

## 9. Youth and Confirmation Work in Hungary

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### 9.1 Introduction

Hungary is a minor Central-Eastern-European country with a relatively small and slowly decreasing population of less than 10 million. Although Hungary, a NATO-member since 1999 and EU member state since 2004, has a largely westernised culture, its Communist past has evidently left its mark on its society and mentality. After 1990, confiscated properties of the Churches were partly restituted and their social and educational institutions have not only been re-established but even their explosive growth has been witnessed for the past 25 years. State subsidisation of social and religious activities of major Churches stabilised their financial situation. At the same time, however, trends of religious affiliation and practice have not paralleled these changes; after a brief period of a moderate religious revitalising, the number of believers and church members has been continuously declining.

Confirmation has been a living tradition and an integral part of religious education of youth in many Protestant Churches in Hungary from the 16th century onwards. Its practice was first investigated countrywide and cross-denominationally by the second international study on confirmation work in 2012/2013 in which Hungary participated for the first time. Despite its methodological limitations, the results of this study can be regarded as an important possibility for seeing the Hungarian confirmation work in a European perspective.

### 9.2 Religions and Churches in Hungary

While the population in Hungary is predominantly Roman Catholic, it must be noted that a very significant Protestant minority lives in this region. The secularising impact of the four decades of the past Communist era is, however, still evident or even has become more visible only in the recent years by the successive generations (Tomka 1996; Tomka 2010b).

#### *Religious Demography*

Census data from 2011 offer a basis for estimating Hungarian denominational composition. These data show that while today 37% of the entire population claim to belong to the Roman Catholic tradition, the Reformed-Calvinist con-

fession – 12% of the population in about 1200 congregations – is also very significant or even composes a local majority in some townships in the eastern part of the country. The Evangelical Lutheran Church – composing at present 2% of the population in about 450 congregations – has a long historical tradition which is closely linked to the history of Slovak and German minorities since the Reformation period and is still culturally important and widely acknowledged. Methodists belong to the minority Churches in Hungary with a constituency of only 2416 according to the 2011 Census. However, while 18% claimed to be non-denominational, the unusually high share of non-respondents of 27% made the above estimations somewhat uncertain (Csordá ed. 2014). Moreover, the changed wording of the relevant 2001 census question – examining this topic for the first time since 1949 – evidently contributed to an apparent drop in recent church affiliation figures.

Religious change in Hungary can be characterised by the theories of religious individualisation and religious privatisation (Rosta 2012). Youth is, however, becoming more secularised – a truly worrisome consequence for churches in an already aging society (Hámori/Rosta 2014a). In spite of the Religious Education classes in denominational and now also in state-run elementary schools, these negative trends may result from a weakening impact of religious socialisation in the family (Hámori/Rosta 2014b).

Figure 49 of 13- to 14-year-old Protestants calculated from 2011 census data and Protestant confirmands based on available church statistics shows the pace of decline in numbers. Considering that the number of births is also declining in Hungary, this trend shows stagnation.

The gradual declining trends made clear by the above numbers have become a pressing issue for traditional Churches in Hungary in recent years, raising also questions of future financial sustainability of the inherited institutional structure. Vanishing congregations of depopulated communities in disadvantaged rural areas are especially a major concern.

