



Konfirmandenarbeit  
erforschen und gestalten

Researching and Developing  
Confirmation Work

*Edited by Jens Dechow, Wolfgang Ilg  
Friedrich Schweitzer and Henrik Simojoki*

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# DEVELOPING CONFIRMATION WORK IN EUROPE

Empirical Findings and Perspectives  
for Post-Pandemic Times  
The Third International Study

Wolfgang Ilg, Manuela Hees, Eveliina Hellas,  
Linn Sæbø Rystad, Thomas Schlag and  
Henrik Simojoki (eds.)



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## Preface

»A cord of three strands is not quickly broken« – what this passage from Ecclesiastes 4:12 conveys about the relationships between people can also apply in a figurative way to the present research project: The third international study on confirmation work in Europe was so severely challenged by the unexpected event of the COVID-19 pandemic that it was unclear whether the project, which aimed to deliver a large scale study on the reality of confirmation work in several European countries, could be accomplished. In presenting the results of that successful study, this book demonstrates the resilience of those responsible for delivering confirmation work in local parishes and the determination of the research team, who shared a number of ups and downs along the way. Despite these challenges, we managed to not only complete the empirical surveys, but also to introduce a new quality model and digital feedback tool to the field of confirmation work. The positive experience of two former studies served as a solid foundation, even in the troubled times of the third study. As in the second study, researchers from Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland worked together in the preparation and interpretation of the study. As Austria and Denmark were unable to collect relevant samples in the study due to the difficult conditions, their contribution is not based on a common dataset this time. Nevertheless, the reports and insights they share in this book represent valued strands of the common cord.

The appearance of this book marks more than 17 years since the first cooperation for a joint study on confirmation work in Europe began. The 'International Network for Research and Development of Confirmation and Christian Youth Work', founded in 2007, has provided the basis for the trustful cooperation between the researchers involved. After the first study in 2007/08, the second study was conducted only five years later (2012/13), including an extended phase with a survey conducted in 2015 among adolescents two years after their confirmation ceremony. Following the last joint publication in 2017, discussions began regarding a potential third study, and raising the question of what its focus could be and what additional value it could provide. The leader of the first two projects, Friedrich Schweitzer (Tübingen, Germany), initiated a conference in Berlin in 2018 with European researchers and church representatives to discuss ideas and areas for further research. During this meeting it became clear that a third study focused on feedback-driven quality development would provide tremendous value. Half a year later, at a meeting in Berlin in spring

2019, the third project was given the green light. As in the earlier studies, researchers planned to meet twice a year in different countries to exchange ideas and push the study forward. A series of working meetings began in December 2019 in Vienna. None of the team members could have guessed at that point in time that the Vienna meeting would be the last physical meeting in the project for several years. With the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 any travel plans for joint meetings had to be cancelled. Instead of the well-established physical meetings the research team usually held, it moved its meetings online. Altogether, 14 half-day meetings took place on Zoom to adapt existing plans to the new situation, in addition to discussing the quality model, developing the questionnaires and interpreting the results. In December 2022, a hybrid meeting took place in Helsinki with half of the research team taking part physically and half of the team in a digital way. Only with meetings in Budapest in May 2023 and the presentation of the results at a conference in Berlin in March 2024 could the series of physical meetings resume for finalising the study. These meetings – as well as the study itself – were supported and facilitated by the local churches and deepened the ecumenical spirit, which was a defining experience throughout the project.

With the start of the third study, the nestor of the previous studies, Friedrich Schweitzer, passed the reins into younger hands: The central team of the present study was formed by Henrik Simojoki (Berlin) and Wolfgang Ilg (Ludwigsburg), with Jannika Alber and later Manuela Hees as the academic coordinators for all practical issues. As in the earlier studies, the Comenius Institute in Germany provided organisational and financial support. In all the countries involved, many universities, research groups, churches and specialised institutes laid the foundation for the successful work presented in this book. Information about the authors of this study can be found in the appendix on pp. 421. In the following, the teams of the countries and main sponsors are listed (cf. the information on publication support in the imprint):

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## 18 | Preface

As the editorial team we are glad about the long-lasting cooperation with the Gütersloher Verlagshaus in the present book series and want to thank Diedrich Steen who has been the reliable contact person at the publishing house throughout the 14 books published. We would also like to thank two other key persons: Benedikt von Uslar-Gleichen prepared the statistical charts. Francine Boulanger supported our project as a language proof-reader. We are very thankful for the cooperation with all the persons mentioned here – including many persons who are not mentioned but contributed to the third study and the present book. On [www.confirmation-research.eu](http://www.confirmation-research.eu) we will present additional material on the project and provide the digital version of this book.

A cord of three studies in the field of confirmation work provides a substantial thread which can serve as a holding rope for those who develop this educational field into the future. May the present book contribute to the quality development of confirmation work and inspire researchers and practitioners!

