶⁴

For Interviewee K, see above in paragraph about Interviewee A.

Interviewee L serves a suburban Midwestern congregation with an LES. The LES has a catechism program for fifth through eighth grades, with twenty-six students in fifth and sixth grades, and twenty-two students in seventh and eighth grades. Interviewee L is also working

62. Interviewee H. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, October 30, 2023.

63. Interviewee I. Anonymous interview by author. Zoom conference, November 1, 2023.

64. Interviewee J. Anonymous interview by author. Personal interview, October 23, 2023.

individually with two public school students, one in seventh grade and one in high school, and has prospects for two more students. Interviewee L averages about six to twelve confirmands per year. He previously served at a congregation in an urban setting in an outlying district. That church also has a larger LES with catechism classes averaging around fifteen to thirty students with few being public school students.⁶⁵

Finally, Interviewee M is an education professor at a Lutheran college. Her advanced study focuses on learning, teaching, and curriculum.⁶⁶

The survey participants, like the interviewees, come from a variety of ministry settings ranging from rural dual parishes to urban churches with associates. The statistics regarding class sizes among the one hundred twenty-six participants are as follows. Fifty-six (about 44.5% of those surveyed) reported a class size between zero and five students; twenty-nine (about 23%) reported between six and ten; twenty-four (about 19%) between eleven and twenty; fourteen (about 11%) between twenty-one and thirty; and three (about 2.5%) over thirty students (thirty-four, forty-seven, and eighty-five). The average class size overall was 9.5 students, with a median response of six students. These current statistics align with previous class sizes of these pastors. Fifty-nine (46.8%) had previous class sizes between zero and five students; thirty-seven (29.5%) from six to ten students; seventeen (13.5%) from eleven to twenty; ten (8%) from twenty-one to thirty; and two (1.5%) above thirty students. One participant did not provide previous statistics.

65. Interviewee L. Anonymous interview by author. Google Meet, October 24, 2023.

66. Interviewee M. Anonymous interview by author. Personal interview, November 27, 2023.

Methodology

Question and Answer

The majority of congregations surveyed use some form of a question-and-answer examination. The congregation where Interviewees A and K serve uses a public examination consisting of questions and answers. In the examination, Interviewee K tries to take a conversational tone and allows the students to answer the questions with which they feel most comfortable. In recent years, the examination has taken place on a midweek evening before confirmation, but prior to that it occurred on Sunday morning. All the students, both LES and public students, are grouped together although they have different amounts of class hours.⁶⁷ In a similar fashion, Interview J currently has all the students at his church collaboratively answer about one hundred twenty questions in front of the congregation on the day of confirmation. He has edited this collection of questions over the last ten years of his ministry. He uses several review activities in class like quizzes and games to prepare the students for this examination.⁶⁸ Along with these interviewees, sixty of the survey participants (about 47.5%) reported using public question-and-answer in their examination. One particular pastor adds the twist of drawing questions out of a hat. He also develops specific application questions for which the students cannot prepare.

Interviewee B equips his students for a question-and-answer examination by going through the questions at least a month in advance. He wants to make sure they agree with the answers and that the students are not just memorizing answers to have in their head. Interviewee

67. Interviewee K. One should also consider whether these groups have the same learning outcomes. This was not covered in the interview.

68. Interviewee J.

B has developed these questions himself based on the parts of the Catechism and key doctrinal terms. The examination takes place on the morning of confirmation thirty minutes before the service. Interviewee B strongly encourages his council to be there to show the significance of confirmation to his students. Other congregation members are also invited to attend the examination.⁶⁹

In the beginning of his ministry, Interviewee D had the students sit in the front of the church for examination.⁷⁰ Anyone was welcome; members who attended Bible study, the church council, and family members were typically present. As years went by, Interviewee D had various students recite the parts of the Catechism. Eventually, his questions became off the cuff and application-focused with a few notes he had prepared. After the LES closed, this examination was only required of the public students since many of the LES students wanted to get confirmed with their school peers. However, Interviewee D noted that some LES students wanted to be a part of this question process.⁷¹

Interviewee D described a significant shift for examination in recent years at his congregation. They have been holding an “examination event.” Parents and students from fifth through eighth grade gather for food and fun. Then, the examination itself begins. The students are given the questions in advance to prepare, but they do not have the materials with them at the event. The questions aim to apply catechism concepts to potential situations the student may face

69. Interviewee B.

70. Interviewee D. The first confirmation class he had had one student. The interviewee related that this student was able to recite the entire Enchiridion in twenty-two minutes with no mistakes.

71. Interviewee D.

in high school, college, and adulthood. The only recitation required in this examination is the explanation of the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed.⁷²

Interviewee E prefers doing a public examination through questions and answers. In his current congregation, the examination replaces the "Word" section of the confirmation service. He intentionally places the examination in the service so that visiting friends and family can witness this part of confirmation as well. In his experience, if you put a public examination on a separate day, fewer congregation members will come to observe and support. If a church regularly has multiple services, he recommended only having examination in one service so that the students do not have to go through the process more than once.⁷³

Interviewee E does not give his students a list of questions to study; the questions are unscripted and can be about anything the students have learned in the last few years. The class does have a review day before confirmation. He always begins examination by asking a variation of the question, "If you were to die today, where would you go and why?" Then, he turns to the congregation and states that the examination could end there, because that is the most important truth learned from catechism class. Even so, he continues to cover some Bible history, First and Second Article truths, then the Ten Commandments, the use of the law, then Third Article truths, with a strong emphasis on the Lord's Supper. If the students are not able to answer a question, Interviewee E asks the parents to help. This gets parents involved and helps them see the importance of knowing the faith personally.⁷⁴

72. Interviewee D.

73. Interviewee E.

74. Interviewee E.

When Interviewee F served parish congregations, he always used a public question-and-answer examination. This almost always took place during Bible study and was never part of the confirmation service to maintain a more relaxed environment.⁷⁵ Interviewee G has also previously used this method in his primary congregation. He would ask questions from a packet going down the line of students. The content would cover the bulk of the Catechism. Interviewee G assigned questions to each student and gave them the answers so they could practice. He also had the questions printed for the congregation in attendance so they could check their own knowledge and evaluate if they needed a refresh.⁷⁶

When Interviewee H was able to start catechism classes in his mission church, he used a method that he called “normal or traditional,” questions and answers in a public forum during Bible study right before the service. He tried to make the process a running narrative of the Christian faith, especially to show the newer Christians in his congregation how all these truths were connected. He also wanted the students to feel like they were communicating their faith naturally rather than just giving memorized responses. Interviewee H leaned into the graduation or celebration aspect of confirmation to emphasize the importance of this process.⁷⁷

