

5. Will the Church Keep Them as Members? The Influence of Confirmation Work on the Commitment to Church Membership

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5.1 Introduction

Weakening attachment to religious institutions has been regarded as one of the key challenges to traditional religious groups. Especially Protestant Christianity has been increasingly losing its position in the personal lives of people in Europe. It is visible in declining membership figures and declining participation rates in many countries, but has not necessarily meant decline in believing in general. Davie refers to this phenomenon as »believing without belonging« (Davie 1994; 2000). Heelas and Woodhead (2005) on the other hand, argue that the current age is characterised by a massive subjective turn in modern culture and they regard it as the greatest change since the Christianisation of Europe. People no longer primarily conceive themselves as belonging to a community or as a link in the chain of a tradition. Therefore, they are more inclined to a life defined by their own subjective experiences and needs (Heelas/Woodhead 2005, 2-4). Many studies indicate that especially the younger generations are increasingly likely to be skeptical of religious institutions. They cast doubt on traditional beliefs and values and do not blindly follow what they have learned in childhood. They search for deeper personal meaning but not within religious institutions. They primarily make individual decisions based on their own beliefs and life-views and no longer belong to religious institutions because of tradition. They no longer belong only because they have been raised to belong, but increasingly demand personal meaningfulness in order to stay members. With these attitudes, young adults in this age group represent a challenge for churches and religious organisations. (Niemelä 2015; Mikkola et al. 2007)

The decreasing role of religious institutions in the lives of young people is linked to changes in the family setting. A decreasing number of young people have been raised with a close link to religious institutions and received a clear religious upbringing. Quantitative data (e.g., ISSP 2008, Religion Monitor, World Values Survey) show that religious upbringing in homes is declining especially in highly industrialised countries (e.g., Bucher 2009, 625; Niemelä 2011).

Out of the countries in our study, the church membership rates have been declining especially in the Nordic Countries. During the 21st century, the church membership rates of the Lutheran Church have declined from 2000 to 2013 most in Sweden (from 83 % to 66 %). In the other Nordic countries, the

decline has been slightly more moderate, but still faster than ever before: Finland from 85% to 75%, Iceland from 89% to 76%, Norway from 86% to 75% and Denmark from 85% to 79%. Church-leaving is overrepresented among young people; this is the case especially in Finland where church-leaving just a few years after confirmation has become increasingly common and as many as one fourth has left the church in early adulthood in the beginning of the 21st century. A longitudinal study of Finnish confirmands shows that church-leaving is not primarily linked to negative church experiences or attitudes, but simply to lack of meaningfulness. Negative confirmation experiences do increase the likelihood to leave the church, but those with negative experiences are only a minority among church-leavers. Therefore, the majority of church-leavers have typically experienced confirmation time as fun, however seldom as personally meaningful in a deeper sense (Niemelä 2015).

Hungary exemplifies a typical post-Socialist trajectory. As Hungarian sociologist Miklós Tomka has shown, up to the turn of the millennium, the elderly rural population used to be the most practicing (i. e., church-going). Ten years later, however, in line with declining religiosity of all subgroups of the population, differences between rural and urban as well as older and younger populations have been levelled. It is apparent that the decline of commitment to traditional institutionalised religiosity has been accompanied by a relative stability of openness to certain religious values such as belief in God (Tomka 2010a). As far as younger age groups are concerned, however, changes in denominational commitment, religious practice, religious identity and belief of younger age-groups have been showing a declining trend through Hungarian Youth survey waves 2000 and 2012. Moreover, in contrast with previous theoretical assumptions of religious individualisation, it is rather falling interest in religion which drives this decline (Hámori/Rosta 2014a).

While the youth need an ideology on the cognitive level, they emotionally search for a community. There is always a community to which the adolescents want to belong. This community could be a peer-group, a clique, or a church community as well (Nipkow 1997, 43). One of the central aims of confirmation time in most countries is linked to strengthening young people's commitment to their church and parish. For example, in Austria one of the key aims is to help young people »to find a home within their congregation«, in Finland and Norway, that the young people would live their life in the community of the parish (Innanen/Krupka 2010b).