Ludwigsburg / Helsinki / Oslo / Zürich / Berlin, May 2024

The editorial team

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## I. STARTING POINTS

## 1 Introduction

HENRIK SIMOJOKI, THOMAS SCHLAG, MANUELA HEES, EVELIINA HELLAS,  
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This volume presents and reflects on the results of the third European study on confirmation work. The third study builds on the first study which was conducted in 2007/08 (Schweitzer, Ilg & Simojoki, 2010) and the second study which was carried out five years later in 2012/13 (Schweitzer, Niemelä, Schlag & Simojoki 2015), which also included a longitudinal follow-up survey (Schweitzer, Schlag, Simojoki, Tervo-Niemelä, & Ilg 2017). The book at hand thus continues a long-term research process which, in its continuity, its scale and the scope of its international-comparative design, is unparalleled in the field of religion-related youth research. The nine countries involved in the third study were the same countries as in the second study: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland. However, the term »third study« could also imply that this book merely continues what was already laid out in the two previous studies. This might prompt the question: Where's the innovation?

This introduction provides an answer to that question. First, the perspective of quality development which guides this volume is conceptually unfolded, with a specific focus on feedback, digital media and learning. Then, the research project is contextualised: The two surveys were mainly conducted in autumn 2021 and spring 2022 – at a time that was still dominated by the COVID-19-pandemic and the protective measures it necessitated (1.2). By exploring how the participating adolescents perceived and experienced their confirmation time in the exceptional situation of the pandemic, the study contributes substantially to pandemic-related research in practical theology and youth research. Against this background, the wider horizon of the study is highlighted: The studies on confirmation work are part of the attempt to establish international research and cooperation in the field of non-formal religious education (1.3).

### 1.1 Quality Development in Confirmation Work

Empirical research on confirmation work is not carried out for its own sake. Rather, it aims to understand and improve the quality of this specific field of church work (Niemelä, 2008, pp. 5–41; Pettersson, 2009; Simojoki, Ilg, Schlag

& Schweitzer, 2018, pp. 29–44). By surveying perceptions and experiences, structures and activities, the first two international studies on confirmation work strived to contribute to the further development of confirmation work. Moreover, the studies have had a tangible effect on the practice of confirmation work in the participating countries. Examples of this include the growing importance of camps and outings or the involvement of young volunteers, the development of teaching and learning material, newly designed training and further education programmes as well as, more generally, a youth-oriented approach to confirmation work. However, the implicit reference to quality and quality development has not yet been systematically elaborated in the studies on confirmation work.

Hence, the third nationwide surveys focus on the question of how quality in confirmation work can be conceptualised, operationalised based on criteria and improved. In an extensive international dialogue process, a quality model was developed, in which ten dimensions of quality were defined, substantiated by indicators and illustrated by exemplary items of the study (chapter 4).

On this basis, the international study advocated feedback as a medium of quality development that has been somewhat neglected in the theory and practice of confirmation work to date (chapter 4). Elaborated and popularised by John Hattie (2009; Hattie & Clarke, 2019) in particular, the feedback concept has been discussed intensively in the context of school education for some time, especially with regard to the experience of learners. Pupils should be encouraged and empowered to communicate their perspectives on the effectiveness of learning processes to their teachers and thus actively influence the shape and quality of school lessons.

When this concept is transferred to confirmation work as a field of non-formal education, the aspects of participation and empowerment gain additional weight (Ord, 2016). In addition, the respective chapter 5 shows that there are also theological reasons to foster a feedback culture in confirmation work. By encouraging, empowering and enabling the participating young people to contribute with their views and talents, feedback can be seen as a way of enacting the basic Christian idea of the priesthood of all believers.

This is where empirical research and quality development come particularly close together since feedback ideally should also be obtained in the quantitative form of standardised questionnaires to complement oral feedback in dialogue with the confirmands. For this purpose, the digital feedback tool i-konf was developed in connection with the third study ([www.i-konf.eu](http://www.i-konf.eu)). The multifunctional online tool enables those responsible for confirmation work to obtain feedback from their confirmands quickly and easily via smartphones. Through this process, a bridge is built between quantitative empirical research and quality development »on site«. However, the function of the i-konf tool in the third

study goes even further: While the previous surveys were conducted in the »traditional« way of printed-out questionnaires, the data collection for the third study was carried out via i-konf, which made participation in the study more accessible for most, but also more difficult for some others.

The study also breaks new ground by highlighting two issues that are important for quality development and which are examined in depth here for the first time. While the first two studies included some learning-related items, for example on relevance and participation, the pedagogical quality of the confirmation work is now systematically addressed, with »agency« as the central concept (chapter 20). The focus is on the confirmands' view of the learning processes in confirmation time. Among others, the following new questions were added: Were the contents and topics in the learning units explained well? Did the confirmands have enough opportunities to express their opinions? Did they experience a variety of learning methods? Were they challenged in their thinking? Was there often unrest and disruption?

The second focus addresses the challenges and potential of the »digital condition« (Stalder, 2018). Since confirmation work is, like other forms of non-formal education, mainly characterised by in-person interaction and embodied community experiences (Simojoki, 2019), the previous studies hardly included any references to digitalisation and the use of digital media in confirmation work. Given the fundamental importance of digital communication for today's young generation, it was time to pay more attention to this issue based on recent research (Ojala, 2020). To this end, a distinction was made between two perspectives on digitalisation that are relevant for religious education (Simojoki, 2023b): One accentuates the fundamental social, political and economic, but above all cultural and religious transformations that have accompanied the increasing influence of digital technologies and which have had a profound impact on how today's young people relate to themselves and the people and world around them. The other explores the learning potential of digital media and strives to develop digital learning formats adequate to suitable for confirmation work.