In his first call, Interviewee L followed the existing practice of public question-and-answer examination with eighth grade students being confirmed. He eventually transitioned this to have a more conversational nature where he and the students were working together to proclaim the truths of the Catechism. He used more leading questions that enabled the students to confess what they know. In addition to these accounts of public question-and-answer forums,

75. Interviewee F.

76. Interviewee G.

77. Interviewee H.

thirty-six survey participants (28.5%) reported using a private question-and-answer component in their examination, often in the form of a written test. Notably, one pastor reported using four smaller tests across the two-year course of catechism study, rather than one cumulative test at the end.⁷⁸

Essay

Some congregations use an essay form of examination. In one of his previous congregations, Interviewee C had the students confess their faith in their own words through an essay. In his opinion, the examination model of a hundred questions and answers in front of people would not work for the context of that congregation. The personal confessions, on the other hand, were well-received by the church.⁷⁹

In his first call, Interviewee J followed the method used by his predecessor and used essays. The students wrote these essays over the course of eighth grade about what their confirmation meant to them, and they read the essays in church shortly before confirmation. On other occasions, Interviewee J had the students write about their confirmation verses to think about their individual faith.⁸⁰ Interviewee M reported that a family member was examined through a written essay. The pastor at this congregation had students write on any faith-related topic they wanted and then read it to the congregation at confirmation.⁸¹ Thirty-five survey participants also used an essay-style component where students wrote and delivered a

78. One response noted that students must score above 90% to pass the final exam with a few questions that must be answered correctly. The students receive a study guide at least two weeks prior, there is a review the week before the exam, and they are allowed to retake the exam if they do not pass.

79. Interviewee C.

80. Interviewee J.

81. Interviewee M.

proclamation of faith. Twenty-five of these (20%) made the essays public, typically by students reading them aloud on confirmation day, while others simply posted or distributed the essays to the congregation. In addition to this essay-form public confession of faith, one church has responsive readings of parts of the Catechism within the confirmation service. Another pastor has his students write two essays. The first consists of two paragraphs on each of the six parts of the Catechism explaining where the teaching comes from in the Bible and why it is important for believers. The other essay asks the students to explore how they will grow in their faith as a WELS member after confirmation. Ten pastors surveyed (8%) had the students write the essays privately but not read them in public.

Interview

Another method used for examination is a private interview or meeting between the pastor and the student, and typically including family members and other church leaders like elders or council. Seven pastors from the survey (5.5%) include an interview or meeting component in their examination. One pastor has the parents interview the child at home and send a recording to the pastor, who then follows up. During the discussion, Interviewee D contemplated the possibility a shift to one-on-one pastoral interviews as an alternative. This method would allow the pastor to ask about matters like a student's relationship with Jesus, what the student envisions for their faith at different stages of life, what they expect of their pastor, or what they specifically believe – in their own words – about various doctrines.⁸²

Interviewee G is making this kind of change. He tried it last year with the vacancy congregations he serves, as they did not have a consistent, established examination practice. This

82. Interviewee D.

year, he plans to apply it in his own congregation. At this private interview, the pastor and the board of elders ask each student a combination of catechetical and personal questions. The only recitations he requires are the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, and the Lord's Prayer. He follows up each recitation with related questions to determine if they grasp the concepts of what they have memorized. While these individual interviews are happening, Interviewee G also has the other students take a written exam. This is more comprehensive, but the test is "open book". The students can also bring their Catechism to the interview portion. Interviewee G sees the "open book" aspect as an opportunity for him to gauge the ability of students to navigate the resources at their disposal.⁸³

Interviewee L conducts examination by meeting individually with each student in seventh and eighth grade in the spring after the class has covered the Lord's Supper. To set up the meeting, he tells them, "If you think that you're ready for the Lord's Supper, that you want to receive the Sacrament, schedule a meeting to talk with me." He highlights this invitation throughout the year; eighth graders who have already covered the Lord's Supper in seventh grade may feel ready the subsequent fall. Each student is responsible for scheduling his or her own meeting. In this meeting, the pastor and the student discuss various sections of the Catechism, including the Creeds, Baptism, Keys and Confession, and the Lord's Supper. Over the course of the class, the students fill out a booklet of the chief parts of the Catechism on their own time. Interviewee L allows them to ask any questions about parts of the Catechism about which they still are not sure, and he fills in any gaps in understanding. Regarding the Lord's Supper, he asks four questions: 1. What is the Lord's Supper? 2. What does the Bible say makes

83. Interviewee G.

a person ready? 3. Why do you want to take the Lord's Supper? 4. Why do you want to be confirmed and take the Lord's Supper at this congregation?⁸⁴

After this meeting, Interviewee L involves the parents in planning ahead, both for a confirmation day and for the student's faith life as they move forward. He is flexible on dates for confirmation; if the family wants to line up with others, he typically sets one Sunday a year somewhere between June and August for group confirmation. However, he has also confirmed students individually as they are ready. In the future, he would be interested in having "New Member Days" on Reformation and Pentecost, celebrating anyone who had joined the church leading up to that date and announcing these new members to the rest of the congregation.⁸⁵

Combinations

Several pastors combine the methods of examination previously listed. Interviewee C uses a written examination which the students take a few weeks before confirmation. The examination consists of about twenty essay questions, and it typically takes the students around three hours to complete. The content covers the chief parts of the Catechism. After the written portion of his examination, Interviewee C selects a few essays that he thought each student answered well. Those essays will then be read in front of the congregation on confirmation day as a demonstration of their personal faith. He also has a few recitations as part of the examination, typically including the Ten Commandments and a few explanations, the Lord's Prayer, and the

84. Interviewee L.

85. Interviewee L.

Apostles' Creed. Occasionally, he will ask for a student to tell the congregation "What does this mean?" in his or her own words.⁸⁶

Interviewee I used two components in his examination process. First was a written exam of roughly one hundred twenty questions taken a few weeks before confirmation. Second was a public forum where students were put into "cubicles." Each cubicle would have a student, an elder, and a member of the student's choosing (typically a friend or family member). They would have a conversation consisting of practical application questions, as well as role playing the mission strategy "God's Great Exchange" with the cubicle members. Some of the questions required the students to distinguish between law and gospel in given passages. Interviewee I also gave the students multiple statements from various religious groups about certain doctrines, and they needed to choose the true, biblical stance. This exercise gave the students a chance to distinguish between other teachings they might face as they grow up. This cubicle portion of examination happened mid-May and easily lasted two hours. Other congregation members were invited to observe even if they did not participate in a cubicle.⁸⁷

Eight survey participants also reported combinations of various examination methods. One did a question-and-answer portion privately and had students read an essay publicly. Another had a written exam as well as a public examination. One participant did examination entirely privately, with written exam, essay, and personal interview components. An additional combination had students do a private interview with family members present and then a public examination on one part of the Catechism. One pastor related that this year he plans to incorporate a witnessing scenario as a private examination in addition to a public question-and-

86. Interviewee C.

87. Interviewee I.

answer examination. Another pastor uses multiple smaller interviews as well as having his students prepare a presentation for the congregation on one part of the Catechism. One combination incorporated private question-and-answer with a public confession of faith and responsive reading of parts of the Catechism within the service. The final combination listed involved the public examination aspect in addition to a private meeting discussing why the student wanted to be confirmed and the plan to stay faithful moving forward.

