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"And the Word was made flesh?" – Exploring young people's situated learning in leadership and spirituality in a secular context

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Abstract

This article explores the situated learning found among 18 young volunteers taking part in an education programme about leadership and Christian spirituality in the Church of Sweden. Focus group interviews and observations are analysed in the framework of situated learning, using legitimate peripheral participation as a lens. The study shows how the young people, through the education programme, formed a safe community where new identities were shaped through participating in new ways of worship, making pilgrimages, engaging in peer dialogue, and in reflection. They also gained new perspectives and models for volunteering. The young people´s experience of living in a secular culture presents challenges to their identity formation and to their ongoing spiritual practice and development. The use of situated learning provides a deeper understanding of the process of learning in spirituality and of the problems associated with conflicting communities of practice.

Keywords

Christian spirituality – leadership – secularization – situated learning – Sweden – young volunteers.

1 Introduction

> And, that was totally amazing. We were about 20 persons who dared to sing, pray and read with emphasis. It was such fun! I can't even name it. I could totally relate – take it to my heart, what we did and said.
>
> GIRL, AGE 18

Learning in Christian faith and spirituality in secular societies is challenging for both the educator and the learner. Still, churches in such contexts create programmes and activities aimed at creating conditions for religious growth. Of special interest are often young people, seen as most vital for the life of the church, and representing the future.[1] But how can one speak of faith and spirituality in a society where the norm is secular; and more specifically how can learning take place?

Based on a case study, I shall explore learning in leadership, faith and spirituality within an education programme for young volunteers, in one of the most secular countries in the world, namely Sweden.[2] In a large parish in the Lutheran Church of Sweden, some young volunteers in confirmation work had chosen to take part in a newly initiated education programme aimed at deepening their spirituality and developing them as leaders.[3] As a researcher, I followed this group, in dialogue with the priest responsible for the programme, with the purpose of studying the young people's spiritual journey. More specifically, I posed questions about how learning in faith and spirituality took place in this context; what fostered learning and what inhibited it? I was prompted by experiences such as that of the 18-year-old girl cited in the foregoing quote.

In order to make sense of this kind of experience, I started out with a contextual understanding of learning, an approach which would suit both the subject studied and the secularized social context. Firstly, learning in Christian faith and spirituality in secularized societies takes place in specific (Christian) contexts: contexts that are often separated from society at large. Secondly, the learning that took place was concrete and contextual, involving different spaces, times and practices. The social and practical aspects of learning were

1 Roth, Andrew, *Faith formation in a secular age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academics, Baker Publishing group, 2017), xix.

2 Sweden is one of the Nordic countries in Europe, with approximately 10 million inhabitants.

3 The fluid concept of spirituality is used openly and alternatively to faith in the text, concerning convictions, experiences, and practices that embody a relationship of trust in God. See Sheldrake, Philip. *Spirituality. A Brief History*. (UK, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

thus important for understanding the young persons' experiences in this programme. What happened was highly situated in social practices, and could be described as situated learning.

> (---) learning is not merely situated in practice – as if it were some independently reifiable process that just happened to be located somewhere; learning is an integral part of generative practice in the lived-in world.[4]

Learning in this respect is thus always situated and embodied, and cannot be reduced simply to mental processes or cognitive understanding. The learner gradually masters and gets to know Christian faith and spirituality by practising and living in a community that allows for this kind of activity. This type of situated learning bridges over the divide found between learner and context that is inherent in sociocultural theories. The focus is no longer on "receiving" a body of knowledge about the world, but rather emphasises activity in the world. In the view of the agent, activity and the world mutually constitute each other.[5] I shall return to the theoretical discussion of situated learning when dealing with material and method. But first, some words about the context of the study.

2 The Lutheran Church of Sweden in Context

During recent decades, the number of people belonging to the Lutheran Church of Sweden has diminished gradually.[6] In 1972, almost everyone – at least 95 per cent – belonged to the Church of Sweden, and by 1995 this had dropped to 86 per cent.[7] In 2000, the year of separation of the church from the state, 83 per cent of the Swedish population belonged to the Church of Sweden. These figures have continued to fall, being 70 per cent and 58 per cent in 2010 and 2018 respectively. The numbers for church attendance, baptisms, church weddings, and confirmations show a similar declining trend. During the last three decades, the number of churchgoers has more than halved. Even

4 Lave, Jean and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35.

5 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 33.

6 The work and life of the Lutheran Church of Sweden had been governed by the state until the year 2000.

7 The decline till then was due both to members leaving the church and to immigrants of other religions or denominations arriving in Sweden. Before 1996 one automatically became a member of the Church of Sweden by birth, rather than by baptism.

more significant for this study is the proportion of 15-year-olds taking confirmation, which has gone from 63 per cent in 1990 to 23 per cent in 2018.[8]

The commitment and formal affiliation to institutional religion, especially to Christian churches, are thus in steady decline in Sweden. More generally, we see a seemingly contradictory trend: on the one hand, a growing secularization in the population; on the other, an increasing religious and ethnic pluralism and diversity.[9]