The present study interweaves these two perspectives – confirmation work in the »digital condition« and digital learning in confirmation work. The broader horizon was operationalised by asking the confirmands about the role of digital media in their life, whether online religion should be addressed in confirmation work, how much their experiences with social media were issued and whether the use of mobile phones created any conflicts. Other items address the use of digital media by the full-time workers and volunteers. Furthermore, the importance of digital media for group communication during confirmation time is emphasised. The forms of digital learning are also analysed, from online Bibles and gaming to creative work with social media.

Only later in the study was an item added that would have seemed unrealistic in the planning phase of the project: »I experienced forms of online teaching/learning.« This item refers to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, which in many countries made online communication a sheer necessity. The global pandemic not only affected confirmation work to the core but also profoundly changed the conditions and objectives of the third study.

## 1.2 Confirmation Work in the Pandemic

In the years 2020 to 2022, confirmation work took place under conditions that those responsible for this field of Protestant youth work and especially the young people taking part would have found unimaginable before the outbreak of the COVID-19-pandemic. In the first year of the pandemic in particular, confirmation work was hit with full force by the protective measures made necessary by the dramatic increase and consecutive waves of new infections. However, as the country reports in this study show, the protective measures related to the pandemic varied considerably between the individual countries. Corresponding with the political strategies of the respective governments (Lynggaard, Kluth & Jensen, 2023), Sweden had the most lenient approach to the pandemic and there were also comparatively few restrictions in Switzerland. In many other countries, confirmation work was affected much harder by protective regulations. In these countries, the gradual normalisation of school lessons was prioritised in educational policy, while pandemic-related contact restrictions for non-formal education remained in force for longer and were comparatively strict. They affected confirmation work to its core, as the shape of this field of activity had changed fundamentally in recent decades, in the sense that experiences of personal encounters and tangible community have become the core profile of this educational programme. In many contexts, weekly afternoon lessons have long been supplemented by camps, outings, internships and active parental work. The traditional pastoral one-person approach has more and more given way to a team-oriented structure in which young volunteers play a key role. While the catechetical confirmation classes of the past were implicitly based on the school model, nowadays methods and activities, strongly shaped by youth work, dominate. Against this backdrop, it is obvious that confirmation work lost some of its key strengths due to the restrictions on gatherings and contact during the pandemic: Camps had to be cancelled in many cases. Group interaction was hindered by social distancing and the obligation to wear masks. In many parishes, the required switch to online teaching was difficult to manage because, on the one hand, the necessary digital

infrastructure had yet to be established, and, on the other hand, the limitations of video conferencing were more noticeable in confirmation work as an experience-oriented and community-driven field of non-formal education. In addition, full-time staff already had to manage pandemic-related risks in wider parish work, meaning that fewer time resources were available when more would have been necessary. Especially in the first year of the pandemic, confirmation services and festivities had to be postponed. All in all, it is no exaggeration to describe the COVID-19 pandemic as the biggest disruption of confirmation work since the Second World War in most of the countries.

In view of this exceptional situation, the question arises as to how confirmation work has coped with the manifold challenges of the pandemic period. This volume takes a multi-perspective approach to this question, covering a variety of aspects and perspectives. It presents one of the few quantitative-empirical youth studies that could be conducted during the pandemic. In the context of European churches too, most reflections on the »lessons of the pandemic« are not grounded in empirical research. This is, however, not surprising, bearing in mind how difficult it was to conduct empirical surveys under pandemic conditions. Not only was there often a lack of activity or accessibility in the practical contexts to be researched, but the objectives guiding this research could no longer be maintained due to the unusual circumstances, as was the case, for example, for international standardised assessments of educational attainment. Additionally, many parishes may have considered it unfair to expose practitioners, who were already working at the limits of their capacity, to the additional demands of a survey.

It is therefore all the more commendable that there have been high-profile initiatives that have empirically explored the conditions, experiences and coping strategies of church work during the global pandemic. Among these studies, the international-ecumenical research project »Churches Online in Times of Corona« (CONTOC) stands out due to its scope and international orientation (Schlag et al., 2023). Interestingly, the CONTOC study, which surveyed digital practices in various fields of church activity such as worship, pastoral care, diaconal work and also formal and non-formal education, clearly shows that in the first phase of the pandemic, educational programmes in particular tended to be the most affected. In many parishes, for quite a while, these programmes were either not held at all or only very selectively. Non-formal programmes in particular were especially restricted, with many programmes simply no longer taking place. The CONTOC study shows, from the providers' perspective, how much workers suffered from the breakdown of relationships, not least with the children and young people in the educational programmes for which they were responsible. At the same time, however, it is also evident that in some parishes this situation was proactively addressed wherever possi-



ble by the responsible church staff. Thus, there were obviously workers and parishes in which educational work was more severely impaired by the protective measures and others that coped better with the challenges of the pandemic situation. This fact of a simultaneous standstill on the one hand and the resumption of confirmation work as quickly as possible is also indirectly reflected in the results of our own research.