Rationales

Purpose of Examination

Interviewee A defined the purpose of catechesis primarily as instruction in the Word of God. In his expanded definition, he explained that this instruction would allow a student to say, “I believe in Jesus as my Savior, I believe in the truths of God’s Word as taught in this church, I want to become a member here, and I’m ready to receive the Lord’s Supper.”⁸⁸ His definition incorporates many of the aspects that other pastors saw as the purpose of catechesis. With these goals in mind, one can see what pastors might look for in examination.

Doctrinal Foundation and Scriptural Instruction

In his own twofold description of the purpose of catechesis, Interviewee B listed first that the course of study exists “to give students sound scriptural instruction in the basics of Christianity so that the faith that they received in their baptism gains more definite shape and clarity and

88. Interviewee A.

thereby helps them to take firmer and more conscious ownership of it.”⁸⁹ He stressed the need for solid doctrinal foundation to make one’s faith personal and to better appreciate the sacraments. Interviewee B recalls one of his professors, Daniel Deutschlander, describing catechism class as “building the skeleton of a house” that, God-willing, the student will continue to fill in as he continues in faith. Rather than striving for a finished product, then, the goal of catechesis is to set up a firm foundation for lifelong building.⁹⁰ Interviewee C also has the desire to give youth the foundation of basic doctrines upon which they can continue to build through Bible study and worship.⁹¹

Interviewee F likes to use a tagline of “learning a lifetime of discipleship.” To him, we cannot consider catechesis as teaching everything they need to know. He admits that some pastors feel they will not have a chance to teach these students again, so they want to pack in as much as possible. However, approaching catechesis with that attitude would add to the impression that confirmation is the end of the Christian education. In his words, “Catechesis is an incomplete process. We can only build a foundation.”⁹² Along the same lines, Interviewee G hopes that catechesis helps students see their Christian education as a “lifelong endeavor” where they are always growing in the Word. Catechism class merely sets the framework for that growth. Examination, then, would function as a review (or confirmation) of what they have learned to that point.⁹³

89. Interviewee B.

90. Interviewee B.

91. Interviewee C.

92. Interviewee F.

93. Interviewee G.

What is incorporated in this scriptural foundation? In seeking to teach the great truths of the Bible, Interviewee E strives to go beyond the six chief parts of the Catechism and includes parts of Bible history as well as information about why Luther wrote his Catechism. Through studying Scripture, Interviewee E wants to instill in the students a desire for ongoing Bible study as an enjoyable and worthwhile endeavor.⁹⁴ The most important thing to come from catechism instruction, as Interviewee L said, is that students grow in “knowledge of everything Jesus does for us.”⁹⁵

Communion Preparation

Another common use for examination is to determine a confirmand’s readiness to receive the Lord’s Supper. Interviewee F asserts that the way examination is typically practiced in the WELS shows that we view it as admittance to the Lord’s Supper. In his opinion, if that is the purpose, then we are setting a much higher bar than Scripture does. We would be making the requirements for Communion intellectual. However, Scripture does not prescribe memorization of the six chief parts of the Catechism; no catechism even existed when the Lord’s Supper was instituted. By having a question-and-answer examination, Interviewee F suggests that we give the impression that students need to pass a test before they can receive the Lord’s Supper. Nonetheless, in his view, to be confirmed, a person does need to be able to examine himself to receive the Lord’s Supper.⁹⁶ In summary, being prepared to examine oneself before the Sacrament is beneficial; putting intellectual requirements on the meal is not.

94. Interviewee E.

95. Interviewee L.

96. Interviewee F.

Interviewee F's assertion above finds agreement in varying degree: Interviewees A,⁹⁷ B,⁹⁸ E,⁹⁹ G¹⁰⁰ all agreed that one of the purposes of examination is to demonstrate that students are properly prepared to receive the Lord's Supper in a beneficial way. Interviewee L eagerly wants to connect people to the gift of the Sacrament as soon as possible. However, he also wants to ensure that the confirmands will be receiving the Sacrament for their spiritual blessing and not to their detriment. Therefore, he has previously refrained from confirming students whom he has determined are not ready. To make this determination, Interviewee L asks four questions based on what the Bible teaches about those who can receive the Sacrament: 1. Do I know that I'm a sinner? 2. Do I recognize Jesus as my Savior? 3. Do I know the body and blood of Jesus in the bread and wine? 4. Do I desire the Lord's Supper?¹⁰¹ In order to make sure his students are ready for the Lord's Supper, Interviewee I tried to implant the words of institution in their minds during instruction. He also allowed his students to handle the bread and wine before their first communion.¹⁰²

Living Out the Faith

97. Interviewee A.

98. Interviewee B.

99. Interviewee E.

100. Interviewee G.

101. Interviewee L.

102. Interviewee I.

Examination is often used to look for whether a confirmation candidate has the desire to live out the faith they have learned. Recall Interviewee F's tagline "learning a lifetime of discipleship." Pastors might try to prepare confirmands for growing into an active, adult member of the congregation or in general for discipleship, following and serving Jesus daily. Interviewee H related a phrase from Dr. Arthur Just of the Missouri Synod, that catechesis is about "Christian formation."¹⁰³ The lessons learned in catechism class help to grow in the life of faith. Interviewee I posed that the presupposition behind the instruction is that the material learned will become "integrated and implemented in [the student's] living."¹⁰⁴

Interviewee E said that one of the goals of his catechism class is to help students decide whether they would like to make that congregation their church home. He wants them to be active in the congregation, shown by coming for worship and Bible study. Interviewee E prepares the students for confirmation with several announcements throughout the year, ramping up in February. In mid-April, he distributes a form asking the students whether they plan to be confirmed. For those who indicate "Yes," he proceeds with preparation for that day with the student and the parents. Having confirmed an average of nine to ten students per year, he has noted thirty-five to forty percent staying active within his church. He notes that, of those who are not active members, some of them attend area Lutheran high schools or preparatory schools where they are being spiritually fed.¹⁰⁵

Interviewee E also made this point: the goal is not so much that his students become members of his congregation but that they know and love Jesus. It would be valuable to become

