

Finnish Confirmation Training: A Unique National Custom

Unparalleled elsewhere

As noted in a study by the Lutheran World Federation, *Confirmation Ministry Today* (1995), the confirmation training offered by the Lutheran Church of Finland is given pride of place among the churches' youth programmes. Compared to the confirmation training offered by other churches, it has one particularly significant characteristic: the rate of participation is the highest of any Lutheran country. The situation remains unchanged in the early years of the 21st century.

Attending confirmation training in Finland

The Finnish system of confirmation training had its beginnings in the eighteenth century. Originally linked with the confession of sins, it came to be known in Finnish as 'rippikoulu' (confession school). For the most part confirmation training is given in the year during which the young person reaches the age of fifteen. At present (in 2003) 89% of Finland's fifteen-year-olds attend confirmation training; this means approximately 55,000 youngsters each year. About 1,820 fifteen-year-olds, or 3–4% of the age cohort, join the church through confirmation training each year.

It must be borne in mind that only 84% of the population are actually members of the church, which means that this training is drawing in a considerable proportion of those who do not belong to any church and of those belonging to other churches.

In proportion to the size of the age group, confirmation training attendance has remained relatively steady for the past twenty years. In 1965 confirmation training was attended by 84.3% of the age group, and at the turn of the next decade the figures fluctuated around the 90% mark. They dropped off slightly in the early seventies, reaching a low water mark of 88.3% in 1975.

In the 1970s and 1980s a reform of the confirmation training scheme was being carried out in Finland, affecting both the form and the content. As the new scheme came into effect, participation rates began to rise: the figures jumped up to 90.5% in 1976, and remained above 90% throughout the eighties and nineties. At the present time (2003) participation still remains high at 89% of the age group.

Basic features of Finnish confirmation training

Local parishes are responsible for conducting the confirmation training, and the dioceses supervise and support them in this task. The basis of confirmation instruction within the church is the Confirmation Training Scheme approved by the Bishops' Conference in 2001. This new scheme is entitled LIFE – FAITH – PRAYER. The overall aim is that the young people, having received through holy baptism a faith in the triune God, should be reinforced in this faith; that they should grow in their love for their fellow human beings, and live a life of prayer in communion with the congregation.

In practice the goal of confirmation training is to lead young people in the direction of congregational fellowship and help them to grow as Christians. The subsections of the scheme give more detailed instructions for the realization of this general aim. The length of the training in terms of actual teaching time is set at 80 hours. One central feature of the theological and pedagogical paradigm of confirmation training is a Christian interpretation of life. During the period of confirmation training, young people's questions about life are discussed and answered in accordance with the frame of reference provided by the Christian faith. The central areas of instruction in the confirmation training scheme are the young people's own questions about life; the Christian faith as a whole and Christian responsibility; spirituality; worship and the musical life of the church; and familiarization with the parish as a whole.

In the further development of confirmation training, the main aim at present is to ensure that it should be seen as a basic task to be carried out by the entire parish. Confirmation training is thereby to be perceived as a period of time involving growth, learning, and active membership of the parish.

Confirmation training procedure

In the early nineties, a broad-ranging study of the current practice of confirmation training was carried out by Jarkko Seppälä, Professor of Religious Education at the University of Helsinki. The purpose of the study was to help the parishes to develop their work in this area. According to this study confirmation training had changed dramatically in the seventies and eighties. In the context of the present essay, however, it is not possible to give a comprehensive description of this process of change. I can only mention a few significant points concerning Finnish confirmation training.

The popularity of confirmation training in camp form

In church statistics, confirmation training programmes are classified according to the form of instruction. The mainstream trend in confirmation training is to conduct most of it in a camp. Other forms of confirmation training are evening classes during the school year and day classes during the summer vacation. The average confirmation class size is 25. The popularity of confirmation camps has increased over the past twenty years. In 1971 the proportion of confirmation programmes conducted in camp form was 36%; by 1989 it had gone up to 76.8%, by 2000 to 85%, and by 2002 to 90%.

Parishes arrange confirmation training in different forms according to their own judgement. The camps play a central role; the length of the camp stay ranges from five to twelve days.

The length of confirmation training varies from parish to parish. In some parishes the length of time from enrolment to confirmation can be half a year; in others it could be two or three months, including the camp period and participation in parish functions. The actual duration of confirmation training has not been thoroughly researched, so the above information is based on practical experience. The new scheme for confirmation training (2001) emphasizes the importance of the time before and after the confirmation camps.

Attempts are made to integrate confirmation training into the parishes' regular activities and their youth work, in which training continues after the confirmation itself through participation in church youth activities. However, the rate of such participation is far lower. In 1999, the regular youth activities of the parishes brought together 9% of 15- to 18-year-old Finns. Approximately 43% of those taking part are boys (in 2000). The training of group leaders for confirmation camps has in fact become the core of youth work in many parishes. In 2002,

approximately 21,500 young people took part in this training, and 13,200 of them worked as volunteers in confirmation camps and in other forms of confirmation training.