The third study on confirmation work in Europe and the CONTOC study therefore complement each other in a fruitful way. While the CONTOC study focuses on pastoral work in its entirety and analyses it from the perspective of digital media communication, the present study focuses on the specific field of confirmation work but addresses it comprehensively. Like in the CONTOC study, this research project also obtains the perspectives of the workers, including volunteers. However, its main emphasis is on the expectations, perceptions and experiences of the confirmands. The focus therefore shifts from the provider perspective to the participant perspective.

The timing of the surveys is important for classifying the results: in most of the participating countries, the first survey ( $t_1$ ) took place in autumn 2021 and the second ( $t_2$ ) before confirmations took place in spring or early summer 2022. Even though the number of COVID-19 cases rose during the fourth and fifth wave in fall 2021 and winter 2021/22, the months before the second survey were characterised by a gradual normalisation.

With regard to the pandemic, two lines of enquiry need to be distinguished: First, the effects of the pandemic situation on the young people's willingness and enthusiasm to participate in confirmation time and, above all, on how their experiences are analysed (chapter 15). The range of questions is broad: How did the pandemic affect the decision to take part? How do the young people assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their confirmation time? Did they feel connected to others in the group and did staff regularly communicate with them? Did they feel uncomfortable when meeting physically? Were their questions and concerns regarding the pandemic issued? Did the discussions and activities during confirmation help them to cope with the pandemic situation? Were they worried about whether and how their confirmation could take place? And finally: Did the workers their best to ensure them to have a good confirmation time?

However, the significance of the COVID-19 pandemic for data collection and analysis goes much further. In short, all the results of the study must be interpreted against the background of the pandemic situation. The study replicates many items that were already included in the first and second study: Once again, the motivations and aims (chapter 16), the experiences and the satisfaction (chapter 17) and the attitudes and beliefs (chapter 19) of the confirmands were surveyed and interpreted. However, in view of the fundamentally changed

contextual conditions, longitudinal comparisons with the previous studies can only be made with restrictions.

The need to contextualise the empirical findings of this study also arises from the fact that the pandemic situation is also noticeable in the sample. Although the challenging circumstances resulted in significantly lower response rates than in previous studies, the total number of questionnaires received ( $t_1$ : 9621 confirmands and 1609 workers;  $t_2$ : 6171 confirmands and 870 workers) is still considerable. However, as will become clear in the next chapter on the research design and the methodology (chapter 2) the sample is less balanced than in the earlier studies. In addition, even in some of the countries with a high number of respondents, certain distortions must be expected. It is to be assumed that the parishes' decision to participate in the study was influenced by their experiences in dealing with the pandemic. In particular, parishes where confirmation was more severely impaired by the protective measures have tended against participation. As a result, parishes that coped better with the challenges of the pandemic situation are disproportionately represented in the sample. Such distortions are unavoidable due to the exceptional circumstances but must be communicated transparently and kept in mind when interpreting the data.

### 1.3 The European Horizon

In academia, the relevance of international comparative research is generally accepted. In the context of this study, the benefit of such research for developing confirmation work needs to be highlighted (on the following cf. Ilg, Simojoki & Schweitzer, 2022, pp. 172–173).

First, international-comparative research broadens the view on confirmation work. Traditionally, the perspective on this program for youth was limited to the respective situation in an individual country, mirroring, among others, the historically close relationship between the Protestant churches and the state in many European majority contexts. Given the increasing influence of globalisation (Simojoki, 2023a; Kim, Osmer & Schweitzer, 2018) and Europeanisation (Schreiner, 2012), it is important to utilise international comparative perspectives for developing confirmation work.

Another reason for international comparative research in confirmation work has to do with the Christian idea of ecumene. This idea implies the need, among others, to bring different churches closer together through greater mutual knowledge and shared understanding. While this has mostly been under-

stood in terms of doctrinal issues, cooperative empirical research entails important potentials for mutual understanding as well.

Moreover, the studies on confirmation work have contributed to an international knowledge exchange (on this cf. Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2021) in practical theology and religious education. In this respect, they build upon earlier exchanges and transfers in this field. A prominent example of this transfer are confirmation camps. Originating in Finnish and Swedish confirmation work, such camps have become an essential part of confirmation work in many other countries. However, such processes of knowledge transfer should also be accompanied by historical-hermeneutical and empirical research. For example, the studies on confirmation work prove that the length of camps has a positive impact on overall satisfaction, religious attitudes and religious practice, commitment to the church and to the perceived relevance of confirmation work (Niemelä, 2010, p. 252; Maaß & Simojoki, 2015, pp. 132–133).