103. Interviewee H.

104. Interviewee I.

105. Interviewee E.

members so he could ensure they are continuing to be taught, but it is not necessary for confirmation.¹⁰⁶ Interviewee D agreed. He wants the purpose of catechesis to be that students are close to Jesus, that they love learning about him from the Bible, have fun with it, and that they go to heaven. With this goal in mind, he suggested the method of pastoral interviews for examination, so that the pastors could hear more about the personal faith of each student.¹⁰⁷

In examination, many look for how students will live as members of the congregation. To Interviewee K, catechesis is more than just learning the facts of God's Word. It is about becoming a part of the congregation by living out the faith they have learned and recognizing that the church is *their* church, not just their parent's church. His congregation is seeking more ways to involve the youth in church work, like the altar guild, usher teams, or mentorships with adult members.¹⁰⁸ While Interviewee E does not want membership at his church to be a primary goal, he still tries to establish connections with his students. By building pastoral trust with them, he hopes that the children will remember their pastor fondly and be willing to come to him in time of need.¹⁰⁹ Interviewee G would like his students to seek membership so that they could continue growing. He hopes to show that catechism class has not taught everything but has planted the seeds for further study as lifelong learners in the Word.¹¹⁰ Much like in the quote from Interviewee A at the beginning of this section, Interviewee J hopes to prepare students to

106. Interviewee E.

107. Interviewee D.

108. Interviewee K.

109. Interviewee E.

110. Interviewee G.

say, “I truly believe these gospel truths that I have been taught, and I want to remain a part of God’s church for my entire life.”¹¹¹

Strengths and Weaknesses of Examination Approaches

Public Testimony

A consistent theme that many agreed upon was that a public examination was valuable for the congregation to hear a testimony of the faith of these students. Interviewee A noted that public examinations allow, albeit in a limited way, the chance for students to confess their faith in Jesus and the truths of Scripture. Also, the congregation can visibly recognize those who have been instructed and now are joining in the communion shown in the Lord’s Supper. If examination is private, members often do not know the faces of the confirmands.¹¹² Interviewee B agreed that, while a bit stressful and uncomfortable, public examination is beneficial. It gives the students a chance to practice public witness and the members an opportunity to be assured of the unity of faith with these youth.¹¹³ Interviewee E¹¹⁴ and Interviewee K¹¹⁵ both noted that the public aspect may push students to know their material better because they are going to speak “on stage” in front of people. Interviewee E also sees this as a chance for these students to practice public confession of their faith in Jesus, something they do not get the chance to do often.¹¹⁶

111. Interviewee J.

112. Interviewee A.

113. Interviewee B.

114. Interviewee E.

115. Interviewee K.

116. Interviewee E.

Interviewee I commented how his cubicle approach did not allow any students to hide. They were not coached on their answers, and therefore, they had to demonstrate the capacity to express their faith. While he understood that this environment was “putting them out there,” Interviewee I was confident of their success.¹¹⁷ Interviewee L commented how a private examination meant students did not get the chance to stand up and publicly speak about their faith, an opportunity that many do not experience in regular life.¹¹⁸ While the public aspect may make some students nervous, there are benefits of practicing the witness of faith and giving the congregation confidence in the faith of these newly confirmed youth.

Full Coverage of Teachings

A comprehensive examination, like those covering over a hundred questions or the six chief parts, can assure the pastor that the students have knowledge of the core teachings of Christianity. While the amount of material may be daunting, the coverage allows a pastor to assess for any gaps or misunderstandings in the learning of each student. Interviewee B sees the question-and-answer method as a plus in this area, that it covers the basics of Christian teaching – something both he and the congregation are hoping to hear that these confirmands know and believe.¹¹⁹ Interviewee I appreciated that the written portion of his examination forced students to answer within the lines, to be able to succinctly answer questions. He said, “At some point, fact questions require fact answers.”¹²⁰

117. Interviewee I.

118. Interviewee L.

119. Interviewee B.

120. Interviewee I.

Interviewee H pointed out that while essays might be nice for personal expressions of faith, they do not allow for demonstration of full knowledge. A student has learned more than just one topic over the course of catechism class; how can they show that extensive learning in a brief essay?¹²¹ The desire for personal confessions within examinations often means that the material won't be covered as much as in a summative assessment.

Even if the whole Catechism would be covered in examination, Interviewee E commented that, in a way, a pastor is never satisfied with how much the students learn. The desire is that they would be in the Scriptures every day. But he also rested on the fact that nobody can know what direction God is going to take their lives.¹²² Pastors plant the seed and trust that God will make it grow and bear fruit. Interviewee L mentioned how some of his students who had not initially been confirmed have come back years later with a desire to then be confirmed.¹²³ The power of the Word they were taught is effective beyond the years of catechism class.

Personalized Faith

As noted in previous sections, many forms of examination strive to bring out a personal confession of faith, showing that the material has been applied to the individual. As a campus pastor at a high school, Interviewee H has observed teenagers who know their catechism material well but were ill-prepared for the realities of the world. They do not know where to go in the Bible for help and how to answer their faith questions. His high school students are looking for

121. Interviewee H.

122. Interviewee E.

123. Interviewee L.

something applicable and meaningful.¹²⁴ Their own catechism classes seemingly did not provide enough personal connections. Examinations designed to draw out individual expressions of what was taught help the truths take deeper root.

Interviewee C notes that, by reading prepared essays, his students are confessing their own faith in their own words. Rather than just memorizing answers, they tell what they believe in a way that they are confident proclaiming.¹²⁵ Interviewee H thinks this kind of personal essay could be most beneficial following the confirmation rite. At that time, each confirmand could speak to how they see their individual faith life moving forward.¹²⁶

While Interviewee I liked the succinct and factual nature of the written examination he used, he recognizes that a method like this deprives the learner of the chance to articulate their faith “beyond what their pencil says.” He said that written exams typically result in simple regurgitation of those facts, not in expression of personal faith.¹²⁷ Interviewee J concurs that the long form question-and-answer examination often becomes “little more than trying to cram for what they see as a big test.” He is unsure if the students actually take the truths they learned to heart and can speak to them in their own words.¹²⁸ Interviewee K emphasized that the factual question-and-answer form may be useful for demonstrating head knowledge, but it cannot assess for practical application or sanctified living as part of the church.¹²⁹

124. Interviewee H.

125. Interviewee C.

126. Interviewee H.

127. Interviewee I.

128. Interviewee J.

129. Interviewee K.

However, if the approach is adjusted to include application questions, as Interviewee C does, it can analyze more than the “book side of things” and ask students matters that are more personal in nature.¹³⁰ Interviewee G recognizes that using application or discussion questions in a public question-and-answer format is challenging, but he asserts that doing so would allow for better sharing of personal faith. Meanwhile, in his experimentation with an interview-style examination, Interviewee G feels he got a better understanding of a student’s ability to examine himself in preparation for the Lord’s Supper. He could evaluate if a student knew his need for forgiveness and how he received that forgiveness in the Lord’s Supper personally.¹³¹ Interviewee E has seen the shift toward application emphasis in examination as an opportunity for students to make a personal confession in a meaningful way publicly.¹³²

Interviewee G noted a potential issue with using examinations more focused on personal faith. There is a danger of trending toward Pietism, emphasizing what faith means to the individual rather than having the solidarity of a united faith. If everyone is answering the same questions year after year, there is a confidence in shared beliefs. Interviewee G also pointed out the opposite error that comes from leaning too far into content-based examinations. This can swing toward rationalism and make faith a purely intellectual matter.¹³³ As noted above, there is the desire for catechism students to take these truths to heart and make them applicable.