As a result of widespread secularization and the declining participation in church activities, knowledge about religion and spirituality is now generally low in Sweden. People are becoming less religious, and remain unconnected with faith or world-view communities. To be active in a church and to practise institutional religion in such a society is even rarer, and might be regarded as somewhat awkward or even stupid.[10]

Consequently, young people grow up in a society characterized by religious decline; they encounter less religious tradition, and thus often live their lives without any profound contact or knowledge about what it means to practise religion.[11] Hence, for a majority of the population, even those belonging to the Lutheran Church of Sweden, the media and religious education in school are the most commons sources of young people's awareness of religion in any way.[12]

We see a paradox in Sweden and other European countries: whilst religion is becoming more diverse and visible in the public sphere, secularization is growing at the individual level.[13] Despite the various trends towards secularization, there is too a disenchantment with the secular mentality and with the rationalistic, economic practices which shape a growing number of Western societies, including Sweden.[14]

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8 The decline in confirmation numbers started during the last decades of the twentieth century. In 1970 more than 80 per cent of those aged 15 took confirmation.

9 Furseth, Inger, ed. *Religious Complexity in the Public Sphere Comparing Nordic Countries* (New York: Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), 17.

10 Thurfjell, David, *Det gudlösa folket: de postkristna svenskarna och religionen.* (*A people without God: post-Christian Swedes and religion.*) (Stockholm: Nordsteds förlag, 2015).

11 Klingenberg, Maria. Youth and Religion in Sweden: Orientations to Religion Amongst "Believers," "Atheists and "the Uninterested". In *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society.* 2019, Vol. 32. No 2. 148–167.

12 Löfstedt, Malin & Anders Sjöborg, Unga, religion och lärande (*Youth, religion and learning*) (Malmö: Gleerups, 2019).

13 Davie, Grace, *Religion in Britain: A Persistent Paradox* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2015), Woodhead, Linda & Rebecca Catto, eds. 2012. *Religion and Change in Modern Britain*. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2012).

14 Cassanova, José, 2018, "The Karel Dobbelaere lecture: Divergent global roads to secularization and religious pluralism", in *Social Compass* 2018, Vol. 65(2) 187–198 DOI:10.1177/0037768618767961.

3 The Education Programme and the Research Design – Materials and Method

During the spring and summer of 2019, I became associated with an education programme for young volunteer leaders in confirmation work in the Lutheran Church of Sweden.[15] The programme took place in a parish with a large congregation and having an extensive confirmation and youth work schedule with plenty of active youth volunteers.[16] During early 2019, all their young volunteers were offered a continuation of their previous leadership training in the church. Eighteen young people (8 boys, 10 girls), aged from 17 to 21, signed up and took part in the education programme.

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose was to develop the participants as leaders and to contribute to their spiritual growth, especially in relation to their volunteer work with confirmands. The programme was planned and led by a priest, together with an older youth leader from another parish, and consisted of two parts. The first part comprised several gatherings in the home parish in Sweden, whilst the second entailed an intensive residential week at Assisi in Italy.

Initially, in spring 2019, the young people met together for nine Sundays and celebrated the main Sunday service together, followed by a two-hour seminar. The seminars covered education about leadership and Christian faith. They always involved group discussion and the sharing of different kinds of experience among the members, as well as individual or group assignments.

After these nine Sunday events, the participants went as pilgrims to Assisi for seven days, where they lived communally at a monastery hosted by Bridgettine nuns.[17]

As researcher, I followed this group of young people, in dialogue with the priest responsible. During the services and seminars in part one, I conducted participatory observations. I was also given access to the teaching material used. Further, I visited the weekly youth service in the parish and talked with some of the young people afterwards. During the last three days of the week in Assisi, I took part in pilgrimages, worships, and everyday life, and made

15 The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

16 Training for young volunteers in the Church of Sweden is organized locally in parishes or dioceses. In this parish, there are approximately 450 confirmands each year (60 per cent of the year cohort).

17 The Bridgettines, or Bridgettine Order. The Order of the Most Holy Saviour (Latin: Ordo Sanctissimi Salvatoris), abbreviated as O.Ss.S., informally known as the Bridgettines or Bridgettine Order, is a monastic religious order of Augustinian nuns, religious sisters and monks, founded by Saint Bridget of Sweden (Birgitta) in 1344.

participatory observations following an observation guide. The field notes are structured around elements on psychical environment, the participants – activities and interactions -, and other factors like informal, unplanned activities, symbolic meaning, and non-verbal communication.

During those final days in Italy, I also conducted three focus group interviews with participants.[18] The focus group interviews were semi-structured and thematically organized around the members' religious background and role in the parish, their experiences of different aspects of the education programme, and their relationships to friends and peers outside the church. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. An additional, more formal interview was conducted with the pedagogue responsible in the parish, concerning the organization and rationale of their youth work in general. In addition, I made a visit to a confirmation camp during the summer, where some of the young volunteers served as leaders.

The material as a whole thus comprises: the formal steering documents in the parish concerning teaching in general, and confirmation and young volunteers in particular; the field notes from participatory observations from both Sweden and Italy; the focus group interviews; and the additional formal interview.

A guiding principle in processing and analysing the material has been to maintain faithfulness to the perspective of the young people. In the analysis, I have tried always to be sensitive to their experience. The perspective is thus on them, their saying and doing, and on what has been and is important to them, using both observation and interview material.