In many respects, comparative research helps to identify and to tackle overarching specific challenges. For the churches responsible for confirmation work, the challenge posed by the decreasing number of participants is particularly pressing. Therefore, this study pays special attention to the development of the participation rates in the nine countries that are involved in this study (chapter 3). The decline in participation figures is ongoing in all countries, despite the high overall satisfaction of young people with their confirmation time (Maaß & Simojoki, 2015, pp. 125–128), as already demonstrated in the first two studies. Obviously, this decrease is closely linked to comprehensive processes of secularisation and pluralisation as well as the growing heterogeneity of European societies. The present study responds to this with two research foci: On the one hand, it analyses the collected data in terms of gender diversity (chapter 21), on the other hand it examines the attitudes and experiences of young people who were not baptised at the beginning of their confirmation time or »distanced« in a certain sense (chapter 22)

While international-comparative research broadens the horizon, it also sharpens the understanding of both the contextual nature of the developments in one's own context as well as in other contexts. In the present study, contextual factors come into play in a special way. Firstly, the different strategies for dealing with the pandemic in the countries involved must be considered when interpreting the data. Secondly, the samples are more heterogeneous than in previous studies, also due to the pandemic. In two of the participating countries, it was not possible to obtain sufficiently reliable data. This book recognises the increased importance of contextual factors by deliberately devoting a lot of space to country-specific developments and results (part III). To facilitate the identification of similarities and differences, the nine country chapters are structured analogously. Typically, an introduction is followed by an overview

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of the collected data, on the basis of which exemplary results are presented and analysed. Then, further research on confirmation work in the respective country is reported. The chapters conclude with an outlook on current challenges and prospects for the future.

## 2 Research Design and Methodology

WOLFGANG ILG AND MANUELA HEES

### 2.1 Design of the Study

To allow for comparisons with the first and second study, surveys in the third study followed the same design. The quantitative approach aimed to capture a representative sample of parishes in every participating country. Participating parishes distributed questionnaires at two points in time to all confirmands and all workers, including any volunteers who participated at least three times during that confirmation year. Table 1 presents the samples for the seven countries that managed to complete the survey.

Table 1: Sample Sizes of the Countries Involved in the Study

Confirmands	Total	Germany	Switzer-land	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Hungary	Poland: only t <sub>1</sub>
t <sub>1</sub>	9621	3439	1154	2896	926	773	295	138
t <sub>2</sub>	6171	2534	853	2019	144	457	164	
Matching rate (base: t <sub>2</sub> )	48%	47%	59%	50%	47%	36%	11%	
Workers	Total	Germany	Switzer-land	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Hungary	Poland: no workers
t <sub>1</sub>	1609	837	201	78	29	420	44	
t <sub>2</sub>	870	504	132	52	2	156	24	
Matching rate (base: t <sub>2</sub> )	51%	53%	61%	29%	0%	52%	0%	
Leaders (only 1 per parish)	Total	Germany	Switzer-land	Finland	Norway: no leaders	Sweden	Hungary	Poland: no leaders
t <sub>2</sub>	478	273	103	18	0	60	24	

In Austria and Denmark, it was not possible to gather reliable samples for the international study.

In some countries the number of participating parishes is bigger than the number of leaders' questionnaires, as some parishes didn't fill out the questionnaire from the leader.

As Table 1 illustrates, the international study is a large-scale study with more than 9000 European confirmands responding to questionnaires in  $t_1$  and more than 6000 in  $t_2$ . Compared with the earlier studies, including the second study, in which more than 19000 confirmands participated, these numbers are lower than expected. The context of the pandemic made it much more difficult to convince parishes to participate in the surveys, as they struggled very much to continue confirmation work amid frequently changing pandemic regulations (cf. chapter 15 for effects of the pandemic from the perspective of the confirmands). The pandemic presented bigger challenges and limitations than any faced in the two previous studies: As mentioned above, Austria and Denmark were not able to conduct the study as planned, therefore their data are not part of the international data collection presented in the comparative chapters of this book. Nevertheless, this book includes individual chapters for these countries based on a small amount of data from the third study, in the case of Austria, or from other empirical sources in the case of Denmark. In Poland it was only possible to complete the  $t_1$ -survey with confirmands.

In most of the countries, the parishes which participated in the study don't resemble the overall makeup of parishes in the respective countries in a representative way, especially since parishes that dealt comparatively well with the restrictions of the pandemic were more willing and able to complete the study. The use of a new online tool for the survey also presented an additional hurdle. Since the third study cannot claim to be representative, no weighting of the data was introduced. The results of the countries and the results for the total were computed by analysing the complete datasets with every confirmand who filled in a questionnaire accounting for the same weight.

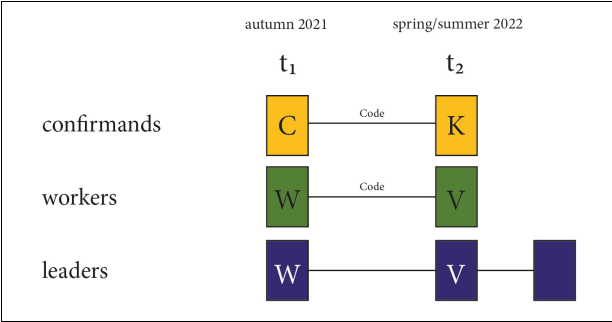
Considering the enormous challenges of the pandemic, it can be seen as an achievement that the third study could be finalised at all. These challenges have consequences for working with the data in this book: The authors decided to present only a few international comparisons. Where countries are compared, only those countries which have a relevant number of questionnaires for the respective topic are included. As the consequences of the pandemic, both for confirmation work and for the realisation of the study, varied by country, the individual country reports have received more attention in this book. Here the results are embedded in the specific situation.