Regarding examining for personal faith, some participants expressed a fear that it becomes examining for fruits of faith. Interviewee F wondered how one could accurately measure something so subjective in nature. He said that this approach could lead one to start

130. Interviewee C.

131. Interviewee G.

132. Interviewee E.

133. Interviewee G.

ranking different ways of serving, and he also commented how a pastor cannot know all the ways his members are living out their faith.¹³⁴ Scripture does talk about identifying people by their fruits, but fruits will look different for each person. Interviewee G encouraged pastors not to just recognize the obvious good works but to get to know members and students in how they live outside of worship.¹³⁵ Interviewee H also expressed the danger of “playing Holy Spirit” and trying to read hearts. However, he said that one could see if a student had a genuine desire to be active if he or she regularly came to worship. Even with youth confirmands, who often require transportation to worship, Interviewee H could tell those who wanted to get to church.¹³⁶

As many participants note, the evaluation of an individual confirmand’s faith is often done before examination. One wonders if this assessment specifically is best done over the course of instruction rather than at the conclusion. However, there is still merit to the public proclamation of each student to their fellow Christians.

Review

A benefit many see in public examination is that it allows those in attendance to review the truths they have previously learned, as Interviewee B related.¹³⁷ Interviewee A wants his members to be answering the questions in their own heads as the students do out loud.¹³⁸ Interviewee E appreciates this review of the study for those in attendance, both members of the congregation as

134. Interviewee F.

135. Interviewee G.

136. Interviewee H.

137. Interviewee B.

138. Interviewee A.

well as family and friends who might not be as familiar with the content.¹³⁹ In contrast to public examinations, Interviewee L recognizes that his private interviews deprive the congregation of an opportunity to review.¹⁴⁰ If there is not a public examination that cumulatively covers the catechism material, pastors may consider other means for review. One congregation practices the responsive reading of parts of the Catechism during the confirmation service, as mentioned above.

Pressure

A large challenge that many see to public and cumulative assessments is the perception of pressure. Interviewee B does stress the seriousness of confirmation vows when preparing his students. If a confirmand truly feels like he or she is not ready, he tells the student to let both him and the parents know, but he is not disappointed if they need to wait.¹⁴¹ To Interviewee C, examination does not need to be a major stressor. By then, he has already determined that these students are connected to the means of grace and will be moving forward, so they are ready.¹⁴² A survey participant emphasized that a public examination is not for the student to “pass,” but to “give them an opportunity to express and share their faith to family, friends, and the congregation.” He noted that if a student were not ready to be confirmed, they would not be part of the public examination, so those students present did not need to be afraid of “failing.” Interviewee F also tried to take away the pressure from a public examination. He worked to

139. Interviewee E.

140. Interviewee L.

141. Interviewee B.

142. Interviewee C.

create a relaxed environment and to get the students laughing to alleviate their nerves. He emphasized to all in attendance that nothing was riding on the examination. The students were ready to be confirmed, and if they had a brain freeze, both he and their parents knew well that they were truly prepared.¹⁴³

Interviewee A acknowledges the reality of test anxiety for some students. He would try to lighten this pressure in the public examination by having a student look directly at him and talk through the question.¹⁴⁴ Interviewee E contemplated alternative examinations for a student who feared the public aspect, but he pushed his students to go through with it to show them that they were capable.¹⁴⁵ One survey participant told his students he wanted examination “to be a ‘win’ for them,” so they rehearsed the questions at least three times in the way examination would happen on Confirmation Sunday. In contrast to the view that the public proclamation is a high-pressure situation, some noted that the congregation provided a safe environment for students to practice witnessing to their faith. For instance, Interviewee B expressed that this examination was a low-stakes situation for students to shine and gain some practical experience in talking about their faith.¹⁴⁶

Some pastors commented on another kind of pressure unique to youth examination. Interviewee B pondered why we practice examination for youth confirmands and not for adults. He noted that there seems to be different expectations for each group, where youth are required to learn more information before being confirmed.¹⁴⁷ Interviewee F suggested that if we publicly

143. Interviewee F.

144. Interviewee A.

145. Interviewee E.

146. Interviewee B. For further reference, see section on Public Testimony, starting on p. 36.

147. Interviewee B.

examined a sixty-five-year-old woman in front of the church, she would probably freeze up too.¹⁴⁸ Interviewee L asserted that, to his knowledge, there is not a WELS church that has public examination for adults. Rather, the congregation trusts that the pastor has made a proper evaluation of an individual's fitness to become a member – whether they are an adult transfer, someone who went through Bible Information Class, or a youth confirmand.¹⁴⁹ Interviewee K also commented how adults who have gone through instruction simply make a confession to the pastor and become part of the church; there is no examination test.¹⁵⁰ Interviewee G wondered whether we need a public rite of confirmation altogether. If the purposes of examination are for a public declaration of faith and to affirm admittance to the Lord's Supper, he sees other means to these ends. Public confession of faith is done regularly in the orders of service through creeds, and admittance to the Supper used to be a pastoral decision case-by-case.¹⁵¹ Congregations trust pastors with many other decisions and evaluations; why put students in a high-pressure situation to be examined when it could be done without the public formality? This higher level of expectations for youth could create extra pressure in learning that affects retention of the material as well as desire for participation in catechism class and examination.

Interviewee G noted that in the first year of trying his interview examination, several students were terrified by the idea of having a one-on-one meeting with their pastor. They also were nervous about getting questions wrong, even as he assured them it was not a pass-fail exercise. Interviewee G is hoping with continued experience that he can gauge how much the

148. Interviewee F.

149. Interviewee L.

150. Interviewee K.

151. Interviewee G.

nerves were about the interview and how much was about lack of knowledge.¹⁵² Interviewee L, who also uses private interviews, strives to make these meetings a low-pressure situation. He recognizes that students face pressure from parents to get confirmed; from peers indirectly as students strive to be confirmed with their class; from the church which might question why an eighth-grade student was not confirmed; and maybe even from the pastor, whether intentional or not, as he desires the benefits of confirmation for the student. In the past, Interviewee L has seen children make vows they are not prepared to keep and confess a faith that they do not personally believe due to these pressures.¹⁵³

Interviewee H expressed a concern that pastors may have: what if you only have one student out of a group that is not ready to be confirmed? Would not confirming the child strain relationships with the family, put a stumbling block in the way of continuing growth, or ostracize the child from the class? Then, there is added pressure to confirm that child with his or her peers.¹⁵⁴ Interviewee K had a similar concern. By withholding confirmation, do you push a student further away? If you were to confirm a student who is not ready, are you just adding to the elder work of contacting delinquent members?¹⁵⁵ There are a variety of pressure points that pastors need to take into consideration when examining a potential confirmand.

