

8. After Confirmation: Confirmation Work in the United Methodist Church in Germany

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8.1 Background Information

The *Evangelisch-methodistische Kirche* (United Methodist Church, EmK) in Germany is the only Free Church participating in the European study on confirmation work. The common self-description »Free Church« refers to denominations that have been independent from the state since their beginnings. The EmK has, like most Protestant denominations, an equivalent to »confirmation work«, called »Kirchlicher Unterricht« (KU, church instruction). At the end of KU time the adolescents receive an individual blessing in a special worship service, called »Einsegnung« (benediction), which in most respects can be understood as an equivalent of confirmation service (for details and theological backgrounds see: Härtner/Beißwenger 2015b, 280-292). Since the EmK in Germany is a very small church, adolescents who participate in KU are in a minority situation (cf. Beißwenger et al. 2015, 157-169). The first study within the EmK, having been carried out as a nationwide full-scale survey (t_1 - t_2 : 2012-14), has revealed that KU can be regarded as a fruitful field of Christian education, with an indication of some concerns for further development. The t_3 -study underlines both aspects and brings up new findings.

8.2 How the t_3 -Study Was Conducted

Procedures in the EmK in Germany built upon the survey and the questionnaires in t_1 and t_2 , details are published in Härtner/Beißwenger 2015a and 2015b. The first questionnaire was administered in 2012 (t_1). Since KU in the EmK generally encompasses a curriculum exceeding one year's time, the t_2 data consist of a t_{2a} (Einsegnung and t_2 in 2013) and a t_{2b} (Einsegnung and t_2 in 2014) sample; therefore in t_3 the questioning has taken place one or two years after the end of KU time and was conducted in spring/summer 2015. In t_2 the adolescents were asked to participate in the t_3 -study and if they agreed, to provide their contact information (email, postal address). From 452 t_3 -questionnaires that had been sent out, a total of 227 valid ones could be evaluated, 187 of them contribute to the matched data set of the t_1 - t_2 - t_3 -sample that is fully longitudinal.

The t_1 - t_2 - t_3 -sample is not representative, as the background variables of the

Table 53: Sample sizes in t_1 (2012), t_{2a} (2013), t_{2b} (2014) and t_3 (2015)*

	t_1	t_2	t_3	$t_1-t_2-t_3$
N	761	346 (t_{2a})	227	187
		282 (t_{2b})	(36% of t_2)	(30% of t_2)
		628 (total t_2)		

* Due to the very low number of adolescent volunteers in KU the respective extra-questionnaire was not used in the Methodist t_3 -sample.

Table 54: Background factors of the Methodist sample (%)

	Sex: boys/girls	Contact to the church between 5-9 years/more than 9 years*	Parents' interest in religion	Bedside prayer	More than 250 books at home	Parents active as volunteers**
	(C/QM01)	(CM11/12)	(CJ01)	(CJ02)	(CM04)	(CP17)
$t_1-t_2-t_3$	39/62	79/82	86	90	62	68
t_1-t_2 only	47/53	71/71	77	81	56	59

N = 748-179; * at least 3 times, ** at least one parent who is volunteering.

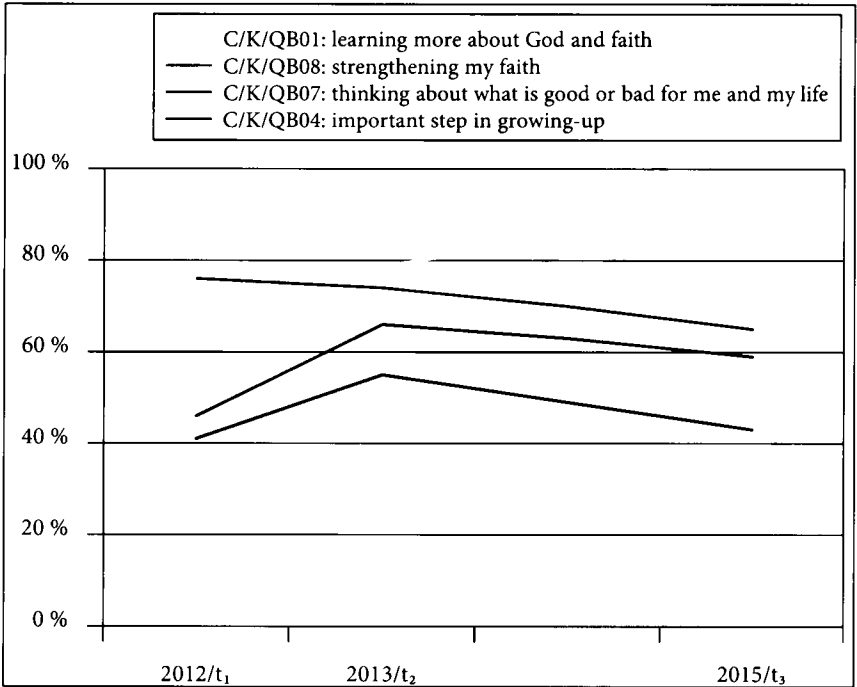
t_3 -sample clearly indicate: among the adolescents who returned the questionnaires there were 39% male and 60% female, while in t_2 the share was almost equal (47% male, 53% female). The majority of the adolescents in t_3 come from families with a higher level of education and a stronger religious background. Also, the adolescents themselves are more religious, have a closer relationship to the church and have better experiences with worship services. Those background factors (see Table 54) need to be taken into consideration for the interpretation of the t_3 -data.

