



Connections

A Theotokos Confirmation Resource



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This resource is written by Dr. Jonathan LeMaster-Smith and Rev. Shannon LeMaster-Smith in partnership with Hinton Rural Life Center for Hinton's Theotokos Confirmation retreat ministry. It is designed to be especially accessible to and relevant for smaller and more rural churches, but will be a valuable United Methodist Confirmation tool for all UM churches.

Confirmation

Confirmation in The United Methodist Church marks the first time a person publicly “confirms” their intention to live the vows of the baptismal and membership covenant and so becomes a professing member of their local congregation and The United Methodist Church. Through confirmation, we “renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church” (*The United Methodist Hymnal*). In being confirmed, a person claims the Christian faith as part of their belief and identity. They also confirm that they want to continue learning and growing into a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ.

The preparation leading up to confirmation can take many forms and cover an assortment of content. It often covers information about the baptismal and membership covenant; the Bible; and the history, polity (form of organization), and doctrine of The United Methodist Church. Beyond content, the process of preparing for confirmation may include experiences and opportunities for confirmands to grow in their faith and develop relationships with other Christians.

These may include, but are not limited to, retreats, service projects, having faith mentors, and attending and participating in church council meetings, worship, or other churchwide activities.

Theotokos Connections – User Guide

The *Theotokos Connections* curriculum seeks to prepare confirmands for participating in the Christian community as a member of The United Methodist Church. The sessions are designed to be **fully adaptable** to your setting. They are designed in such a way that you can cover a session over a one-hour time period OR spread out the activities provided for each session over longer time periods and/or multiple weeks. We suggest using this curriculum with middle school students, but it can be flexed according to your group interests and needs.

GOAL

The goal of this curriculum is to **help confirmands prepare for and develop a basic understanding of the history, polity, and doctrine of The United Methodist Church; explore their story, faith, identity, and place of belonging and participating in the United Methodist Connection; and be able to share their story with others, through word and action.** The focus of the curriculum as a whole is more on the process than the content, in that it seeks to build community with participants and help them understand, appreciate, and live into the greater Connection (to Self, to God, to the Church, to Neighbor, to Creation, and to Heritage).

BASIC DESIGN

There are six sessions. The first session, “Connect to Self,” is an introductory session. The five sessions that follow can be taught in *whatever order* the leader chooses.

Each session explores a **Faith Story**, a **Connection Point**, and part of the **Confirmation Vows**. There is an opening **Opening Circle** and a **Closing Circle** – both of which allow for flexibility in how you choose to open and close each session. There is an **Appendix** at the end of the curriculum with activity suggestions for the Opening Circle and Closing Circle, but we encourage you to develop an opening and closing ritual that is meaningful for your group. The **Activity Blocks** include multiple options for reflection and active-learning practices. You may choose one activity block or do all of them – you get to decide. Again, the Appendix will have resources referenced in the Activity Blocks.

ICONS OF INTEREST:



Below is an overview of the format of each session.

FORMAT FOR EACH SESSION

Connection Point: Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor. Our whole mission as people who follow Jesus is to CONNECT. Each session will introduce a way to connect and will be built around this connection point.

Main Point: It's easy to get lost in all the information. The MAIN POINT will keep you grounded. This will be a one- or two-sentence recap of the session. Basically, if you summed up in two sentences everything you want your confirmands to learn.

Confirmation Vows: For this curriculum, the baptismal and membership vows taken at confirmation are divided up into parts and matched with the corresponding “Connection Point.” The quoted sections are from “The Baptismal Covenant 1,” from *The United Methodist Hymnal (UMH)* and *The Book of Worship*. For example, in the session “Connect to Church,” participants explore the membership vows of “prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.” The corresponding part of the vow is named in this section, with a note for which activity block to explore.

Overview of Session, Background Information: Not sure if you know or understand the content for the session? Do not fear. Each session will include the necessary background information for you as the leader to help you better understand the content and prepare for the session.

Opening Circle: How you begin a session can set the tone for your time together. This is a time set aside specifically to invite everyone to be present and participate in the session. At the very least, this could simply be to say their name out loud. Once someone says one thing out loud (even their name), they are more likely to speak again later. There are a dozen or so ideas in the Appendix. Choose one.