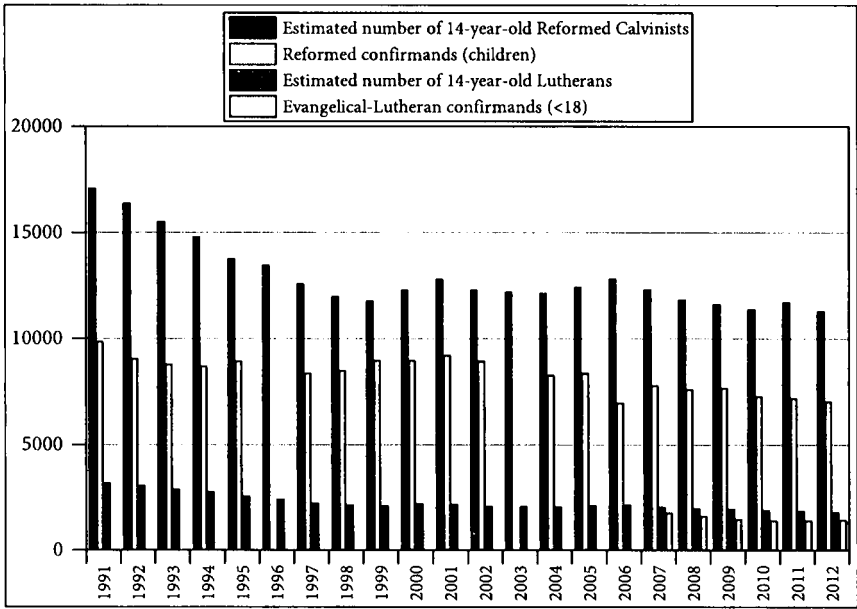
### 9.3 Confirmation Research in Hungary

#### *Methodological Overview*

During the research, the translated and localised versions of questionnaires of the International Confirmation Research in a paper-based, postal, self-administered form were used with stamped, addressed envelopes and detailed instructions included in the packages. As no time and resources were available to conduct a »t<sub>0</sub>« survey to gather contextual and parish data, these items were included in the extended »t<sub>1</sub>« questionnaires for pastors.

In addition to experts of the participating churches, many professionals, re-

Figure 49: Number of 13- to 14-year-old Protestants and Protestant confirmands in Hungary



Sources: Hungarian Census 2011, figures provided by the Synod Office of the Reformed Church in Hungary and the Administrative Centre of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Hungary, own calculations.

representatives and volunteers of the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the Lutheran Theological University, the Reformed Pedagogical Institute, and the »Collegium Doctorem« (an academic circle of Hungarian Reformed theologians) have contributed to the preparation of the research. Offices in charge with catechetical and youth work of the participating churches provided administrative and logistical support for the implementation.

In spite of an initial extensive collaboration of many institutions concerned, the research was hampered by insufficient human resources for its entire duration. Methodological concerns experienced during the study particularly showcase some systemic distortions of Churches in post-Socialist countries. Readers are referred to the chapter on Methodology in this volume for further information about this issue (p. 328 ff.).

*Description of the Sample*

A total of 943 confirmands and 134 workers from altogether 160 congregations responded to at least one or both rounds of the questionnaires. Table 79 summarises the numbers of samples by denomination.

Table 79: Number of questionnaires (Hungary) in 2012/13 by denominations

		sample	t <sub>1</sub>	t <sub>2</sub>	Percentage matched (basis: t <sub>2</sub> )
Reformed sample	units	380	64	35	60%
	confirmands		534	164	76%
	workers		65	40	60%
Evangelical Lutheran sample	units	450	65	27	59%
	confirmands		315	140	71%
	workers		45	19	84%
Methodist sample	units	40	5	4	75%
	confirmands		17	11	91%
	workers		5	3	100%