Commitment to the church can be viewed from different perspectives. The church commitment can be divided into three levels: 1) institutional commitment which refers to the commitment to belong to the church as a member, 2) practical commitment which refers to the commitment to attend and to practice religion, and 3) theoretical commitment which refers to the commit-

ment to the faith and doctrine of the church (see Häkkinen 2010, 39). This chapter considers the commitment related to the first category: to what extent are confirmands committed to church membership and to what extent can confirmation work strengthen this commitment?

The following questions will be asked:

1. How does the importance of church membership differ in the beginning of confirmation time in the different contexts studied?
2. How does the importance of church membership change during confirmation time? How does confirmation time influence young people's attitudes towards baptising their future children?
3. What explains the commitment to church membership and changes in it during confirmation time in different contexts?

Results give insight to the future development of church membership of the countries and contexts studied.

5.2 Attachment to the Church in the Beginning of Confirmation Time

The general attachment to the church differs notably between the countries and in the churches studied. The attachment is strongest among the Lutheran confirmands in Poland, among Methodist confirmands in Germany and among the Reformed and Lutheran confirmands in Hungary. All of these groups are in a minority position in their country. 83% of confirmands in Poland, 70% among Methodist confirmands in Germany and 63% of Hungarian confirmands already regard belonging to the church as important to them in the beginning of confirmation time.

German (EKD) and Austrian confirmands are also above the average in their attachment. As many as 41% of the German (EKD) confirmands and 43% of the Austrian confirmands regard it important to belong to the church in the beginning of confirmation time. The Swedish confirmands are on the low end: less than one fifth of the confirmands in Sweden regard belonging to the church as important. In the other Nordic countries and in Switzerland the share is between 26 and 32%.

Women in general regard church membership as more important than male confirmands. However, Polish and Austrian confirmands do not follow this pattern; in these countries male confirmands are more likely to regard church membership as more important.

The importance of church membership among the confirmands in different contexts is linked to the general membership rate of the examined church in the country. In countries in which the church is in a clear majority position, the

confirmands do not typically regard church membership as important. This is the case in the Nordic countries. In these countries 65 to 78 % of the population belong to the Lutheran church, but only 18 to 32 % of the confirmands regard church membership as important. The cases in which the studied church is in a minority position, the importance of church membership is notably higher.

The importance of church membership among confirmands is linked to parents' interest in religion ($r = .39^{***}$). If parents are interested in religion, the young people are likely to regard membership as important. The linkage is statistically very significant in all countries and the Churches studied.

Table 17: The share of confirmands regarding church membership as important in the beginning of confirmation time (t_1) and the share of church members and the share of parents interested in religion in the different countries (%)

	Share of members of this Church in the country	Church membership important in the beginning of confirmation time (CG01)	Parents very or quite interested in religion (CJ01)	N \geq
Germany EKD	31 (EKD)	41	25	9847
Austria	4 (Lutheran and Reformed)	43	31	481
Switzerland	30 (Reformed)	27	17	7003
Denmark	78 (Lutheran)	27	25	1940
Finland	75 (Lutheran)	28	20	2278
Norway	75 (Lutheran)	32	22	2202
Sweden	66 (Lutheran)	19	23	1320
Poland	< 1 (Lutheran)	83	75	354
Hungary	12 (Reformed) 2 (Lutheran)	63	69	755
Germany EmK	< 1 (Methodist)	70	77	739

5.3 To What Extent Can Confirmation Work Strengthen the Commitment to Church Membership?

The importance of church membership changes in most countries to more positive during the confirmation time. When the responses of only those who have replied to both t_1 and t_2 are taken into account, the change in the impor-

tance of membership is statistically significant in all countries. Also in Austria the change is towards positive, but it does not reach statistical significance due to a low number of paired questionnaires.