Faith Story: Part of confirmation is recognizing God's voice as you begin to discern how God is calling you to shine light in the world. Each session will explore a call story from a notable figure in Christian history.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection: Use these open-ended reflection questions to help confirmands ponder the Call Story. These are not "right or wrong" type questions; rather, they encourage curiosity and wonder. Encourage a friendly space of sharing where confirmands feel safe to share out loud. Allow for some bit of silence for confirmands to process the question. Note: Depending on those in your group, you may need to allow time for personal reflection before group sharing. Some of us need a little more time than others to reflect on a question and our response to it.

Activity Blocks: There are many ways that people absorb and reflect on information. These activity blocks present different ways that you can explore the content. Choose one or as many as you wish.

Closing Circle: No matter how the lesson or activities go, save at least a few minutes for a closing circle. Bring the group together and encourage them to share something they learned. Share a blessing or prayer. There are a dozen or so ideas in the appendix, and one or two suggestions for each session. Choose one. After your closing, share whatever necessary information and/or announcements you may have.

Additional Resources: These are extra resources if you wish to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and/or a list of other resources for activities to use.

RESOURCES RECOMMENDED

We recommend the following resources for each confirmand. Reach out to your annual conference's Resource Center or to your conference's youth or young people's ministry coordinator/strategist for help.

- **The United Methodist Handbook** is comprehensive and free, as a pdf, at <https://nmoumc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UMC-Handbook.pdf> . A similar resource, **The United Methodist Member Digest**, is free in hard copy at <https://umcgiving.outreach.com/Products/Church-Products/UMC-Member-Digest-57030.aspx> and digitally at <https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/united-methodist-member-digest-all-versions> .
- **CEB Student Bible for United Methodist Confirmation** - The role of Scripture is important, and it is encouraged that each confirmand **begin** this season of preparation with a Bible they can become comfortable with through this process. We recommend the CEB Student Bible because it is easy to read and includes United Methodist specific information, such as Baptismal and Membership Vows; Social Principles Litany; Glossary of United Methodist terms; and the Historical Statement of The UMC, which includes the General Rules. <https://www.cokesbury.com/9781609262037-The-CEB-Student-Bible-for-United-Methodist-Confirmation>



- **The United Methodist Hymnal** contains prayers, songs, scriptures, creeds, and other fabulous information about our rich heritage as United Methodists. We encourage having these hymnals readily available for use during confirmation sessions. Note: Unlike the other two resources on this list, you do not need to purchase one for confirmands to take home.
- **A Blank Notebook or Journal** - You can provide this or ask confirmands to bring one. It can be a simple, inexpensive, one-subject spiral bound notebook. Encourage the confirmands to use this notebook to take notes and/or write questions as you go through each session.

SCOPE AND SEQUENCE: OVERVIEW & SESSION DESCRIPTIONS



First Session

Connect with Self Call of Samuel

The first session encourages participants to explore their unique gifts and talents and begin to discern how they fit into the larger United Methodist Connection. The participants will share their stories, start to unpack who they are, and explore who God is calling them to be. The story focus is the call of Samuel and his willingness to listen to God. Participants will explore what it means to take vows as members in The UMC and claim their identity in Christ.

Confirmation Vow: Pastoral Introduction: *Brothers and sisters in Christ: Through the Sacrament of Baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy Church. We are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price. Through confirmation, and through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.* ("The Baptismal Covenant I," UMH)

United Methodist Specific: Baptism

Other sessions that follow may be completed in any order.



Connect with God Call of Mary

This session is rooted in grace. Youth will explore how we experience God’s love in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit, the life of the church, and our own spiritual practices. The call of Mary frames the story, as she is the ultimate “God Bearer.” This session explores the freedom and power offered by God through Christ and what we mean when we confess our belief in God.