Learner Variability

152. Interviewee G.

153. Interviewee L.

154. Interviewee H.

155. Interviewee K.

Rev. Dr. Kevin Wyssmann, quoted by David Rueter, stressed that “the church needs to be flexible as it works with individual students.”¹⁵⁶ Each student comes with varying background knowledge and learning preferences. Pastors must consider the wide breadth of learner variability within catechism classes. Interviewee H noted that many of his students went to public school and nearly all the class came from families that were new to Lutheranism. They all needed extra instruction in Bible history. It was difficult to keep the public students on pace with the LES students since they only met once a week.¹⁵⁷ For many churches with an LES, the students in the school may have religion courses for six or seven years prior to catechism class. They can navigate the Bible and spiritual conversations more easily. Their public school peers may need adjusted teaching in order to grasp the same catechism truths. Interviewee E also has served in churches with members new to the faith and students who are not members. He has crafted his curriculum toward Bible history and basic truths of the Word.¹⁵⁸ To account for this kind of learner variability, one survey participant examines the Lutheran elementary students and knowledgeable public school students through public question-and-answer. For other public school students, he uses essays.

In the individual meeting approach used by Interviewee L, the student is the one required to set up and follow through on a meeting with the pastor. He has had some parents ask why their child was not confirmed, and he answered that their child did not establish the meeting. The parents responded that Interviewee L could not expect an eighth-grade student to be mature enough to establish his or her own meeting. To that, Interviewee L noted that other students this

156. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 18.

157. Interviewee H.

158. Interviewee E.

age have followed through on the process and demonstrated the necessary maturity. In addition, if a student cannot carry out this responsibility, Interviewee L wonders if they are ready for the Lord's Supper.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Interviewee G attests that not every pre-teen student can fully understand and articulate the necessary concepts for examination before the Sacrament. However, throughout instruction, he can tell if there's an issue to address individually before examination.¹⁶⁰ As the interview method shows, catechism students exhibit variability in maturity and intellectual readiness.

Learner variability also takes into consideration the cognitive development of students. Interviewee B commented on some of the educational weaknesses of the question-and-answer method. He noted how some pastors are shifting toward a more conversational process rather than expecting memorized answers. He observed that this matches with the declining capacity or requirement for memorization in regular schooling in the United States. Interviewee B also recognizes that lowering the level of the questions may alleviate some pressure, but it also may have an undesired effect of lower-level learning. He wonders if we should desire for students to have a more detailed understanding of their faith by the end of confirmation.¹⁶¹ Likewise, Interviewee C sees value in having a rigorous examination. With his essay approach, he could see students thinking they could bluff their way through writing without putting in much effort. There may not be as much challenge as studying for a hundred question examination.¹⁶² A pastor

159. Interviewee L.

160. Interviewee G.

161. Interviewee B.

162. Interviewee C.

must consider what level and style of learning his students need – something more challenging or simple, rote memorization of facts or putting concepts in their own words.

Class Size

Some pastors determine what examination method to use based, in part, on class size. One who uses essays said if he had a group larger than eight students he might use questions and answers, but he appreciates how the essays allow students to formulate their answers. One pastor commented that when he has had one student, an essay has worked better than asking that child all the questions. Another agreed that with small class sizes, “asking them sixty to seventy questions in a public examination format is taxing,” but if he had more than eight students the public question-and-answer is still preferred. Still another said that when there are three or less, he examines through personal essay. While Interviewee D had a strong desire to do personal interviews with students, the size of his congregation did not allow the time to meet with each one individually.¹⁶³ Interviewee E wanted to maintain connections with all the students he taught, but with other pastoral responsibilities, he found that he only follows up with the select kids who go through with confirmation at the end of his class.¹⁶⁴

Universal Design of Learning

In the conversation with Interviewee M, she told me about Universal Design of Learning (UDL). According to her, UDL is an education framework based off universal design architecture.¹⁶⁵

163. Interviewee D.

164. Interviewee E.

165. Interviewee M.

When a universal design architect plans a building, he has in mind all kinds of people that will use it – people with wheelchairs, walkers, strollers, et cetera. So, he will put ramps or level entrances at every entrance point. He plans for easily accessible elevators at multiple points in the building instead of at just one point. The architect designs the building to remove any foreseeable barriers to all people. This concept translates to education as teachers seek to proactively design the objectives of their instruction. They predict what barriers any student might have to learning and strive to remove those obstacles. A UDL teacher will “recognize that all learners can be successful.”¹⁶⁶ Pastors can reasonably predict that some students will not test well, whether on a private written exam or in a public forum of questions and answers. Another predictable barrier to learning in catechism class is reading. When the content is text heavy, some students might get left behind.

This concept of UDL may be as new to the reader as it is to me. Simply consider this: examination can be adjusted keeping the mindset that “all learners can be successful;” they simply might need options for multiple means of engagement. This means giving opportunities to reach the same learning goals in a different form. A pastor might recognize artistic gifts in some students, so he makes part of the examination a “confession of faith” through a poster, a song, or a movie. Perhaps a student is a stronger writer than speaker, so a friend or family member delivers that student’s essay. Even if a student does not have the same biblical background as his or her peers, the same confirmation goals can be evaluated by a variety of examination possibilities. As pastors implement multiple means of examination, he must clearly establish the learning outcomes to maintain a fair level of rigor among students.

166. Interviewee M.

CONCLUSION

Recommendations

With the concept of UDL and the variety of examination methods and rationales, there is room for pastors to explore alternatives to the examination practices they have practiced and are currently using. The following are some potential alterations to consider.