8.3 Main Results: What Comes after Einsegnung (Benediction)?

KU Time and Einsegnung in Retrospect

The results for t_1 and t_2 reported in this article consequently are computed for the fully matched cases $t_1-t_2-t_3$; this is why values may differ from those presented in other publications.

In the international data set, 44% of the youth agreed to the statement »I made an important step in growing up« (QB01), in the EmK 43%. The latter

Figure 41: Views on KU time (EmK): t_1 (2012), t_2 (2013), t_3 (2015)

N = 179-184; the share of positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

value has dropped from 55% (KB01, t_2) during KU time, which indicates, that the adolescents, in retrospect, tend to return to their views at the beginning of KU time (CB01, t_1 : 41%). In this concern, the question arises if confirmation time (KU) and the day of confirmation (Einsegnung) can be considered as a *rite de passage* any longer. 65% of the Methodist adolescents say »I was strengthened in my faith« (QB08, international: 47%). This comparably high assent confirms the thesis, that adolescents with a more distinctive religious upbringing benefit most from church-related activities like KU (cf. Krupka et al. 2015, 117-124). Among the Methodist young people in t_3 , 68% of those who see their parents as being »quite or very interested in religion« felt that they were strengthened in their faith, while among those saying their parents were »not or somewhat interested« it is 55%. In t_3 the values for the satisfaction with KU are even higher than in t_2 , up from 76% to 87%. Also, 81% of the adolescents state »I can recommend taking part in KU time to others« (QK21). In comparison with the high values concerning satisfaction, one might have expected an even higher assent in this respect.

Table 55: Day of Einsegnung (EmK): t₁ (2012), t₂ (2013), t₃ (2015)

		M t ₃	Yes t ₁	Yes t ₂	Yes t ₃	Yes international average t ₃
QK20	one of the most important days of my life	4.88	–	–	64 %	51 %
C/K/QB09	Importance of having a beautiful celebration with family and friend	4.80	30 %	80 %	61 %	72 %
C/K/QB10	Importance of money and presents	3.24	19 %	43 %	23 %	36 %
C/K/QB11	Importance of receiving a blessing	5.47	75 %	86 %	76 %	47 %

N = 182-184; the share of positive responses (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

Once KU-time is completed, a ceremonial service is conducted; since the adolescents receive an individual blessing, the service is also referred to as »Einsegnung« (benediction). The adolescents are not expected to make a confession of faith. Although Einsegnung does not have relevance in terms of church-law (e. g., full membership), in t₃ it is a proportion of 64 % of the adolescents stating »It was one of the most important days of my life«. This surprisingly high value underlines the meaning of Einsegnung for the young people. This finding also correlates with the fact that receiving an individual blessing ranks far higher (76 %) than »Having a beautiful celebration with family and friends« (61 %) or »The money and presents were important for me« (23 %).