Confirmation Vow: *The Apostles' Creed in threefold question-and-answer form appeared at least as early as the third century as a statement of faith used in baptisms and has been widely used in baptisms ever since. (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” UMH)*

United Methodist Specific: Grace



Connect with Church Calls of Paul & Timothy

Our connection to the local and global Church is deeply important to our faith. The Church is our extended family; our connection to that family comes in many forms. This session looks at the history, structure, and gifts of The United Methodist Church. Framing this session, the calls of Paul and Timothy as church planters and connectors help us understand our connection to the Church, no matter our time and place. This session explores the commitment to the Church and the Church’s commitment to us as members.

Confirmation Vow: *As members of Christ's universal Church, will you be loyal to Christ through The United Methodist Church, and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries? . . . As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service and your witness? (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” UMH)*

United Methodist Specific: Polity



Connect with Neighbor Call of Richard Allen

Our connection with neighbor and community is one of Jesus’ key expectations of his followers. Our community influences, supports, and sustains us. This unit will explore how we can act in love to support, care for, and enrich our community. Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, frames this story, because he worked to care for, educate, and support his neighbors and community in so many Spirit-filled ways. This session engages the gift of God to renounce, repent, reject, and resist sin and evil in the world and suggests how we can connect in transformative ways to the community.



Confirmation Vow: *Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin? . . . Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?* (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” UMH)

United Methodist Specific: Social Holiness/ Social Principles



Connect with Heritage Call of Harriet Tubman

The history and heritage of our Church remind us that we are part of a grand tradition of love, hope, and justice. The history of the Church is not perfect, but it is our history, and we can learn and grow from it. Learning how the Spirit moves throughout history helps us live into God’s future. Framing this story is Harriet Tubman. A renowned figure in United States history, Tubman is also an important figure in church history. Acting on her faith and connection to the Church, she worked to free those the world enslaved. The “Thanksgiving Over the Water” looks at the role of the Spirit in the history found in scripture and beyond.

Confirmation Vow: See “Thanksgiving Over the Water” (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” UMH)

United Methodist Specific: History



Connect with Creation Call of Robert Sheffy

Scripture reminds us that it is our duty as humans, made in God’s image, to care for all of God’s creation. As part of the web of creation, we need to remember that the water, earth, air, plants, animals, and everything else impacts us and we impact it. As part of confirmation, we are reminded of what God can teach us through creation and how to care for creation. The story of Robert Sheffy frames this session. Known as the St. Francis of the Wilderness, he cared for animals as part of his ministry as a Methodist preacher. This session engages the language of God’s new creation and our participation in God’s plans.

Confirmation Vow: *Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?* (“The Baptismal Covenant I,” UMH)

United Methodist Specific: Communion



SESSION 1: CONNECT WITH SELF

Main Point

Part of confirmation is finding our identity in relationship to God and God's plan. This requires connecting with yourself and looking for what God is doing in your life and what makes you uniquely and wonderfully made.

Overview of Session and Background Information

Use this to prepare yourself as the leader for the time together.

At confirmation age, young people are doing the continuous work of forming their identity as individuals and members of the community. They are seeking out people and groups to imitate, connect with, and rebel against. There are many forces in the world that seek to influence young people's lives, choices, and relationships. Of course, the local church can be one of the most beneficial forces in a young person's identity formation. It can offer community, accountability, and resources for exploring the hard questions within a space full of people from multiple generations and backgrounds.

As young people are exploring their self and identity, The United Methodist Church offers a powerful image for identity from its biblical and historical tradition. As Christians, we acknowledge that all humans are made in the image of God regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, ability, or anything else.. The theological term for this is imago Dei, which has its roots in Genesis 1:27, where God made humans in such a way as to mirror God's own nature - morally, spiritually, intellectually.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, reminds us that the image of God is not something like a picture or face on a coin. It's a reminder that we are made with the gifts God gave us, including our ability to think, act, and respond to God. Wesley also explains that, along with these gifts, we have the responsibility to care for God's creation. Finally, Wesley explains that beyond our gifts and responsibilities, the image of God is one that makes us beings made of love. The image of God is one of love.