Despite these methodological limitations, the third study presents very interesting data from a large variety of parishes reflecting the practice of confirmation work in the last phase of the pandemic in Europe.

2.2 Questionnaires and Procedures

As in the previous studies, questionnaires were filled in at two points of time by the confirmands and by the workers. The leaders (those individuals in charge of local confirmation work) filled in workers' questionnaires in addition to some structural information. Figure 1 shows the design of the study.

Figure 1: Design of the Third Study on Confirmation Work



Parents' questionnaires were added only in an additional study in Switzerland.

The survey was conducted at two points in time after initial contact with the parishes in spring 2021:

- t<sub>1</sub>: In September / October 2021, workers and confirmands received the first questionnaire. For the workers, the focus was on potential goals in confirmation work. Confirmands were mainly asked about their motivation to participate and their expectations, as well as their attitudes towards church and faith.
- t<sub>2</sub>: The second survey date was a few weeks before confirmation ceremonies were scheduled in 2022, so either in spring or early summer 2022, depending on the parish and country. In this second survey, the young people and workers were asked about their experience in the intervening time. Additionally, key information was collected from the main responsible persons (»leaders«) in an extra questionnaire.

The surveys were carried out during a confirmation meeting and usually took about 15 minutes to complete. The feedback tool i-konf provides internet links and QR codes so that the survey is accessible on any mobile device, including smartphones and tablets. It was also possible to print the questionnaires and to type the answers into the i-konf tool manually afterwards. Filling in the questionnaires was voluntary. It can be assumed that most confirmands in a group

completed the survey, although there are no exact numbers on this. In accordance with data protection regulations, parents had to give written consent for confirmands to participate in the survey, depending on the age of the confirmands. The entire process was subject to a data protection and ethics concept that was reviewed by the ethics committee of the Protestant University of Applied Sciences in Ludwigsburg, which can be found at [www.i-konf.eu](http://www.i-konf.eu) (which now includes a modified form of the original survey so that parishes can collect this information independently).

The data collection was done in most of the countries via the online i-konf tool, with only Sweden opting to use a separate online tool. As the pandemic caused different levels of turbulence to the research activities in different countries, the methodology used had to adapt to country specific settings, including the point in time where data collection took place. The country chapters in this book provide more detailed information on the individual processes of conducting the survey in each country. Additionally, in most of the participating countries, books on their study are available in the respective language of that country, which include a detailed report on methodology, including an estimation about a possible bias in the sample due to the COVID-19 situation.

The item-names that are used for the interpretation of the data, consist of two letters and a two-digit number, e. g. CE01. These names were used identically in all three studies, so that comparisons of the results are easily facilitated. The first letter indicates the questionnaire (cf. Figure 1):

C = confirmands $t_1$	K = confirmands $t_2$
W = workers $t_1$	V = workers $t_2$

The second letter of the item-name indicates the section within the questionnaire. Sections with the same second letter in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  correspond with each other, e. g. CE01 corresponds with KE01. The section-letters between confirmands and workers, however, are independent from each other.

Throughout this book the wording of the items is presented in English. However, the questionnaires were written and completed in the respective national language(s) of each country. This means that nobody actually used the English questionnaire. As countries like Sweden and Norway have several official languages, items were translated into 15 languages altogether. The i-konf tool was also provided in all these languages. In order to ensure a coherent way of reporting the data, the research group made a number of linguistic decisions. For example, we consistently use »confirmation time« to describe the whole of the process and the term »ministers« to mean pastors and other practicing theologians. These words were translated into the terms that are most commonly used in the respective languages.

In line with the previous studies, the questionnaires are predominantly



quantitative in nature: respondents are usually given options on a seven-point scale, where 5, 6 and 7 are interpreted as approval or »percentage yes« in this book. While the quantitative methodology can provide a broad picture of the views of a large number of confirmands, it is less suitable for emphasising individual attitudes and perceptions. The free texts from the questionnaires offer qualitative data which can at least provide some clues in this regard. Those texts are mainly used in the individual country chapters, as the original language and context plays an important role in understanding this kind of individual feedback.

All items in the study are documented in the appendix from p. 388. The structure of the questionnaires can be found in the (shortened) questionnaires provided at [www.i-konf.eu](http://www.i-konf.eu). General information on the study and its background is presented on [www.confirmation-research.eu](http://www.confirmation-research.eu).

### 2.3 Matching Data

Respondents were asked for an anonymous code at both surveys so that the answers from  $t_1$  could be individually matched with those from  $t_2$ . The codes like RN02 were generated in the following way: »Third letter of your first name; third letter of your mother's first name, your month of birth as a number (e.g. February = 02)«. This matching was possible for 48 % of the confirmands'  $t_2$  questionnaires and for 51 % of the workers'  $t_2$  questionnaires (cf. Table 1 on p. 29). The data collected can also be assigned to the respective parishes. The anonymity of both the individual respondents and the parishes was guaranteed.

