

Confirming Our Faith for 160 Years—Part 4

The Secular Significance of Confirmation, etc.

Before we get into the subject of the conclusion of this series, let us take a look at what else Pastor Munch's wife Caja had to say about Confirmation, which I found rather enlightening.

Quoting further from the letter written on October 28, 1857 by Caja Munch (see Part 3):

... (Munch) started early Sunday morning to register more than twenty children who were to be christened, and their godparents; then eight children presented themselves as they wished to be confirmed; these were very carefully catechized for several hours, and he accepted six of them. Then the service (location unknown – JAS) started in the same small parlor crowded with people...

You are surprised, maybe, that Munch could confirm these children without having more knowledge of the Christian faith. But it is really the dire need that forces the ministers in America to take this step; as soon as they realize that, due to the great distances, the children do not have the opportunity to benefit from the guidance of a minister, they reluctantly perform this function when it is requested, hoping that the Lord will add His blessings to it for the future; otherwise, these children would grow up without being confirmed, as so many unfortunately do, which certainly would not be any better.

Knowing that the Pastors who came over here were usually quite strict and bound to the rituals and traditions of the State Church of Norway I must say I was gratified, if more than a bit surprised, to find that they could be so understanding of the situation, and *that* compelled by the practicality of the solution (but I have said, many times, that the Norwegians were nothing if not pragmatic*).

From the moment they made the difficult decision to leave their beloved homeland, the immigrants' lives were in constant turmoil. When any group is in transit for an extended period, established and structured systems such as education cannot be sustained. The demands of pioneer life along with a serious shortage of ordained ministers in the settled areas, much less on the frontier, meant that it took quite some time to restore those activities.

Although not the most ideal situation, basic ministerial needs could and did have to wait for sporadic visits from dedicated outlying pastors, but confirmation instruction had to be carried out on a regular long-term basis and for that they needed a permanent pastor. It's no surprise then, that our first class of youthful aspirants were confirmed in 1860, one year after the arrival of Rev. N.E.S. Jensen, who left Norway with his bride, Hannah, to serve the Norwegian Lutherans of Houston, Rushford, Highland Prairie and Elstad. From that time on there would be a class confirmed almost every year up to the present, and soon the settlers would be able to hold the ceremonies in their very own church.

Not only was Confirmation a very important, and by then traditional, religious ceremony it also carried with it significant social ramifications as a major rite of passage in their secular lives. Of course, we still have confirmation, but now the important milestones that are attained at ages 18 and 21 are much more associated with reaching adulthood.

In the old days Confirmation pretty much corresponded with Eighth Grade Graduation from country school, and since very few went on to high school, this marked the end of formal education for most. The Confirmands were now thought to be mature enough to take jobs "off the farm" and school would no longer interrupt their workdays (although there were many who did take jobs off the farm at younger ages as well). Their social lives were also expanding, since they now had more "leave" to interact with their contemporaries on a more mature level.

This marker of societal advancement was well known to the older ones we talked to back in the late 1980s, when people still knew about the *gamle-tids* (old times). Ingrid Julsrud shared with us examples she remembered from her younger days: "They're not old enough to do that—they're not even confirmed yet!" someone would say, or "She can't go to dances—she isn't confirmed yet!"

—Continued next month.

— Jim and Shelley, *Cross of Christ Archives*, April 2020