The choice of learning theory for interpreting the material has been made with the intention of doing justice to these young people's processes and the findings yielded by the material. I started out with a broad perspective on learning, and explored several different learning theories. In this hermeneutic process, situated learning stood out as a suitable perspective.[19] The analysis thus has focused on how learning as a process has taken place in a participatory framework. Furthermore, the material showed how learning in faith and spirituality came about through an increased access to performance and

18 Each focus group was made up of five members. Two boys did not want to take part in the interview, and one girl involuntarily missed the interview.

19 The Finnish researcher Jouko Porkka partly uses the theory of situated learning in his thesis that deals with young confirmed volunteers in Finland. Se Purkka, Jouko. *The Young Confirmed Volunteers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Motivation, Religiosity, and Community*. (Tampere: Diaconia University Applied Sciences, 2019).

practice, and not primarily by talking about it. In this kind of theory, learning is thus viewed as integral to, and as an inseparable aspect of, social practice.

This implies a theoretical perspective where knowledge is relational, and that learning is motivated by engagement and search for meaning. By developing situated leaning as *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP), Lave and Wenger create an analytical standpoint for understanding learning, and for interpreting a community of membership which signifies learning.[20] The idea of legitimate peripheral participation was linked to the idea of a community of practice, originally to specific occupational communities. [21] The theory was immediately accepted and new approaches to learning were revealed in a number of studies in an array of learning situations.[22]

Legitimate in this view concerns the legitimacy of participation by defining characteristic ways of belonging to a social group and activity, and is therefore a constitutive element of and crucial for learning.[23] *Peripheral* refers to the location of the participation in the social world in question. There are more or less engaged and inclusive ways of being located in the activity or practice.[24] The *participation* could be more or less full, in contrast to partial participation. There is thus neither centre nor core in the activity or practice; only either greater or lesser degrees of participation. Initially, entering a given community, learners are legitimate peripheral participants and with experience can become full participants with the attendant identity shifts.[25] This is thus a gradual process for the newcomer, successively gaining access to sources for understanding through growing involvement.[26]

The framework of legitimate peripheral participation means shifting the analytical focus from the individual learner to learning as participation in a social world, taking part in social practices.[27] The learning thus involves the

20 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 40.

21 Midwives, tailors, quartermasters and butchers were studied, and the participation in the community of non-drinking alcoholics was also included. Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation,* chapter 3.

22 Consalvo, Annamary L., Diane L. Schallert, Elric M. Elias. *An examination of the construct of legitimate peripheral participation as a theoretical framework in literacy research.* In Educational Research Review 16 (2015) 1–18.

23 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 36.

24 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 36.

25 O´Donnell, Victoria L and Jane Tobbell, "The transition of adult students to higher education: legitimate peripheral participation in community of practice?" In *Adult Education Quarterly*, Vol. 57 No.4 312–328. August 2007.

26 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 37.

27 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 43.

whole person and implies becoming a full participant, a member of a social world, a kind of person who belongs in that world.[28]

Legitimate peripheral participation has been discussed critically over the past 25 years. One concern is the problem of defining who is an "old-timer" and who is a newcomer in a community of practice. This division privileges some people over others, and downplays a newcomer´s perspectives and knowledge, and can hide the tensions between conflicting goals and aspirations. Wenger thus addresses this problem with power in later works. I will return to the power dynamics in relation to the youth in the final discussion.[29] Related to this power dimension is the problem with the binary split that the language implies, where LPP could be viewed as the opposite to full participation. Lave and Wenger do in fact discuss this potential objection in their initial work. Nevertheless, critics of the theory have stressed that everyone´s participation is legitimately peripheral in some respect. In the course of time, new theories and perspectives have developed and new constructs of community of practice have been added, such as affinity spaces, knowledge collectives, or knowledge communities. Furthermore, the use of practice in theoretical settings has been widely elaborated, and sometimes explicitly related to learning as LPP. Not least, Bourdieu´s construct of doxa and habitus brings new and additional perspectives to the LPP.[30] Lave and Wenger did however enter the discussion on practice theory in their initial work.[31]

The analysis of the material, building on the theoretical framework of LPP, has been guided by questions about belonging to and engagement in the education programme, the group and the activities. In what ways did the young people take part in the practices and activities? What did they find meaningful, and what contributed to participation?

In the following sections, the situated learning among the participants is elaborated. Their learning has taken place in several different overlapping

28 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 53.

29 Wenger, E. "Communities of Practice and Social Learning Systems: the Career of a Concept" in *Social Learning Systems and Communities of Practice.* Ed. Blackmore, Chris. (Springer-Verlag: London, 2010).

30 Consalvo, Annamary L., Diane L. Schallert, Elric M. Elias. *An examination of the construct of legitimate peripheral participation as a theoretical framework in literacy research.*

31 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation,* 50–51. "Briefly, a theory of social practice emphasizes the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing. It emphasizes the inherently socially negotiated character of meaning and the interested concerned character of the thought and action of person-in-activity. This view also claims that learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world."

areas or dimensions. The analysis, grounded in the experiences and observations of the young people, has been organized in four themes: the first two concern the practices of worship and pilgrimage; there follow two themes dealing with the young persons' experiences and reflections on taking part in the education programme.[32]

4 Situated Learning – Analysis and Results

The young people's previous experiences, their beliefs and ideas will all mould the starting point for the legitimate peripheral participation. The meaning which they construct around the education programme will in turn influence their participation.[33] Therefore, some brief notes about those involved are important for understanding their learning.