Results from  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  are compared at various points in the book. From a methodological point of view, a preliminary remark is necessary here: As shown above, the sample size at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  is not identical. A comparison of  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  therefore contains data from samples that differ to a certain degree. If data trends were to be presented very precisely, only data for the confirmands (or workers) who completed questionnaires at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , and who could be clearly matched, would be included. Within this »matched sample«, the results for  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  would be slightly different from the overall sample, which could be confusing for the reader. In this book, therefore, when comparing the results of  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , the data of the complete samples are shown. If the results of the matched sample deviate significantly from this, this is noted and explained. However, where trends during confirmation time are analysed in greater detail, this analysis is based exclusively on the matched cases, i.e. on a smaller but identical group in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ . In most cases, the differences between the full data and »matched only« data are subtle. Readers can understand trends in the

matched sample by looking in the appendix, which includes descriptive data of the »difference variables« for each item and the questions asked at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  (cf. pp. 401–402 and 412–413). As an example, item DIFF\_CE09 is calculated from the difference between the value of CE09 and KE09, which both have the same wording: »I believe in God«. A positive mean value of the DIFF variable (in this example, DIFF\_CE09= 0.20) therefore indicates that the values in the matched sample increased on average between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  by 0.20. Some chapters, especially chapter 19 on religiosity, include detailed analyses of the statistics of the DIFF variables explaining any differences in how the individual developments are distributed.

When making comparisons between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ , it is important to understand that there are two kinds of correspondence between  $t_1$  and  $t_2$ :

- Items concerning personal attitudes towards faith and church have exactly the same wording in  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  as is the case with the example of CE09/KE09 »I believe in God«. The difference between the results at  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  indicates a change of attitude during confirmation time. These items can be found mainly in sections CE/KE, CF/KF, CG/KG and CH/KH.
- Other items describe an expectation at  $t_1$ , like »During the time of my confirmation training it is important for me that my questions concerning faith will play a role« (CK11). At ( $t_2$ ), the corresponding item describes an experience: »During the time of my confirmation training my questions concerning faith were addressed« (KK11). These items can be found mainly in CB/KB and CK/KK for the confirmands and WB/VB, WC/VC and WD/VD for the workers. It is noteworthy that not every expectation is matched with a respective experience and vice versa.

## 2.4 Indexes

Indexes are computed to facilitate analyses and comparisons and to improve the validity of interpretations. The indexes were created by using factor analysis (Varimax with rotation). They are computed as the mean values of all the items enclosed in the index. Only indexes with Cronbach's alpha > 0.7 for the whole dataset and additionally with Cronbach's alpha > 0.6 in each of the participating countries were used. The index-name starts with an »i«, followed by two letters which indicate the relevant item-section and a number (e.g., iCB1). To avoid confusion with indexes from earlier studies (iCB1, iCB2 ...), all newly defined indexes have a two-digit-number (like iCB11). The following indexes have been defined below, in addition to those used in some individual chapters for specific analyses.

**iCB11: Religious motives ( $t_1$ )**

- CB01: to learn more about God and faith.
- CB02: to experience community in the confirmation group.
- CB03: to come to my own decision about my faith in God.

**iKB11: Religious experiences ( $t_2$ )**

- KB01: I have learnt more about God and faith.
- KB02: I have experienced good community in the confirmation group.
- KB03: I have been enabled to come to my own decision about my faith.

**iCL1: Interest in conduct of life ( $t_1$ )**

- CL08: Justice and responsibility for others
- CL09: Friendship
- CL11: The meaning of life

**iCL12: Interest in the Christian tradition ( $t_1$ )**

- CL01: Baptism
- CL02: The Lord's Supper
- CL05: Jesus Christ
- CL06: The Bible
- CL22: God
- CL30: Death and Resurrection
- CL31: Holy Spirit

**iKN3: Satisfaction ( $t_2$ )**

- KN01: The whole confirmation time
- KN03: Content/topics of lessons in confirmation work
- KN07: Minister/person primarily responsible for confirmation work
- KN08: Other teachers/workers
- KN10: Church services
- KN11: Camp(s)
- KN14: Music, songs and singing
- KN20: Working methods (for example, working with biblical texts, group work etc.)

**iKU1: learning in confirmation time ( $t_2$ )**

- KB01: I have learnt more about God and faith.
- KB03: I have been enabled to come to my own decision about my faith.
- KB04: I have made an important step in growing up.
- KG08: I am interested in taking part in a Christian youth group after confirmation.

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- KK44: I have experienced that my commitment to other people is important.
- KK45: I have become (more) conscious of my responsibility for ecological problems.
- KK73: During confirmation training I learned many things that were new for me.
- KU05: I was challenged in my thinking.

The values of Cronbach's alpha for the indexes are specified in Table 2.