As stated above, the t₃-sample represents adolescents with a closer connection to the Christian faith and the church, as the high value for the statement »I have friends who are active in the church« (QG22: 66 %) confirms. This may be one factor that helps to explain why only 10 % of the Methodist adolescents state »After confirmation (Einsegnung) I have lost contact with the church«, while in the international sample it is 36 % that say so. The significant negative correlation between those items ($r_{QG20/QG22} = -.343^{**}$) underscores this assumption. Two more prominent factors for a continued connection to the church after Einsegnung may be seen in the high approval rate with the statement »I found programs within the church (for example, youth work) that were interesting to me« (QK26: 61 %, international: 30 %) as well as in the high con-

Table 56: Faith-related attitudes (EmK): t₁ (2012), t₂ (2013), t₃ (2015)

		M EmK t ₃	Yes t ₁	Yes t ₂	Yes t ₃	Yes international average t ₃
C/K/QE01	God created the world.	5.97	87 %	83 %	83 %	34 %
C/K/QE02	There is life after death.	6.18	79 %	81 %	86 %	63 %
C/K/QE03	God loves all humans and cares about each one of us.	6,18	94 %	91 %	88 %	63 %
C/K/QE04	Jesus has risen from the dead.	6.16	91 %	86 %	85 %	42 %
C/K/QE05	I am insecure what I should believe.	3.13	17 %	28 %	25 %	35 %
C/K/QE09	I believe in God.	6.20	93 %	92 %	86 %	60 %
C/K/QE08	Faith in God helps me in difficult situations.	5.37	82 %	81 %	75 %	44 %
C/K/QE10	I know what the Christian faith entails.	5.45	65 %	76 %	80 %	80 %

N = 181-187; the share of positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

sent to the item »I was asked to take over a task in the church« (QP50: 59 %, international: 31 %).

The Development of Beliefs and Religious Attitudes

A longitudinal comparison of the values of t₁, t₂ and t₃ indicates that among the Methodist adolescents faith-related attitudes remain rather constant, as Table 56 shows. In comparison with the international data, the EmK sample shows significant higher approval rates with conventional positions of Christian belief. With a value of 83 % approval of the item »God has created the world«, Methodist adolescents differ most from the international average of 34 %. A closer look, however, shows that the aspect of doubt during and after KU time also increased, especially when it comes to personal views of the matter. The item »I believe in God« goes down from 93 % (t₁) to 86 % in t₃ – still a high value compared to the international data (QE09: 60 %). A similar observation can be made for the item »Faith in God helps me in difficult situations« going down from 82 % in t₁ to 75 % in t₃ (QE18 international: 44 %). In t₃ it is one out of four adolescents who states »I am insecure what I should believe« (QE05

Table 57: Relationship to the Church (EmK): t₁ (2012), t₂ (2013), t₃ (2015)

		M EmK t ₁	Yes t ₁	Yes t ₂	Yes t ₃	Inter- nat. average t ₃
C/K/QG01	It is important for me to belong to the church.	4.97	75 %	75 %	64 %	44 %
C/K/QG02	The church does not have answers to the questions that are important for me.	3.55	23 %	24 %	27 %	36 %
C/K/QG03	If I will have children, I want to have them baptised.	5.39	76 %	75 %	66 %	86 %
C/K/QG04	Church services are usually boring.	3.65	28 %	33 %	34 %	48 %
C/K/QG05	The church does a lot of good things for the people.	5.69	83 %	83 %	81 %	82 %

N = 177-186; the share of positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

international: 35 %). This development is not surprising, since adolescents in general tend to critique their upbringing, including faith-related aspects.

Attitudes towards the Church (EmK)

Methodist adolescents hold the Christian faith and the Church (EmK) in high respect. This is true for all three samples of the study. While the valuation of the »Christian faith in general« is constant on a high level (C/K/QF01 »positive or very positive«: 89 % in t₁, 90 % in t₂ and 88 % in t₃), the assent »towards the EmK in general« in t₃ slightly declines (C/K/QF02: 87 % in t₁, 89 % in t₂, 83 % in t₃). The adolescents partaking in all three surveys see themselves in a rather close relationship with their local congregation and the EmK in general, as Table 57 shows. Yet, some details have to be considered as well. The number of young people stating »The church does not have answers to the questions that are important for me« increases to more than a quarter (QG02: 27 %). Also, a growing number of young people, 34 % in t₃ find church services »usually boring« (QG04). If they had children of their own, it is two thirds of the young people who state that they wanted to have them baptised. This comparably low value (international: 86 %) may have to do with the fact, that in the EmK a considerable number of parents decide to postpone the baptism of their children in order to have them make a decision of their own concerning their religious belonging (cf. Härtner/Beißwenger 2015b, 284).