The young people in focus have been practising Christians, usually in the context of their confirmation, when passing through the basic leadership training, and when working as youth leaders in confirmation-training and in summer camps. In addition, some of them go occasionally to the youth service which is held in the parish one evening each week. As volunteers, they have mainly been responsible for leisure activities with the confirmands, but from time to time have led prayer or an aspect of worship. Naturally, their spiritual backgrounds differ, but in general their experiences are limited to practices that have been available in their home parish during their own confirmation and as volunteers. Very few, if any, have been raised in homes where Christianity is actively practised, though some of them have a Christian grandparent or parent and have attended church services from time to time, especially during church festivities.

4.1 *New Ways of Worship*

During the education programme, Christian practices new to the participants were introduced. In the nine Sunday services at home, the young people took an active part, and carried out assignments such as carrying the cross or candles in the procession, reading biblical texts, or leading the common prayer.

In the seminars that followed each service, they explored the main church service by addressing and discussing its different parts. Existential questions

32 All four themes are generated from the aggregated material, focus groups interviews, observations, and teaching.

33 O´Donnell, Victoria L and Jane Tobbell, "The transition of adult students to higher education: legitimate peripheral participation in community of practice?".

concerning evil, gratitude, loss, love, and compassion were also raised. The questions were discussed both theologically and from the young persons' own experiences, thereby becoming relevant to everyday life.

Regular and active participation in the church´s main Sunday service was not something any of them were used to. It had a reputation among them of being boring, exclusive and hard to understand. However, several of the young people expressed a growing appreciation of the Sunday service. This happened gradually: through regularly taking part in the service and through exploring its constituent parts in the seminars. The service thereby became more and more meaningful and connected to positive experiences of belonging, recognition, and peace. "You go with the flow, and then it becomes cosier each time." (Girl, age 16)

Their experiences were furthered by their active participation in the service, which created a heightened presence and made them feel at home. "But, when you take part, you feel even more connected and part of the assembly." (Girl, age 18) The positive responses they received from the rest of the congregation for their presence, and for actively taking part, also made them feel welcomed and at home. The cognitive understanding of the meaning of the various parts of the service helped them relate emotionally to, for instance, the absolution of sin, or the praising of God in the Gloria, which contributed to their learning. However, the main Sunday service can still remain somewhat alien, because of the partly unfamiliar choice of hymns and the composition of the congregation, consisting as it does of mainly older people.

The more intense spiritual practice during the days in Assisi marked a radical intensification and introduced new ways of worship. Each day they celebrated morning and daytime prayer, evening prayer with Eucharist, and night prayer, all in the format of the Liturgy of the Hours, in the monastery where they were resident. The young people took it in turn to lead the prayers or the singing, or to give a short sermon.[34]

Gradually they learned and came to appreciate the fixed readings and responses to the prayers in the Liturgy of the Hours. The readings were important per se, but also as a format for the daily prayer: morning, mid-day and evening.

> The prayer is deepening – you start to reflect on the meaning of the readings, instead of just "babble" – you are thinking of the intention behind the words.
>
> BOY, AGE 17

34 The week in Assisi was structured via a booklet giving a theme, biblical text, pilgrimage, questions, etc. for each day.

What was initially experienced as formal and old-fashioned gradually became more and more meaningful and intentional for them. Words and sentences could, all of a sudden, stand forth in new light and meaning. Not only the content of the prayers but also the fixed structure within each prayer session and their shaping of the day were appreciated. The fixed structure contributed to security and relaxation in the prayers and in the hours of the days.

Taken together, the young people involved have acquired a deeper understanding and appreciation of the main Sunday service and of the Liturgy of the Hours. This has happened through their actively taking part in practices new to them, and thereby gaining an understanding of the content, structure and way to behave. Eventually, they could begin to integrate these new ways of worship into a larger system of meaning.[35]

4.2 *Pilgrimage – Narrated Time and Space*

The Italian city of Assisi is a place permeated by Christian narratives, sites, artefacts and persons belonging to a monastic order. Each day of the week in Assisi a new pilgrimage was introduced and performed, together with an existential question coupled with a biblical text. The question and the text were explored during the day, both individually and in groups, and addressed in teaching and services.

The pilgrim walks followed in the footsteps of two thirteenth-century saints: St Francis and St Clare of Assisi. The history and lives of these two saints were progressively revealed. Day by day the participants visited holy sites significant in these saints' often intertwined lives. The narratives in combination with the sites – birthplaces, important churches, convents, tombs, and pathways relating to St Francis and St Clare – evoked an interest in the history, life, and beliefs of these saints, and eventually for Christian life in general.[36] "It´s been interesting to visit all the churches, and listen to all the stories behind. (---). It´s not just a church, but so much more." (Girl, age 16)

35 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 53.