Timing

Many believe that catechesis and confirmation can happen at other times than the standard end of eighth grade. David Rueter relates a method used by Rev. Dr. Kevin Wyssmann, called “Systemic Catechesis.” In this approach, “students are not required to begin or complete their studies at a single predetermined date. Instead, he allows for learning beginning in fifth grade with no set required completion date.”¹⁶⁷ Interviewee H suggests a program beginning around the same time, with catechism instruction from fourth to sixth grade and first communion immediately following. He noted that Martin Luther communed children around age eight, the Missouri Synod communes children in first and second grade, and even the early Christian Church communed at a young age. Interviewee H also related from his personal studies that young children have the capacity to memorize and retain information. While some may worry if a child this age can be truly repentant, he asked if any adult can consistently do so. With the two years of sacramental life with parents and peers that would come after sixth grade, as well as

167. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 18.

continued education, youth may be better equipped before the high school years. In this period, they could discuss applications in upcoming life scenarios.¹⁶⁸ Interviewee J related how one congregation near him gave students the option to be confirmed at the end of seventh grade if both the student and the family felt the child was ready. Then, eighth grade could focus more on applications of Christian living.¹⁶⁹ One pastor from the survey reported doing examination according to Luther's questions and answers in preparation for the Lord's Supper at the end of second grade. Then, students would continue to be educated and would write several essays throughout eighth grade.

Others also supported confirming at a younger age as a possibility. Interviewee D recalled once confirming siblings in sixth and eighth grade who were both determined to be ready.¹⁷⁰ Interviewee C has recognized students as young as fifth grade that he felt were ready.¹⁷¹ While younger children – and even eighth grade students – cannot vote or serve on boards in churches due to by-laws, Interviewee L assessed that if they can answer questions for examination before the Lord's Supper, they can be confirmed.¹⁷² A shift to younger examination may be startling to some, but it does not go without precedent in the past and present.

On the other side of the age spectrum, some students may not be ready to be confirmed at the end of eighth grade. Interviewee B previously had a student who, due to family circumstances, was confirmed at age sixteen.¹⁷³ Likewise, Interviewee L mentioned one high

168. Interviewee H.

169. Interviewee J.

170. Interviewee D.

171. Interviewee C.

172. Interviewee L.

173. Interviewee B.

school student he is currently working with and referenced instances where he has refrained from confirming at the end of eighth grade when he felt the student was not ready. He would continue to work with that student individually and confirm later.¹⁷⁴ Interviewee C has had students get confirmed as a freshman or sophomore due to personal circumstances. He currently has one freshman student that has started the catechism program twice without finishing. At age sixteen or seventeen, Interviewee C would suggest moving a student to adult information class instead of using the two-year catechism program.¹⁷⁵ These previous cases seemed to be exceptions.

Interviewee H wondered if confirmation could wait until after ninth grade or even until age eighteen. Then, by most congregation by-laws, they would be fully adult members with the right to vote.¹⁷⁶ Dr. William Knippa, senior pastor at Bethany Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Austin, Texas, delays catechism instruction until ninth and tenth grade since these students are “at a more advanced stage of concept abstraction” and can “focus on faith application a student’s...questions regarding doctrine.”¹⁷⁷

Several have recommended separating the time of first communion and confirmation. Interviewee J had the idea that passing catechism class could allow admission to the Lord’s Supper, but confirmation would be withheld for a time for a student to demonstrate active faith through worship and personal life.¹⁷⁸ Interviewee C related similarly that in some urban settings, a church may delay confirmation for four to five months after completing catechism study.¹⁷⁹

174. Interviewee L.

175. Interviewee C.

176. Interviewee H.

177. Rueter, *Teaching the Faith at Home*, 18–19.

178. Interviewee J.

179. Interviewee C.

Perhaps not only the age of confirmation could be changed but the date. The idea of “New Member Days” was mentioned by Interviewee L.¹⁸⁰ Interviewee F suggested that a student could become confirmed whenever he or she finished the course of study, just as adults do – whether in sixth grade, twelfth grade, or whenever.¹⁸¹ Interviewee G noted that changing up the timing – whether by age or date within the church year – can help alleviate the “graduation syndrome” which makes some view confirmation as the end of Christian education.¹⁸²

Individual and Private

Several congregations are already changing examination to be private and individual. With one student who experienced severe social anxiety, Interviewee L did the confirmation rite in the Saturday evening service with the student sitting in a pew instead of having the student come up front. Overall, through his personal meeting process of examination, Interviewee L has moved confirmation to more of an individual than a group experience.¹⁸³ One survey participant related that he would use a private form of examination if there were learning disabilities. Interviewee F advised that if allowances should be made for particular students, this should be done with special care so as not to single him or her out. A pastor could do this by handpicking questions for a student to answer prior to the public forum or by evangelically guiding an answer into the right response for a question. Interviewee F also said that when working with students with special needs, he has communicated the exception to his council and congregation ahead of

180. Interviewee L.

181. Interviewee F.

182. Interviewee G.

183. Interviewee L.

time.¹⁸⁴ Again, several of these cases listed are exceptions. While there are benefits to a public examination for students and congregation, children can also demonstrate what they learned in a private, individual setting. Additionally, the private interview can allow a pastor to make adjustments for learner variability while maintaining rigor. This situation may be fitting for more students than just those who stand out as exceptions to a one-size-fits-all approach.

Congregation Involvement

Several pastors see catechism class and examination as a time to start thinking about how these youth will be involved in the church moving forward. In talking with Interviewee K about integrating catechism students in the life of the church, he mentioned the idea of mentorship.¹⁸⁵ Congregations might consider establishing an “Adopt a Confirmand” program. If an elder or lay person were involved in a personal examination, they could identify where a student had gifts that could contribute to the church. Then, a member or committee that used similar gifts could “adopt” that student and mentor him or her in applying those gifts in service to the church. Interviewee I implemented an informal mentorship in a previous congregation. Confirmands were encouraged to help at the LES, particularly if they also graduated from that school, as an easy way to stay connected to the body. He wanted them to see how they would “hand the baton of the gospel onto the next generation.” His church also had junior committee members. Interviewee I recognized that these students were still too young to be leaders or to have a vote according to the constitution, but they could still observe and learn how to live out their faith in

184. Interviewee F.

185. Interviewee K.

these aspects of the church.¹⁸⁶ In Interviewee D's church, any confirmand automatically becomes involved in some role, like ushering, Sunday school, or cross processions. Their youth coordinator creates projects and activities for the seventh and eighth graders to interact with other members already before they are confirmed.¹⁸⁷

One survey participant laid out an interesting way that the congregation could be involved in examination itself while meeting several of the previously listed purposes.

Our confirmands sit at tables and have one-on-one conversations with council members, family members, friends, family, and other church members.... There is a list of 85 questions that I work through with them[,] and they are prepared to answer them, but those who sit with them are free to ask them anything they want to ask. It's conversational, they're not on the spot in front of a crowd. But it accomplishes the goals of giving the confirmands an opportunity to show what they've learned and what they believe, and [it] gives the congregation an opportunity to get to know them, encourage them, and review basic Christian truths.

By their involvement in catechesis and examination, congregation members can show their brothers and sisters in the faith what faith looks like moving forward and implemented in daily life.