Think of this image of love, again, not as a picture, but more like a mirror that is able to reflect the love that God is constantly pouring out. I often describe this as a mirror on a swivel, like a makeup mirror that can turn in most any direction. Yet, due to the sin of the world, the mirror is stuck in a position that does not allow us to reflect the love in ways that God hopes for us. The role of the church is to help people remember they are made in God's image. And, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they can swivel the mirror back again and reflect God's love on the things God intends.

Confirmation is one of the key ways we can help young people engage their identity as humans made in the image of God, understanding that this identity comes with both privilege and responsibility. We are given the opportunity to explore our identity in Christ, the image of God we are most familiar with, and what it means to find our identity there.



The story of the call of Samuel (which we'll explore later in the lesson) is a reminder that God calls young people to claim their identity. It is also a reminder that those who are already mature Christians are there to guide and support young people as they explore their identity. The baptismal and confirmation service include questions for both those being baptized and/or confirmed and those who are present and witnessing this service.

The confirmation process affirms that young people are given an identity as a gift of God and that it is grounded in God's image. This identity empowers them to respond to God and serve God in the world, wherever they are and however they might be led. The charge to others who are present and witnessing the service reminds them that we are all expected to care for one another in faith.

This session offers space for confirmands to explore their identity and their story. They will explore what being made in the image of God means to them and who God might be calling them to be. There will be opportunities for exploring talents and gifts, self-awareness in their identity formation, and how our identities connect to the rest of our world.



SESSION PLAN

Connect with Self Call of Samuel

Opening Circle *Choose one activity from the options given in the Appendix section.*

The Call of Samuel



Background

You might put this section in your own words or simply use it to help confirmands understand the background of the story.

The story of God's call on Samuel's life is one of a young person being chosen by God for a great task. Prior to the main story, Samuel's mother Hannah had been unable to have children. After praying and sacrificing to God at Shiloh, the priest Eli, assuming she was drunk, yelled at her. She explained to Eli that she was praying desperately for God's help. Eli, hearing her honesty, tells her that God will grant what she asks.

Hannah becomes pregnant, gives birth to a son, and names him Samuel. When Samuel is weaned (no longer breastfeeding), she takes him as a child to the temple in Shiloh to be in service to God. Hannah sacrifices and praises God with her now-famous prayer (1 Samuel 2:1-10), thanking God for hearing her need and celebrating a God who hears the needs of those in trouble. As Samuel grows, Hannah brings him new clothes every year, and he continues to serve in the house of God.

This is where we find Samuel, in our core story.

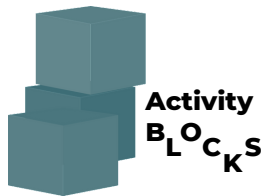


Core Story – 1 Samuel 3 (entire chapter)

- Read the Story
 - We recommend the Common English Bible for use with this curriculum, as it is easy to read and accessible for young people.
 - Options for reading the story: 1) Leader reads it in engaging and dramatic fashion, like a storyteller; 2) Read the story like a play script, dividing up the parts (in this case: a narrator, Samuel, and Eli); 3) Have each participant read a verse or two at a time, then go to the next person.
- More Story Background
 - Share that Samuel will go on to be the prophet who helps deliver Israel from attack, anoints Saul as King, and then anoints David as the King of Israel. (David wrote most of the Psalms!)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

- What does this story say to you?
- What troubles you about this story?
- What questions do you have about this story?
- How do you relate to this story?
- What is God doing in this story?
- What does this story make you want to do?



Activity
BLOCKS

Game: “I Love My Neighbor Who”

Time: As long or short as you want it to be **Needed:** 1 chair for each person, except for one

How to Play: Make a circle of chairs. Have enough seats for everyone except one person, who will stand in the middle of the circle. The person in the middle begins the game by saying their name and the statement, “I love my neighbor who _____.” The person fills in the blank with a characteristic, such as the color of an article of clothing, a personality trait, or an interest. Examples might be, “I love my neighbor who is wearing red.” “I love my neighbor who is outgoing.” “I love my neighbor who loves pizza.” Or my personal favorite, “I love ALL MY NEIGHBORS!” Then, everyone who fits the category in the statement, including the person in the middle, stands up and quickly tries to find a new seat. The person left without a chair stands in the middle and continues with “My name is _____, and I love my neighbor who...”