36 The city of Assisi in northern Italy is very much centred around the religious lives of these saints, with an emphasis on the life and work of St Francis. However, the education programme also incorporated the life and work of St Clare, who was contemporary with St Francis and also his friend. Both saints were born in Assisi, lived most of their lives there and are buried there. The large Basilica of St Francis of Assisi, where his crypt is located, is the mother church of the Roman Catholic Order of Friars Minor. Among other places visited were St Francis's home and birthplace, the church where St Francis and St Clare were baptized, the location of the first Franciscans' settlement, and San Damiano, the first convent where St Clare built her community.

Moving around in spaces that have embodied Christian life over the centuries and still do so today made these young people aware of other ways of living, believing and finding one's purpose in life. The sites, narratives, and artefacts helped them to create a social relationship to Christian life and practice.

During the days in Assisi, there were stops along the pilgrim walks: in a church, at a hillside, or for worship in the outdoor environment, for silence and individual reflection. Also, during worship and prayer, important time-lapses occurred that helped the young people calm down and be still. These moments were welcomed, "because I have a hard time winding down, to do that on my own. It´s always something that you have to do." (Girl, age 19) And even going to a "somewhat boring" Sunday service could be appreciated, if only as time set apart when all other activities are put on hold and your body and mind calm down. Specific times being set aside for stillness and reflection thus helped the young people to be present in silence and personal worship.[37]

The pilgrimages also meant concrete physical activity: some walks were hard and strenuous, especially given the heat and sun in the scenic hillsides of Assisi. The participants' emotional responses were also engaged: they experienced awe and enjoyment in the beautiful natural environment, and even tears were shed while walking through forests or over flowering meadows.

The physical dimension of the pilgrimage was appreciated, but was also met with some resistance or worry. They asked: "Will I make it to the top?" or "Can I deal with the heat today?" But the effort, pain and fatigue helped them relax and be present, both during the walks and afterwards. After completing strenuous walks, they felt content, and sometimes proud of themselves for making it. The physical and bodily dimension of pilgrimage thus contributed to relaxation, focus and concentration, and a feeling of contentment with one's performance. A walk up a hill could thus be a time for contemplation, where one could be present as a whole person.

The education programme thus provided specific times and spaces that ensured that the young members took part in different activities and practices. Time and space were loaded with Christian narratives, questions and artefacts that gave direction, content and focus when moving through the days. Though it was not specified as time and space for reflection as such, the combination of activity with narrative and teaching did contribute to learning in Christian spirituality.

37 Field notes, services 2019-03-30, 2019-05-12.

4.3 *Dialogue, Spiritual Development and Identity*

The participants did not know one another very well before the programme began. Some of them had met at gatherings in church, others had worked together on summer camps, but they had discussed neither leadership experiences nor faith matters with one another.

One of the most important features for the young people proved to be their conversations and ongoing dialogue during the programme. All of them express how the discussions they had in seminars in Sweden, and in groups whilst in Assisi, were most valuable. These discussions often expanded into everyday activities, during meals, walks and so on. "They have not really stopped. We have talked at night time, and then we have talked while walking." (Girl, age 19)

In the seminars in Sweden, they shared experiences gained from working with confirmands in different settings. Further, they reflected together on the meaning of theological concepts such as sin, forgiveness or human dignity, whether in their own lives or as volunteers with confirmands.[38] By listening to one another they attained perspectives on their own ideas and beliefs, because "others have better ways of expressing it" (Girl, age 18), and when one listens to someone else "it helps one to find one own position" (Girl, age 19). But the conversations also meant acquiring a language for expressing and discussing faith and existential issues. "To express my faith, and to share my thoughts and listen to others." (Boy, age 17)

During the time in Italy, the members were divided into smaller, fixed discussion groups that gathered each night.

> Yes, we got questions, and one ponders on them almost all day, discusses them a bit, then one does something else and then gets back to them again.
>
> BOY, AGE 17

In this way, the conversations deepened during the week in Assisi – being together for a whole week also strengthened their fellowship and mutual trust.

The trust that had been built within the group made them confident and willing to share their personal reflections on what matters most in life and about one's identity.

> What do I want in life? What is important to me? What makes me sad? What do I need? To get to know oneself in this way. One sort of finds one's faith.
>
> GIRL, AGE 19

38 Field note, seminars 2019-03-30, 2019-04-07, 2019-04-14, 2019-05-12.

In reflection, a young person can connect existential questions about identity and meaning with Christian faith and identity. Maturing as a person is thus connected to faith.

> I have learned that neither my faith nor others´ faith, nor Christianity historically are static. It grows, it is not finished. And that´s comforting.
>
> BOY, AGE 17

By understanding the evolving nature of Christian faith, one can incorporate a broader repertoire of what it could mean to be a person of faith.

Growing self-knowledge and identity formation are thus not separate from spiritual development; quite the contrary. Getting to know themselves better, and what motivates them in life and as leaders in the church, is intertwined with spiritual development. That meant also opening up and showing vulnerability and doubt, both religious doubt and personal insufficiency. Achieving this kind of openness and personal reflectiveness was an evolving process which was simultaneously both dependent on and contributed to the trust and security within the group as a whole.