In an additional t_3 -questionnaire the Methodist adolescents were asked to be more specific about their views of the EmK. The most thought-provoking findings concern the item »The EmK offers me a lot of great possibilities« (QZF18). The values decrease from 63 % (t_1) via 58 % (t_2) to 45 % (t_3). In the face of this finding, the moderate increase of the values for the item »The EmK is mainly a church for the elderly« (QZF19) from 17 % (t_1), via 18 % (t_2) to 22 % (t_3) is slightly surprising. Anyhow, almost every second respondent in t_3 states »In my parish, I have the possibility to share own ideas and thus have a voice« (QZF45: 48 %).

At a closer look, the study indicates significant differences between the adolescents who perceive their parents as being »quite or very interested in religion« and those who say their parents were »not or somewhat interested in religion«. In the first group there is a far higher consent »towards the Christian faith in general« (QF01: 91 % vs. 68 %), the same can be said about their attitude towards the church in general« (QFO2: 85 % vs. 72 %) and concerning the statement »It is important for me to belong to the church« (QG01: 69 % vs. 39 %). These correlations can be interpreted as an indication of the far-reaching relevance of a religious upbringing for the development of a religious identity during adolescence.

Volunteerism

A special research interest of the international t_3 -study lies on the question, if confirmation work encourages adolescents to volunteer work in church and society. Surprisingly, 92 % of the Methodist young people stated in t_3 to be involved in some kind of volunteer work. This may have to do with the fact that the respondents of the t_3 -sample in general show a higher interest both in religion and social concerns. Faith-based activities make up a significant share of the adolescents' activities: 32 % are involved in Christian educational work with children and youth, 26 % in Sunday school, 6 % as teamers in KU. However, the adolescents do not limit their engagement to church activities. 59 % of the Methodist adolescents state that they are volunteering in sports, 58 % in music. 29 % take over responsibilities in school (i.e., spokesperson for the class), 27 % in non-church-related youth work, and 18 % are active in »other« voluntary work.

In ecumenical circles, one of the common nicknames of the EmK in Germany is »the ants«, winkingly looking at the high level of engagement that can be found among many Methodist Christians. Given this background, it is astonishing that every fifth adolescent stated »I was asked to take over a task in the church« as being »not applicable at all« (QP50: 21 %). Obviously, the congregations, where this statement holds true, are missing a golden opportunity.

8.4 Additional Analyses

Changes Concerning Worship Services

One or two years after Einsegnung, a noticeable percentage of 52 % of the Methodist adolescents take part in worship services of their congregations (almost) every week, 26 % every month, less than 5 % (almost) never. This, again, indicates the relatively close relationship to the church of the adolescents partaking in the t_3 -study. Yet, the values for the item »Church services are usually boring« (C/K/QG04) rise from 28 % (t_1), via 33 % (t_2) to 34 % (international: 48 %), one adolescent says: »It is often too severe«.

Taking a closer look at the data behind this long-term development, a gender comparison does not bring up significant differences between boys and girls. Also, the educational background of the parents plays no noticeable role. It is the religious background of the parents that points to significant variances: only 31 % of the youth who see their parents as being »quite or very interested in religion« find church services usually boring, while among those with parents perceived as being »not or somewhat interested in religion« it is 56 % who say so.

In the additional t_3 -questionnaire the Methodist young people were asked: »When you think about worship services in your congregation: How important are the following points?« Again, there are noticeable differences corresponding to the adolescents' religious upbringing. Among the adolescents who see their parents as being less religious, it is the »readings from the Bible« that finds the lowest approval (QZF27: 32 % vs. 68 %), followed by »the sermon« (QZF28: 41 % vs. 78 %) and »the blessing« (50 % vs. 81 %); »prayer« is seen as being most important (QZF29: 68 % vs. 87 %) for both groups.

In a longitudinal perspective it is interesting, that the mean value concerning the importance of »the sermon« (K/QZF28) between t_2 and t_3 rises from 2.9 to 3.3 (scale 1-7), while »my own contribution in a church service« (K/QZF33) goes down from 3.7 to 3.3. This underlines the implication of relevant sermons and reinforces the demand of possibilities for the youth to actively participate with their own ideas (cf. Härtner/Beißwenger 2015b, 290).