Tips: Chairs are easier to play with than couches. Encourage the confirmands (and the adult and/or older youth helpers) to be creative with their characteristics; don’t just use visible traits. Also, before you begin, remind everyone to be respectful and not use characteristics that might be hurtful or mean or single anyone out.



Timeline Activity

Time: 10-20 minutes **Needed:** Paper, writing utensils (pens, pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers, etc).

Directions: Encourage the confirmands to draw a timeline of their lives, marking the important life events; naming important people/mentors; etc. You may keep this simple or offer more in-depth instructions, if you have time, adapting this “River of Life” activity at <https://onbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/on-being-river-of-life-exercise.pdf> (estimated time:15-30 minutes).

Spiritual Practice: Journaling

Give each confirmand a small notebook or journal to use throughout the confirmation experience. This can be a simple one-subject notebook, a nice journal, or a simple half inch binder with notebook paper. Encourage confirmands to write or draw their reflections, noting any questions that come up during confirmation or at other times. Encourage journaling as a spiritual practice of reflecting on and processing life events. Maybe choose to spend five minutes of each confirmation session to give confirmands time to reflect in their journals: “What is something that will help you remember what we explored today in confirmation?”

Optional: Have confirmands decorate their notebook covers. *See Dropbox section in the Appendix.*

“THIS IS ME”

Time: 5-15 minutes **Needed:** Phone, tablet, or computer with the ability to access music

Directions: Encourage confirmands to think for a few minutes about a song that describes them (their personality, their background, their calling, their interests - any one or more of these things). Note that the song can be from any genre (specifically religious or secular). Allow them to look up songs on their phones/devices if they have them. Once you’ve allowed them space and time to decide on a song, form a circle. Go around the circle and have each confirmand share the song they chose and why. Allow them to play (or sing, or read lyrics from) the song for the group.

Our Identity in Christ - Baptism

Time: 5-15 minutes **Needed:** A large bowl, a pitcher of water, a Bible, a hand towel or paper towels; name tags or stickers that say “I am a beloved Child of God.”



Directions: Display a large bowl for the whole group to see. Invite someone in the group to pour a pitcher of water into the bowl. Share that we pour the water into the bowl to center our minds as we consider the story of Jesus' baptism.

Have confirmands open their Bibles to the story of Jesus being baptized (Matthew 3:13-17). Read the story together. Reflect on the story, asking:

- *What speaks to you in this story?*
- *What images come to mind when considering this story?*

Perhaps explain that, as United Methodists, we focus on the part of the story when God says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." God named Jesus as God's Son when he was baptized. When we are baptized, we are welcomed into the family of God. (Note: Other denominations might focus on the part of the story where Jesus says, "I need to be baptized." They consider baptism an ordinance rather than a sacrament, as United Methodists do. An ordinance is an action performed in obedience to God. The focus is more on the person choosing; whereas, for United Methodists, the focus is on God's action of offering grace and claiming us as God's beloved children.

Encourage each confirmand to come forward to touch the water. As they touch the water, place the sticker/nametag on them that says, "I am a beloved child of God."

Reflect: What does it mean that we are beloved children of God?

Option: Have each confirmand turn to another and say, "You are a beloved child of God."

Index Card Identity

Time: 5-10 minutes

Needed: One index card for each person (any size); writing utensil (markers, pen/pencil, or colored pencils)

Directions: Have each confirmand get an index card and a writing utensil. Have confirmands write their name in big lettering on the card. Encourage them to write three positive words or phrases that describe them. Then, encourage them to write three roles or relationships they play (daughter, brother, student, teammate). Lastly, have them write on the card "child of God." Encourage confirmands to put the index card somewhere they will see it every day as a reminder that they are a beloved child of God.

Closing Circle



See Appendix for options.

Additional Resources

Youth Leader Development – 3 Big Questions that Change Every Teenager (Powell, Griffin). Check your Conference Resource Center for availability. The book unpacks three big questions that each teenager asks: "Who am I?" "Where do I belong?" and "What difference can I make?"

NOTE: *The remaining sessions can be done in any order.*