Several of the young people describe the growth that has taken place during their years as leaders. Thinking back, they track this process, which started with confirmation, proceeded in their basic leadership training, and continued through being active as a volunteer in the church, and was now being carried further in this structured education programme.

> It feels like you have grown a lot as a human being by being a part of this. It would not have happened outside the church. Grateful! You learn so much from others' experiences, how they think… It is so huge – it´s cool.
>
> GIRL, AGE 18

They describe a process where the time and space in church has been part of shaping them as persons, and is becoming a part of their identities. Consequently, growing self-knowledge and spiritual development are interwoven and seem to support each other.

The opportunity to get to know one another, to develop trust, and to talk about what matters most in life, had a huge impact on them. One can thus recognize a longer process where they have gradually, in different ways, evolved as persons, by practising, discussing and reflecting together. They have thereby, to differing extents, also expanded and incorporated a spiritual and Christian language as members in a community.

4.4 *New Perspectives, Leadership Roles, and Models*

The priest and the youth leader who planned and conducted the education programme provided materials, methods, and experiences from youth ministry beyond the home parish. At the seminars in Sweden new leadership theories and methods were discussed. Based on leadership theories, such as the FIRO-theory, both theoretical and practical moments were introduced in order to create a tight-knit team among the young people.[39] The participants were offered theoretical knowledge about leadership in faith-based organizations, and simultaneously they took part in exercises and practices that carried them along in the very same group process that they were studying. The moments of practical team-building included in the programme explicitly contributed to the building of a community.[40]

The teaching, the group activities and the sharing of experiences among the young people gave them new insights and knowledge about leadership. New ways of understanding their role as leaders and of group processes prompted their reflections and were used in relation to real examples from their work with confirmands.[41]

The entire education programme – the group process and the practices they took part in, with sermons, prayers, assignments, questions, and associated materials – became a sort of toolkit for the participants. The different parts of the programme, when taken as a whole, thus gave the members models and methods for leadership in the parish context.

> And I think that the questions were great. And the booklet, just to have that, with texts and prayers, to have that as a leader when you yourself will do it, that´s great.
>
> GIRL, AGE 19

39 The FIRO-theory (FIRO®, Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation) is a comprehensive and widely-used theory of interpersonal relations created by Will Schutz, Ph.D., introduced in 1958 in the book FIRO: A Three-Dimensional Theory of Interpersonal Behavior. Schutz originally devised the theory to measure and predict the interaction between people to assemble highly productive teams. But also, other theories and models were used, e.g. a Swedish organizational theory named KRAM: Kärlek, Rationalitet, Auktoritet och Mening. (Love, Rationality, Authority and Meaning) Brytting, Thomas & Westelius, Alf. *Förnuft och känsla: om organisering för att må bra.* (*Rationality and emotion: organization for well-being*) (Stockholm: Saltsjöbaden, 2004).

40 Field note, seminar 2019-04-14. The youth discussed love, relationality, authority and meaning in leadership. Se the note 37. Several of them stressed the importance of meaning both in their own role as leaders, and it´s importance for the motivation of the confirmands.

41 Field note, seminar 2019-04-14.

The schedule, with its different practices, assignments, and extra-curricular activities, contributed to an embodied knowledge that they hope to carry further as leaders in the church.

In the seminars, the members tried to make connections between faith, spirituality, and leadership, and also between leadership theory and their work with confirmands.[42] One example concerns how methods they use with confirmands are connected to faith. "Yes – ways to forgive and make a fresh start tomorrow, to be able to do that kind of stuff." (Girl, age 19) A theological understanding of forgiveness provides a way of meeting and working with confirmands when there are problems or conflicts.

On a more overarching level, this kind of reflection represents a self-reflexivity that mirrors their changing view or understanding of their place and role as volunteer and leader in the church.

> Perspective on how we work: I have been quite stuck in how things must be done. This is the way we do it, things that I have not even considered as locally established behaviour.
>
> GIRL, AGE 18

The education programme has thus created a space for reflection over the normal praxis in the parish, and they have thereby become able to elaborate and expand their own repertoire of practices as volunteers in church. Moreover, the focus group interview offered an additional opportunity to reflect and share experiences among the young people that could well have contributed to learning.

The team-building, the dialogue among equals, an outside perspective and examples of new ways of practising and reflecting upon issues of theological significance all thus contributed to the young persons' identity formation – both as young volunteers and as Christians.

5 Legitimate Peripheral Participation – Discussion

The young people in this study had some previous experience of, and interest in, the field of leadership and Christian spirituality. Based on their own confirmation and work as volunteers, they freely chose to take part in the programme. But it is fair to say that at the start they were more or less on the periphery of Christian spirituality and leadership in the church.

42 Field note, seminars 2019-03-30, 2019-04-07, 2019-04-14, 2019-05-12.

When, as youth volunteer leaders in the church, they were offered a new education programme, it was usually viewed as an opening to improve and develop.[43] This motivational factor is of prime importance in rendering their participation legitimate. Differing and mixed motives for participation in the education programme were mentioned, from having a fun experience with new friends to going on a spiritual pilgrimage.[44]

Their previous experiences, together with their being motivated, made their partaking in new forms of Christian worship legitimate. They had attended the main Sunday services before, and were now revisiting it regularly as a group. The "old-timers" at the service welcomed them, and the priest introduced, explained and discussed the different parts of the service. Taken together, all this contributed to engagement and growing participation in the Sunday service.