The central role of group leaders

One important aspect of confirmation training is the work of group leaders. They are utilized in confirmation training in nine out of ten parishes. Group leaders are most commonly involved in the running of confirmation camps. Most of the group leaders are aged sixteen or seventeen. In the last fifteen years the trend has been towards a lowering of the average age of group leaders. There are generally between five and seven trainees per group leader, and from five to seven leaders per camp.

Confirmation training also includes joint activities with the parents. These can take the form of a parents' evening, discussions of youth problems, consideration of the parents' own life situations, and visits to the confirmation classes. Contacts with parents have been constantly increasing. One of the new emphases of confirmation training in recent years has been the recognition of godparents during the training process. In many of Finland's parishes a new procedure is to include the godparents in the confirmation ceremony through the laying on of hands.

Strengths of confirmation training

On the basis of statistics we can say that Finnish confirmation training has successfully maintained its position as part of the religious practice of young people. In terms of content, too, it appears to be well received in young people's social and experiential worlds. This experience in turn is passed down to younger age cohorts. One strength of confirmation training is the camp system and the group leaders' role in this operation. Another significant factor is the position of confirmation training as part of Finnish youth culture. From the young people's perspective it is not seen as something with labels a person as religious: on the contrary, it is a self-evident part of going through one's teenage years.

Young people's experiences of confirmation training

Research has shown that the most significant positive factors associated with confirmation training are to be found in its social input - in other words, in those aspects which stress the importance of togetherness. These factors should be seen in the context of a pedagogical approach based on the principle of enjoyment. The average young person considers confirmation training to be a positive experience: a mere 4% are to some degree disappointed with it. The best form of confirmation training is considered to be the camp system, followed by the classes in city parishes. One significant observation is that boys in particular tend to report gaining more from confirmation training - including its purely religious aspects - than they had expected to.

Confirmation camps in particular make it possible to achieve goals of togetherness. The camp frequently offers young people their first opportunity to live in a peer group for an extended time, during which they have the opportunity to develop their skills in social interaction and relationships. Above all, young people expect confirmation training to provide them with new or deepened friendships, and these expectations are generally fulfilled.

Confirmation training also includes certain significant factors from the perspective of religious upbringing. Research findings suggest that confirmation training is not always able to help in making the Christian faith part of a young person's life. Young people still have difficulties

committing themselves through confirmation training to other parish functions. These are important challenges for the content and procedure of the renewed confirmation scheme and the advance training of parish workers in the next few years.

The most recent research on confirmation training (Kati Niemelä 2002, Hyvä rippikoulu) supports what has been said above. The young people who took part in confirmation training attached particular importance to the social aspects of the training and to the rights that they obtain as a result of confirmation. Their religious expectations were relatively few, but they nevertheless indicated that the training had been of religious significance to them.

A part of Finnish youth culture

In her doctoral dissertation concerning young people from Helsinki, Helena Helve showed how confirmation training was part of Finnish youth culture. Young people felt that attending confirmation training was a self-evident thing to do. Of the fourteen-year-olds who participated in the survey, none had even considered any other option. Confirmation training is most commonly associated with the process of young people becoming adults, and is seen in this context as a standard rite of passage. The process of young people establishing their adult identities, however, is not as clear these days as it was for previous generations. For this reason confirmation training is no longer so obvious a transition into adulthood. According to Helve's research its religious significance also seems to be quite minor.

The number of young people who join the church through confirmation training also tells us something about its significance among young people. Regarding this group, however, no studies have been carried out as to whether they went through the process for the sake of 'custom', or whether there are some other, genuinely religious factors involved. The threshold for participation in youth work after confirmation training is higher, and a stronger commitment seems to be required. An exception here is the training of group leaders for subsequent confirmation camps: up to a half of those confirmed continue into this training.

Another strength of confirmation training is that parish workers of all categories are involved in the process: pastors, youth leaders, church musicians, and diaconal workers. This is significant in terms of the young people's social contacts with members of the parish staff. At the same time it displays the way in which the Lutheran Church of Finland functions as a folk church.

One background factor deserving to be mentioned here is the church's other educational work, together with religious upbringing in day-care and confessional religious education at school. When they start their confirmation training, young people already have some basic background in the Christian faith and some of them also have a firm set of Christian attitudes and values which are apparently strengthened through the process of confirmation training.

Yet another significant practical factor needs to be mentioned concerning the development of Finland's confirmation camps. In the seventies and eighties, the church's own educational work came to be recognized as being of vital importance, and the coinciding years of economic growth enabled the parishes to build and expand their network of campgrounds and conference centres. It thus became possible to conduct camp-style confirmation training in the church's own facilities.

Many of the parents of today's youngsters belong themselves to the first generation of Finnish 'confirmation campers', and on the basis of their own experiences they place a high value on the positive experiences which this training offers. In terms of the educational work of the church it is important to understand that the parents are in a key position in upholding the tradition of confirmation training. An old Lutheran wisdom says that as a channel of Christian tradition, the home is the most important and effective 'preacher'.