Table 2: Cronbach's Alpha for Indexes for all Countries

country	iCB11	iKB11	iCL1	iCL12	iKN3	iKU1
<b>Total</b>	<b>0.770</b>	<b>0.718</b>	<b>0.764</b>	<b>0.920</b>	<b>0.871</b>	<b>0.789</b>
Germany	0.744	0.713	0.709	0.884	0.855	0.800
Switzerland	0.721	0.732	0.732	0.890	0.871	0.831
Finland	0.772	0.756	0.782	0.936	0.883	0.764
Norway	0.743	0.697	0.713	0.916	0.874	0.830
Sweden	0.661	0.663	0.788	0.917	0.922	0.812
Hungary	0.824	0.652	0.698	0.915	0.808	0.673
Poland	0.818	n. a.	0.707	0.901	n. a.	n. a.

## 2.5 Statistical Terminology

For most items, answers were measured on a scale of 1 to 7, with wordings given in the questionnaire like 1 = »not applicable at all« and 7 = »totally applicable«. To reduce the complexity of the Tables in this publication, the answering levels 1, 2 and 3 are summarised as »No«, 4 as »Middle« and 5, 6 and 7 as »Yes«. In computing the data (for example, for correlations), the original answering levels were used. When reporting results, we usually report »% Yes« which is easier to understand than mean values. If differences  $t_1 - t_2$  are presented, then mean values are reported.

The following statistical terms and abbreviations will be used throughout the book:

- Items are the questions within a questionnaire.
- *Percentages (%)* refer to valid percent. Rounding accounts for any deviations where percentage sums do not equal 100 %.

- *Percentage points (%)* refer to the comparison between two results stated in percentages. If 10 % of the confirmands agree with a statement in  $t_1$  and 20 % agree with the statement in  $t_2$  (meaning that the rate of approval has doubled), it would be wrong to say that the increase is 10 % – rather, it is 10 percentage points.
- The *scale level* of the Likert-scales (rating scales) is metric.
- *Sample size (N)* stands for the number of valid answers to a certain item.
- *Mean value (M)* is the average of all answers for a certain item.
- *Standard deviation (SD)* indicates the spread of the answers to a certain item.
- *Level of significance (p)*: In this book a level of 5 % (\*=  $p < 0.05$ ) or 1 % (\*\*=  $p < 0.01$ ) or 0.1 % (\*\*\*=  $p < 0.001$ ) is used. All differences reported are significant at least on a 0.05-level. Statistical details such as F-values and degrees of freedom are not reported here in order to make the book more accessible to readers without statistical training.
- *Correlation coefficient (r)* states the degree of interdependence of two variables. It ranges from -1 to +1. The closer it is to 0, the smaller the interdependence between the variables. Using the guide of Evans (1996), the strength of the correlation when described verbally is equivalent to: 0.00–0.19 »very weak«; 0.20–0.39 »weak«; 0.40–0.59 »moderate«; 0.60–0.79 »strong« and 0.80–1.00 »very strong«.
- *Cronbach's Alpha* measures the degree of internal consistency of the items in an index.

When presenting data, the studies used the following order of countries, which is no more than a technical convention: German-speaking countries, Scandinavian countries, Eastern European countries: Germany (DE), Austria (AT), Switzerland (CH), Denmark (DK), Finland (FI), Norway (NO), Sweden (SE), Hungary (HU), Poland (PL). In order to avoid the misunderstanding that this sequence reflects any prioritisation, the data are sometimes printed in another order. The country chapters are ordered in an alphabetical reverted order, starting from Switzerland to Austria.



## II. DEVELOPING CONFIRMATION WORK

### 3 Development of Participation Rates

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Confirmation work is an offer of voluntary non-formal education. Nevertheless, in recent history (at least in many of the countries involved in the study), it was almost a certainty for a Protestant teenager to take part in confirmation work as almost everyone did so. This situation has changed in recent years (in some countries, even decades ago). Participation is no longer an unquestioned matter of course, but rather an individual decision. From a theological point of view, this development expresses the idea of confirmation much better than it being a social or familial pressure, as prevailed for a long time: If confirmation is the conscious and deliberate affirmation of faith that follows childhood baptism, young people should feel the freedom to take part or to decide against this rite of passage.

Throughout the last studies, research teams have always tried to follow the international developments concerning participation rates in confirmation. Methodologically one has to differentiate between two different participation rates: In the earlier studies, we reported only the total confirmation rate, which is the rate of confirmed adolescents among all adolescents of a certain age group (for the second study: Schweitzer et al., 2015, pp. 307–308). As the share of Protestants within society is declining in Europe, it is now helpful to additionally include a second Figure: the Protestant confirmation rate. This describes the share of confirmands among all Protestant young people of a certain age group, which gives an important overview of the willingness of young Protestants to take part in confirmation time.

The present article starts with the total confirmation rate (3.1) and then adds an overview of the Protestant confirmation rate where data are available (3.2). Both developments are interpreted in the last section (3.3).

#### 3.1 Total Participation Rates

Figure 2 shows the development of confirmation time participation rates over the last 30 years (the period between the 1970s and 1992 can be observed in the Figure in Schweitzer et al., 2015, pp. 307–308). The lines display the proportion of confirmands among all young people in each age group, typically the cohort which is 14 or 15 years old (depending on confirmation age in the different countries).