The Liturgy of the Hours, celebrated while in Assisi, was a practice familiar to only a few "old-timers", the priest, the older youth leader and two additional other, more skilled participants. This meant that the young members themselves had to gradually establish a praying community, and simultaneously learn the format and the prayers. By learning the format and taking part, they came to appreciate this kind of prayer. The incorporation of familiar songs and psalms in the worship, and their own partaking in leading prayer, contributed to making the practice legitimate and to the process of shaping a community among them, and eventually to increased participation.

However, some of the young people separated leadership from spirituality and experienced parts of the programme as less relevant to their task as leaders. They asked for more explicit leadership training and concrete methods and ideas while working with confirmands. Different views of the purpose of

43 Previous experience of church and Christian tradition, together with a positive time during their own confirmation, increases the likelihood of a young person becoming a volunteer in church. See Christiansen, Leise & Bernd Krupka. "From the Beginning of Confirmation Time to Two Years After Confirmation: Longitudial Perspectives". In *Confirmation, Faith, and Volunteerism. A longitudinal Study on Protestant Adolescents in the Transition towards Adulthood*. Eds. Schweitzer, Friedrich, Thomas Schlag, Henrik, Simojoki, Kati Tervo-Niemelä & Wolfgan Ilg. (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2017).

44 For some, the journey to Assisi was a motivation to attend the seminars in Sweden and for others, the possibility to grow, to add an extra bullet-point on the CV were mentioned, as were meeting new friends, being able to talk about faith and gain new experiences. Similar mixed motives are indicated in a study of youth volunteers in northern Sweden. See Grahn, Niklas. Ed. *Att leda är att växa. Unga konfirmandledare i Härnösands stift*. (*To Lead is to Grow. Young confirmand volunteers in the Dioses of Härnösand*) (Stockholm: Verbum AB, 2017), 36. See also Purkka, Jouko. *The Young Confirmed Volunteers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Motivation, Religiosity, and Community*, p.44–45.

the programme and especially on the relationship between leadership and spirituality contributed to a lack of understanding about some of the specific features included. Preconceptions about objectives thus impacted upon motivation and the legitimacy of some aspects of the programme.[45]

The possibility of walking around the town of Assisi and on its hills as pilgrims was, from the start, a motivation for participation. The legitimacy of this part of the programme was obvious from the outset. The daily introduction of themes, questions and texts, the narratives about places and saints, and the physical challenge all contributed to making meaning for those taking part and to their learning what it could mean to be a Christian pilgrim. But there were differences among the young people: some found the more intense spiritual practices, especially in Assisi, to be over-emphasised, and asked for more focus on leadership. Others found it hard to see any meaning in all the walks, especially in the more demanding ones! [46]

The ongoing dialogue and discussion among the young people, together with their reflections, whether alone or together, were practices familiar from other contexts. But topics such as sin, shame and forgiveness, or personal existential questions, responsibilities and morality had not been a part of their previous conversation. They were inexperienced newcomers in talking with peers about their own faith. [47] The incorporation of leadership theory in the activities contributed to unity and trust in the group.[48] In this way the theory being learned was put in praxis, and became a part of the process that helped them build a community.

The gradual formation of a community among them, from the very beginning, and even more so through the journey to Assisi, has been of utmost importance for their learning. In this process, they both formed a safe space to dwell in and their own community of practice.

These young people's participation increased gradually, yet differentially, and formed a "new" community of trust. Practising Christianity in new and varied ways alongside more experienced persons, exchanging experiences and reflections with peers over a period of time, and visiting "holy" places have all contributed to identity formation for them.[49]

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45 See also Säljö, Roger. *Lärande i praktiken. Ett sociokulturellt perspektiv*. (*Learning in practice. A sociocultural perspective*) (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2016), 145.

46 Field notes, Assisi, 2019-06-24, 2019-06-25, 2019-06-26.

47 Field notes, Assisi, 2019-06-24, 2019-06-25, 2019-06-26.

48 Field note, seminars 2019-03-30, 2019-04-07, 2019-04-14, 2019-05-12.

49 Pilgrimages to (historic) religious sites are not possible for everyone, note least obvious in the midst of a pandemic. If one should build on the findings in this article, it could be done by creating "local pilgrimage" with religious practices including physical activity. Not least

However, earlier critiques of the learning theory of LPP are also reflected in the results of this study. There were, as we have seen, conflicting goals and aspirations among the participants, and mismatches between the objectives of the education programme and the members' perceptions of those objectives. Participants' preconceptions and goals did affect the legitimacy and authenticity of different parts of the programme, as shown above. The issue of power and complexities of practice-based groups noted by other scholars are also in play in the material. Those members with some degree of conflicting goals, motives, or aspirations did not engage in the spiritual practices to the same extent as others. Some also declined to take part in the focus group interview, and others talked explicitly during the interviews about their conflicting aspirations and hesitancy to play a more active part in the spiritual formation. This kind of competing, withholding, and unequal distribution of power can hamper learning.[50]

Two additional remarks should be added. Firstly, a prominent feature in the participants' comments was the emotion that permeated practices and everyday activities. The very notion of engagement as such entails a variety of emotions, a fact that could be highlighted more explicitly in the theory and as part of the results. In the conversations and reflections there were intensity, laughter, and serenity. Walking in the natural environment evoked awe, wonder, enjoyment, and contentment, but also fatigue, heat and pain.