“Formative Examination”

In education, a formative assessment is one that is made over the course of study. This is an assessment *for* learning “designed to give teachers information that will allow them to modify the teaching and learning activities in which students are engaged.”¹⁸⁸ It may be an in-class activity, a daily homework assignment, or perhaps a quiz on a particular lesson. This contrasts

186. Interviewee I.

187. Interviewee D.

188. Lorna M. Earl, *Assessment As Learning: Using Classroom Assessment to Maximize Student Learning* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2013), 27.

with summative assessments which come at the end of a period of study – a chapter, unit, or semester. These are assessments *of* learning “intended to certify learning and report to parents and students about their progress.”¹⁸⁹ Most forms of catechism examination which have been discussed fall into the category of summative assessment. However, several of the pastors interviewed (D,¹⁹⁰ F,¹⁹¹ G¹⁹², I¹⁹³) and surveyed commented how the real assessment of learning takes place over the course of the catechism class, as a formative assessment. One surveyed pastor notes that his examination involves the answers and participation in class as well as memory work recitations of students throughout the year. Others listed the review questions built into each lesson, weekly Bible reading guides, service note sheets. Recall the pastor who uses four smaller tests across the two-year study. Another participant has a unit examination twelve times throughout his two-year cycle.

One pastor said that “the purpose of the examination is not really...to see the worthiness of a catechism student.... I already know their understanding of the basic doctrines in class study.” Another congregation summarized what they see as the issue:

We have gotten away from calling the public confession of their faith an "examination" because that is not what it is. It is not a pass or fail to see if they can be confirmed. We believe that the children don't need an "examination" to see if they can be confirmed. We believe they have shown their readiness for confirmation by 1- their participation in the classroom, 2- their preparation for their assignments and memory work, 3- knowledge of the material from their quizzes and tests. We now call our "examination" service "A service of questions and answers". It takes a lot of pressure off of the students and is now what it truly is: an opportunity for the young people to show what they believe and give a confession of their faith publicly via the questions and answers.

189. Earl, *Assessment*, 29.

190. Interviewee D.

191. Interviewee F.

192. Interviewee G.

193. Interviewee I.

In the interviews, I asked how well the examination methods used assessed the desired purposes of catechesis. Interviewee B pondered whether examination was even an assessment tool. He said that assessment of readiness for confirmation came throughout the class. He would not invite a student to be confirmed if he were not already confident. Over the course of study, he would note how seriously they took the class, their interest in Scriptural truths, and their grasp of core Christian doctrines.¹⁹⁴

Interviewee E shares the needed reminder that confirmation can be rightly seen as a milestone and an accomplishment in the student's education. Meanwhile, we maintain that this is merely another step in the Christian journey of lifelong learning.¹⁹⁵ We can use summative examinations while also emphasizing the need to keep growing after confirmation. For instance, Interviewee I had students mark up their Bibles throughout catechism. He co-taught students with their parents and encouraged them to do the study at home together so that spiritual growth became part of their family habits.¹⁹⁶

Closing Thoughts

“On a scale of 1 to 10, how important is examination? Maybe a 1 or 2.”¹⁹⁷ Interviewee D did not want to discourage this study. However, he made a fair point. If one views examination as an *examination*, an assessment or evaluation of knowledge at that point, it is not that valuable. As noted, many of the participants of this study concurred that the assessment happens over the

194. Interviewee B.

195. Interviewee E.

196. Interviewee I.

197. Interviewee D.

course of instruction and not in this final examination, whether public or private. By the end of catechism instruction, a pastor has a feel for which students are ready to be confirmed. However, by changing the purpose of examination to be a declaration of personal faith, preparedness for the Lord's Supper, and a desire to live out this faith, the practice of examination can be more flexible. As seen within this review of the Wisconsin Synod there is no conclusive best approach to examination, and yet the variety of methods studied can be used to achieve the desired goals. No congregation or pastor needs to be tied down by an approach that tries to be all things to all students.

Rather than force a one-size-fits-all examination on the inevitably varied students who come into a class, a church can establish the practice of offering diverse examinations that allow each child to demonstrate the faith which they have been taught. As congregations implement such an approach, they will need to discuss how to manage fairness from student to student and what level of educational rigor they want to maintain for their children. It is important that pastors maintain equal expectations as each child completes this step in their Christian learning. The way they demonstrate that learning may vary, but the information should not as the catechism class covers the same doctrine from our one source of truth, the Bible.

For Further Study

The study of this paper uncovered several other opportunities for further research, including the following questions.

- How is the form of instruction and/or examination connected to confirmation retention?

- One component this paper did not incorporate was interviews with confirmation students, current and recent. What reflections do they have on their examination experience? Did the form of examination affect how they learned? What would they change?
- Several pastors emphasized the importance of parental involvement in retention of students. How are congregations currently involving parents in catechism study? What suggestions might be made for further involvement in instruction and/or examination?

APPENDIX 1: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research. My name is Ryan Henning, a senior at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I am conducting this study as part of my senior thesis project (TH3300) on the topic of examination methods. This project is in partial fulfillment of my MDiv degree. You have been invited to participate in this research because I believe that you can provide valuable information on the topic. I will be asking you questions about how your examination methods assess a student’s readiness to become an active communicant member. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

Your involvement in this research will be shared in the following ways: Most information will be compiled as statistics to be analyzed. Some quotes may be directly referenced or paraphrased with your name withheld (The pastor of Church A said, “My examination method...”). If you wish to be named, please let me know.

If you agree to the audio recording of the interview, the recording will be deleted after the research project is completed.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all questions. You may fully withdraw from the interview at any time and information that you provided will not be reported in the research.

“By signing this consent form, I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study under the conditions described.”

Name : _____ Date: _____

“I furthermore agree to the audio recording of this interview, and understand that the recording will be deleted upon completion of the research project.” _____ (initials)

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INTERVIEWEES

Date:

Interviewee:

Again, thank you for your time and thoughts to contribute to this study! This is my (fluid) research question:

What examination method is most effective for assessing a youth's readiness to become an active communicant member of a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod congregation?

Please answer the following questions.

Questions

- How many students are in your current catechism class?
- What was the average size of previous confirmation classes? (as small as ____, up to ____)
- Does your church have a Lutheran Elementary School catechism class as well?
Y / N
 - o What's the split (LES vs. public)?
 - o Do you use the same examination with both groups?
- What textbook or curriculum do you use?
 - o Have you changed over the years?
- What is your current methodology of examination?
 - o Have you changed over the years?
 - o What strengths/weaknesses do you see to the method?
- In your own words, what is the purpose of catechesis?
 - o How well does your examination method assess whether that purpose has been met?
- Estimate how many confirmands from the last 4 years (2019-2022) attend church two or more times a month.
 - o How do you measure confirmand retention?

- How do you identify an “active member?”
- What signifies “readiness” to be an active adult member?

Other questions will come up through the course of discussion. I welcome whatever other thoughts you have to contribute regarding this topic.

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