Joining Full Membership in the United Methodist Church

»Free Churches« have an understanding of membership that differs from most historically state-related Churches. Joining the church is understood as a decisive act that is deliberately chosen within the individual's life-circle (details for the EmK in Germany can be found in: Härtner/Beißwenger 2015b, 291-292). The high respect for the Church among Methodist adolescents therefore does not automatically lead to a move toward joining the EmK as *professing members*. Among the young people partaking in t_3 the study brought forth

statements with a bandwidth from »I like it the way it is done in the EmK, that everyone can make an own decision«, to »I don't understand, why one does not become a full member at Einsegnung«. Only 11 % (t_3) of the youth have become full members during KU-time (C/K/QZF35), 23 % show no interest in becoming full members (t_1 : 5 %, t_2 : 10 %); 42 % say that they want to become full members in the future (t_1 : 42 %, t_2 : 50 %). Whether the latter is going to be realised in the future, is anything but sure, since professing membership is concomitant to a number of obligations (cf. Agende 2014, 66-69). The EmK should reconsider its ruling criteria and practice regarding professing membership if it wholeheartedly is up to reach the younger generation.

Minority Situation

Methodist adolescents are representing a small minority among the adolescents in Germany (cf. Beißwenger et al. 2015, 160-162). In a longitudinal perspective the assent with the item »It feels strange for me to belong to a Church that many in my environment don't know« (C/K/QFZ17) is decreasing: the values change from 34 % (t_1), via 33 % (t_2) to 25 % (t_3), indicating that for the majority of the adolescents, this is not a problem. In this concern, a longitudinal gender comparison shows interesting results that invite further research. Among the girls, 42 % find the minority situation problematic at the beginning of KU time (t_1), 31 % during KU time (t_2), and 29 % say so in retrospect (t_3). Among the boys the development looks quite different, starting with 24 % (t_1), rising to 37 % (t_2), and decreasing to 21 % (t_3). Supposably the awareness of belonging to a »different« church is more prominent during KU time, because it is the period when the profile of the EmK is being carved out and discussed.

Among the young people who consider the minority situation as problematic, many agree to the statement »The church does not have answers to the questions that are important for me« ($r_{QZF17/QG02} = 0,234^{**}$). A slighter, but significant correlation can be noted with the item »The EmK offers me many great opportunities« ($r_{QZF17/QZF18} = 0,155^*$). These findings suggest that in respect of the minority situation it becomes more and more important whether the EmK and its congregations offer desirable opportunities for the youth to find resonance with their own ideas and imaginations. If that is the case and for them »small« to some extent »is beautiful« (cf. Beißwenger et al. 2015, 167-169), the adolescents will decently cope with the fact of belonging to a minority church.

8.5 Challenges for the Future

The results of the longitudinal study on the one hand encourages the EmK in Germany to confidently continue with KU and pursue every endeavour of re-

forming it in terms of »Participatory Church«, »Relevant Worship Services«, »KU as Teamwork«, »Receiving Members« and »KU in a Church that is Growing Smaller« (see Härtner/Beißwenger 2015a, 274 and 2015b, 290-292). On the other hand, the survey points to a number of aspects that deserve special attention. Since the t_3 -data predominantly represent adolescents with a closer connection to the Christian faith and the EmK, further efforts are to be made to get the same sort of information from youth with a more loose or a lost connection to the Church. The study indicates that the religious upbringing has a huge influence on the adolescents' faith and church-related development. In this concern, those adolescents, who come from a less religious home deserve a higher degree of attention. This reinforces the importance of:

- Attentively including all adolescents in choosing the topics of KU,
- Consciously aiming at integrating all adolescents in volunteer work in the congregations during and after KU time,
- Decidedly improving worship services to be more relevant also to adolescents with a weaker connection to the church.

In the EmK, in which a large percentage of adolescents take part in church-related activities before and after KU, there is a danger of perceiving KU just as a means among others. The longitudinal study, however, accentuates the distinguished significance of KU in the lives of adolescents. This is why KU definitely provides a variety of prospects. The given opportunity to support young people in finding their own religious identity and belonging during »the difficult years« should not be taken for granted by the Church. On the contrary, it deserves mindful efforts in a long-term perspective, so that the positive experiences during KU – both for adolescents and leaders – will be more than a flash in the pan.