But there are also further examples of explicit emotional experience of great importance. Such moments are found in the experience of common worship.

> But it is gorgeous to do this reading of prayer by taking turns, and singing those psalms you know by heart. You can close your eyes and sing. Feel it in a different mode.
>
> GIRL, AGE 18

Taken together, the different emotions permeating the practices and activities are not merely a sign of engagement, but examples of aspects of embodied or situated learning that are worthwhile to note theoretically.[51]

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import in a secular context is the possibility to be a part of established spiritual activates. However, building an education for young people must be done contextually, in relation to national culture and to local spiritual, organizational, economical, factors etc.

50 Consalvo, Annamary L., Diane L. Schallert, Elric M. Elias. *An examination of the construct of legitimate peripheral participation as a theoretical framework in literacy research.*

51 See also Zackariasson, Maria. *Gemenskap. Deltagande, identitet och religiositet bland unga i Equmenia*. (*Community. Participation, identity and participation among youth in Equmenia church*.) In this study of youth in the Equmenia church, the role of emotions is stressed

Finally, the creation of a "new" community is significant for this study. It exemplifies the complexity of old-timer and newcomer, by showing that learning takes place among persons of greater or lesser degrees of skill whilst they simultaneously form a community. The old-timers in the education where sensitive and adjusted the format of the education to the newcomers.[52] The learning thus was a two-way process. Furthermore, this "new" community´s role must be noted as providing a safe space. This kind of community is foundational or intrinsic for the spiritual journey and for learning.[53] However, a crucial aspect that needs to be addressed is the willingness and openness in the home congregation to listen and learn from these young leaders.

6 Concluding Remarks

> It is so much easier to believe when you are surrounded by other believers. And it´s more acceptable to believe.
>
> GIRL, AGE 19

> But this training has strengthened me and made me prepared to be more open about my faith.
>
> GIRL, AGE 18

This education programme has created a new community where the young participants have made friends with others who share a similar outlook on life. In this community, they feel safe and respected and have been able to grow spirituality. However, communities are not entirely separate. Cultural systems of meaning are intertwined and dependent on each other.[54] Young

as internal for the young person's motivation and place in this Christian community. (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgfrei Förlag, 2016).

52 Furthermore, the format of this education has been developed and improved during several years.

53 The importance of a community formed by the members of a confirmation group has been recognized in several studies. Se e.g. Purkka, Jouko. *The Young Confirmed Volunteers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Motivation, Religiosity, and Community*. Niemelä, Kati & Wolfgang Ilg. "From Classroom to Camps? Effects of Different Physical Learning Spaces and Teaching Methods in Confirmation Work". In F. Sweitzer, K Niemelä, T. Schlagu & H Simonjoki, eds. *Youth, Religion and Confirmation Work in Europe: the Second Study*. (München: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2015).

54 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 54.

people repeatedly move between different social settings and communities, and therefore have to explore or assume somewhat different identities.

Living in a secular culture and meeting non-religious friends in non-religious contexts, for instance in school, challenges the young people's identities as Christians. In other contexts and communities within Swedish society, basic knowledge about Christianity is, as mentioned, often low, the meaning of faith and spirituality obscure, and a religious way of living is supposed to be highly private.[55]

The young people in this study firmly express how they struggle and negotiate with the prevailing secular culture. It is hard for them to express, and even more so to be confident in, one´s faith when living in a secular context. Many among them have been questioned and ridiculed for being Christian. And, now and then, they find that they must defend or explain what or why they believe.[56]

To develop a new identity, a full participation in a community, is a long-term process that requires continued social practice and activities, in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice.[57] The building of a new community of trust, and the practising of authentic and legitimate spirituality have contributed to the identity formation of these young people. It could be viewed theologically as a way that "the word was made flesh".[58] However, to continue this situated learning, there has to be a safe community in the midst of the secular – one that enables spirituality and faith practices to flourish.

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55 Westerlund, Katarina, "Spirituality and mental health among children and youth – a Swedish point of view." In *International Journal of Children´s Spirituality*. Volume 21, Issue 3–4,2016.

56 This kind of experience of being infringed because of one´s faith is also reported in the report *Unga troende I samhället*, 2020. (*Young believers in society.*) The report builds on a survey of 393 young Christians in Sweden. Almost half of the respondents report being infringed because of their faith.

57 Lave and Wenger, *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, 98.

58 This kind of formation of a person's identity – or "bildung" – could be an example of what the theologian Jakob Wirén is asking for in his study about how the Church of Sweden can work with education and mission. Se Wirén, Jakob. *Utmaningsdriven undervisning. Hur kyrkan kan dela tro och liv idag.* (*Challenge-driven education. Ways for the church to share faith and life today*). (Stockholm: Verbum, 2017).

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