Table 18: Change in the importance of church membership during confirmation time. Mean values (t_1 and t_2) and the average change (paired sample t-test)

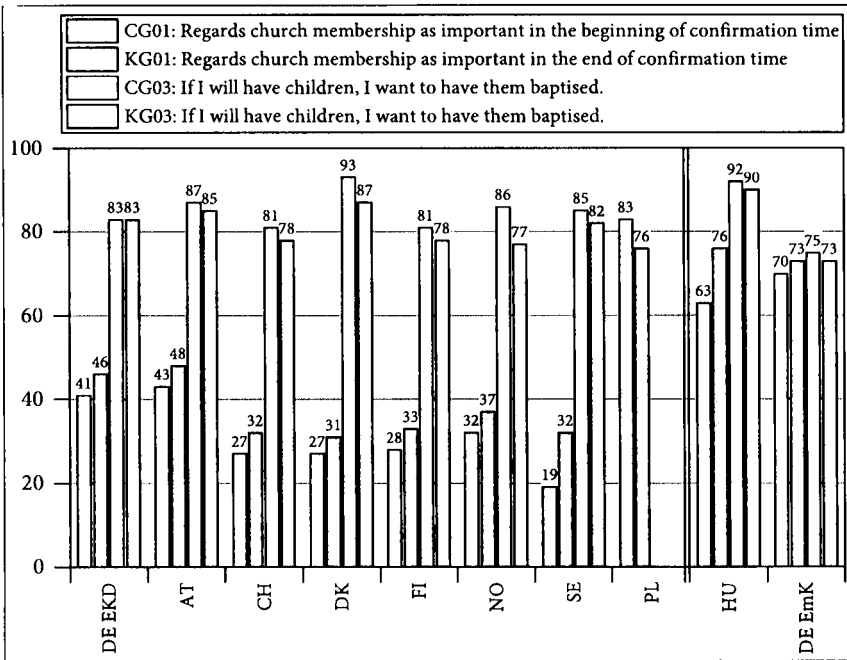
	Total	DE EKD	AT	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	PL	HU	DE EmK
CG01: It is important for me to belong to the Church.	3.97	4.23	4.29	3.52	3.64	3.66	3.73	3.28	5.84	5.17	5.35
KG01: It is important for me to belong to the Church.	4.13	4.33	4.46	3.71	3.81	3.89	4.04	3.60	5.69	5.54	5.35
Average change	0.16	0.10	0.17	0.19	0.17	0.23	0.31	0.32	-0.15	0.37	0.00
Paired sample t-test	-12.40	-5.44	-1.80	8.08	-2.85	-5.81	-5.60	-4.05	1.07	-3.31	-.06
Sig. of t-test	***	***		***	*	***	***	***		***	
N	16344	7281	335	4862	708	1664	1187	471	166	236	522

Scale: 1 = not applicable at all; 7 = totally applicable; only the responses of those replying to both t_1 and t_2 are presented. The *, **, *** show a significant differences at the .05, .01, and .001 level.

One of the crucial questions about the future of the church is related to the parents' willingness to baptise their children. In the beginning of confirmation time, the share of confirmands who are planning to baptise their future children ranges from 75% among German Methodist confirmands to 93% among Danish confirmands. These figures do not rise in any of the countries but tend to decline (see Figure 14). The decline is clearest in Norway (from 86% to 77%) and in Denmark (from 93% to 87%).

What explains the attitudes towards church membership in the end of confirmation and the changes in attitudes during confirmation time? Regression analysis was used to test which background factors or factors related to confirmation experiences influenced the confirmands' commitment to church membership (KG01: It is important for me to belong to the Church) and changes in it during confirmation time (diff_CG01: KG01 minus CG01). As to independent variables, item CJ01 (»How interested are your parents in religion?«) measured confirmands' perception of the religiosity of their family background. Five items (KB02, KK03, KK37, KK56, KN07, see question wordings in the tables) measured community and personal relational aspects of the confirmation time. Four items (KB03, KK04, KK11, KK57) measured, either directly or in-

Figure 14: The share of those regarding church membership as important and those planning to baptise their future children in the beginning (t₁) and in the end (t₂) of confirmation time in different countries (%)



N (total) = 26626 (t₁ 2012), 22459 (t₂ 2013); N (countries) = 358-10074 (t₁ 2012), 293-8964 (t₂ 2013).

directly, perceived group involvement and opportunity for democratic participation in the confirmation group. Two items measured general satisfaction (KK05, KN01). Since a wide range of scholarly literature so far evidenced the significance of gender in religious commitment and behaviour that was also included in the analysis.

Table 19 and Table 20 show that variables included in the regression models significantly influenced both the level of commitment at the end of confirmation time and the extent of change during confirmation time in most participating countries. However, explanative power of the model was considerably higher in the case of outcome commitment than in the case of change during confirmation time. This probably can be explained partly by the higher variance of diff_CG01 to KG01 as well as that the change caused by these contextual variables was in any case smaller. That is, for many confirmands, the commitment to the church was higher already at the beginning of confirmation time, provided that they were interested in faith-related issues or coming from a religious background.

Table 19: Factors explaining the importance of church membership in the end of confirmation time (KG01) among confirmands in different countries (Linear regression)

	Total	DE EKD	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	HU	DE EmK
(Constant)	***	***	***	**	***	***	*	*	***
Sex of the confirmand (combination of CM01 & KM01)	.02**	.03**	.06***	.13***	.05*		.10*		.12**
CJ01: How interested are your parents in religion? ^a	.32***	.23***	.25***	.21***	.21***	.19***	.25***	.19**	.19***
KB02: I have experienced good community in the confirmation group.	-.03***		-.08***		.09**				
KB03: I have been enabled to come to my own deci- sion about my faith.	.10***	.13***	.12***	.10*		.08**	.14**	.24***	.23***
KK03: I came into good personal contact with the leaders and workers.	-.02	.05***	.05**						
KK04: We could influence the decisions about the to- pics.	-.03***				.11**				
KK05: I had a lot of fun.	.05***	.09***	.09***	.13**		.09*			
KK11: My questions con- cerning faith were ad- dressed.	.06***	.11***	.10***	.09*	.06*	.14***	.18**		
KK37: In our parish I feel welcome and accepted.	.07***	.20***	.18***	.11**	.13***	.16***		.16*	.18***
KK56: I made new friends within the group.	-.01	-.02*	.05***		-.06*			.25**	
KK57: I was given the chance to try out volun- tary work.	.06***	.07***	.12***	.09*	.08***	.06*		.20**	
KN01: I am satisfied with the whole confirmation time.	.06***	.08***	.10***		.08**	.09**	.18**		
KN07: I am satisfied with the minister primarily re- sponsible for confirmation work.	.01		-.04*			.07*			
VARIANCE EXPLAINED	17.7%	32.0%	29.3%	22.5%	21.7%	25.6%	20.1%	43.0%	24.5%

^a item CJ01 was changed into reverse order where 1 = not interested at all, 4 = very interested. N (total) = 14254; N (countries) = 670-8685; the results for Austria and Poland are not presented due to the low number of respondents.

Table 20: Factors explaining the change in importance of church membership in the end of confirmation time (diff_CG01) among confirmands in different countries (Linear regression)

	Total	DE EKD	CH	DK	FI	NO	SE	HU	DE EmK
(Constant)	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	**	
Sex of the confirmand (combination CM01 & KM01)	.02*			.12**		-.07*			
CJ01: How interested are your parents in religion? ^a	-.09***	-.09***	-.07***	-.09*	-.13***	-.08**		-.19*	
KB02: I have experienced good community in the confirmation group.	.02		-.05**						
KB03: I have been enabled to come to my own deci- sion about my faith.	.01		.05**						
KK03: I came into good personal contact with the leaders and workers.	.04***	.04**	.05*	.11*					
KK04: We could influence the decisions about the to- pics.	.02*	.03*		-.12**	.08*				
KK05: I had a lot of fun.	.04**	.04*							
KK11: My questions con- cerning faith were ad- dressed.	.05***	.04**	.07***			.10**			
KK37: In our parish I feel welcome and accepted.	.09***	.11***	.05**		.06*	.09*			
KK56: I made new friends within the group.	-.00								
KK57: I was given the chance to try out volun- tary work.	.02		.06***						
KN01: I am satisfied with the whole confirmation time.	.02						.21**		
KN07: I am satisfied with the minister primarily re- sponsible for confirmation work.	.01								
VARIANCE EXPLAINED	4.5%	4.1%	3.0%	7.0%	5.0%	4.6%	6.6%	6.9%	not sig.

^a item CJ01 was changed into reverse order where 1 = not interested at all, 4 = very interested. N (total) = 14183; N (countries) = 668-8653; the results for Austria and Poland are not presented due to the low number of respondents.

The models show that the parents' interest in religion is by far the most meaningful factor in determining both the confirmands relationship to the church membership and the possible change in it during confirmation time. Thus, it can be assumed that a) the lower the parents' interest in religion, the lower the commitment to the church membership among confirmands at the end of confirmation time, and b) the lower the parents' interest in religion, the higher positive change can be observed during – and, presumably, as a consequence of – confirmation time. This is partly linked to the fact that many of those whose parents are religious, are already in the beginning of confirmation time strongly committed to their church membership, so within the limits of a 1 to 7 scale, there is no possibility to measure increase.

Other important factors in both models are related to the feeling of being welcome in the parish, and the feeling that one's own questions were addressed and that one has been able to have fun. In the first model (importance of church membership in the end) also the feeling of community, ability to influence the decision about the topics, the chance to come to one's own decision about faith, the chance to try out voluntary work are statistically very significant. In the second model (the change in the importance of church membership) the good personal contact with leaders and workers was also statistically significant.

At the same time, there are revealing differences between countries. The effect of the religious interest of parents on the importance of church membership (CG09) was significant in most (9) contexts and even the most important in many (e.g., EKD in Germany, Switzerland and all Nordic countries).

The effect of item KK37 (»In our parish I feel welcome and accepted.«) was significant in 9 countries and also positively influenced change in commitment in 4 countries showing that perception of an open atmosphere was an important component of becoming a member. Furthermore, significant positive effect of item KB03 (»I have been enabled to come to my own decision about my faith.«) in 7 countries on KG01 but only in one (!) on the difference in the importance of church membership (diff_CG01) showed that probably only those confirmands had the need to be enabled to make their own decision about faith who were already interested in this issue.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have been analysing the relationship to church membership and changes in it during confirmation time: can confirmation work strengthen the relationship to church membership? The results show that in most countries confirmation work strengthens confirmands' commitment to church membership. Furthermore, the results show that the commitment to church

membership differs notably between the countries: it is highest in contexts where the Church is in a minority position and lowest in the Nordic countries where the church membership rate is high but has been clearly declining during the 21st century. When it comes to confirmands' willingness to baptise their future children, confirmation time does not seem to have any influence or if it has, the share of those planning to baptise their children tends to decline during confirmation time.

Concerning commitment to church membership and personal religiosity in general, it is not only the attitude itself which has to be taken into consideration but also the social environment and atmosphere, i. e., the role models, the historical time period in which people are living, and various unpredictable events that may occur throughout their lives. Firstly, earlier research shows that the family as the most important agent of socialisation has a long-term influence on faith development, moral judgement and values (Horváth-Szabó 1998). Parents give the first patterns of representation of God and religion (or the lack of religion). Our results show that parents are most meaningful also in determining the attitude towards church membership still at the end of confirmation time. Secondly, it should be underlined that personal religiosity is linked to community also more broadly than just to primary socialisation within the family. As children grow older the effects of secondary sociological factors (extended family, neighbours, friends, media) increase in their lives. Thirdly, among these, church community can play a crucial role in religious development and socialisation since children gain knowledge and experience on religion there and meet various religious lifestyles. These factors can help to turn the »me« religion into »we« religion (Sundén 1982, 50). The results confirm the importance of community: the significant effect of experiencing a good community in the confirmation group in some and feeling accepted in the parish in almost all participating countries underline this positive relationship. Fourthly, concerning the attachment to the Church, it is significant whether the confirmand encounters role models or mentors who conduct their life according to their Christian faith in an authentic and desirable manner for the young people (Smith/Denton 2005, 243 raise this issue in an American context). This, even if indirectly, is mirrored in some countries by the significant positive effect of coming into a good personal contact with leaders of the confirmation group. Fifthly, it is also important that the method and topics of teaching correspond to the confirmands' personal needs both of participation and individual identity questions. The youth need support and encouragement, paying attention to them and attracting their attention to the topic of learning. From this point of view confirmation work is not only teaching of basics of the Christian faith and tradition, but giving space for personal reflection of their spiritual quest. Based on the results this space for personal reflection was one of the key factors in explaining the commitment to

the Church at the end of confirmation time and its development during confirmation time. The extent to which confirmands perceived how much they »have been enabled to come to their own decision about faith« and how much »their questions concerning faith were addressed« presents a relatively strong predictor of their commitment to church membership in several countries.