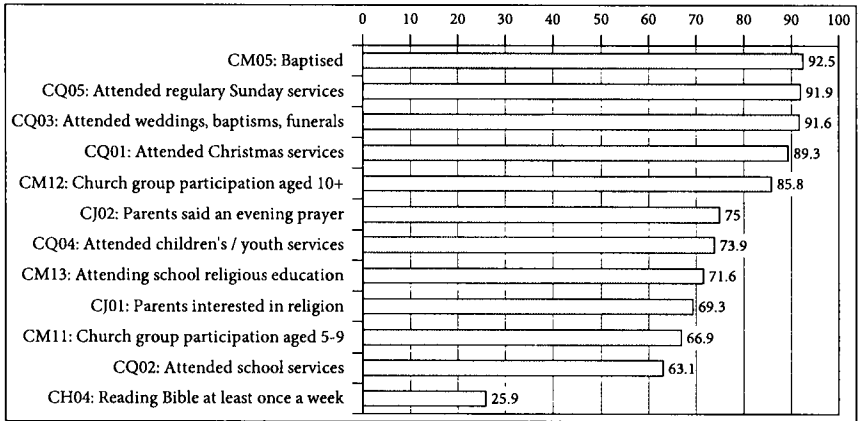
#### 9.4 Major Results

##### *Religious Background and Beliefs of Confirmands*

Figure 50 shows that family acts as a significant religious socialisation background for the confirmands surveyed. A religious service in school was attended at least once by 63% of respondents – the lowest value among indicators about previous religious experiences. Religious socialisation and religious family background and, as a consequence, participation in religious events, religious education, attending a denominational school, etc. go hand in hand and thus confirmation work is also embedded in a series of earlier religious experiences. Individual religious practice expressed by, for example, regular Bible reading is, however, not so typical at this age (26%), a phenomenon explainable by generational characteristics.

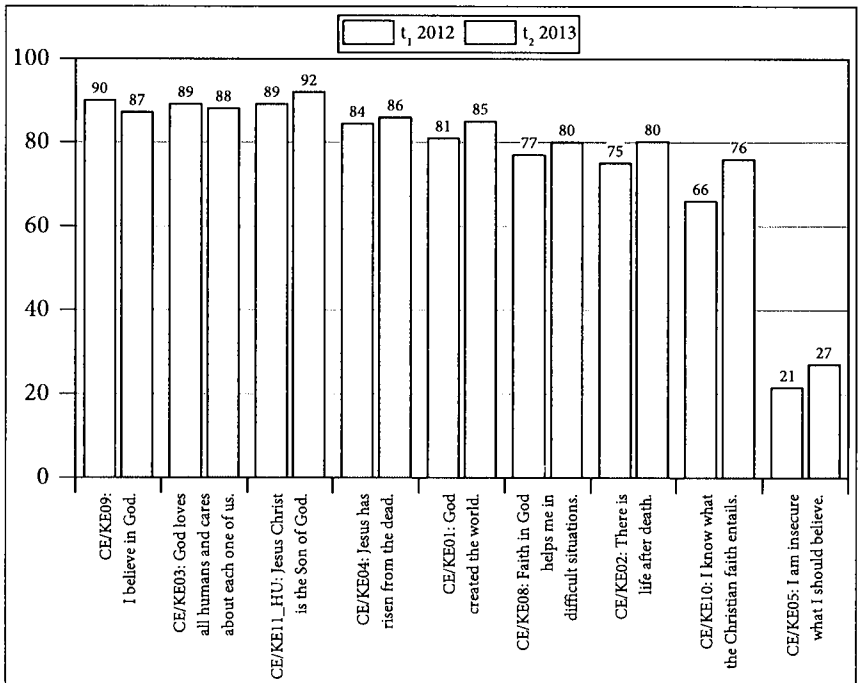
As revealed in Figure 51, key features of Christian teaching (belief in God, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, creation of the world, etc.) have been known and accepted by a large share of respondents already before confirmation time, probably because of their background. These patterns remained basically unchanged or even increased during confirmation time. The highest increase was produced in the case of item CE10 (»I know what the Christian faith entails.«), a comparably low value of 66% within this item set growing by 10 percent points. However, admitting to have an insecure faith also went up by 6 percent points. At the same time, the relatively high level of acceptance of the two most highly approved beliefs (i. e., in a caring God) was reduced a bit by 1 to 3 percent points.

Figure 50: Religious experiences and family background of confirmands in Hungary (%)



N = 575-860; the share of those with a positive response (the scale varies).

Figure 51: Belief of confirmands (t<sub>1</sub> and t<sub>2</sub>) in Hungary (%)

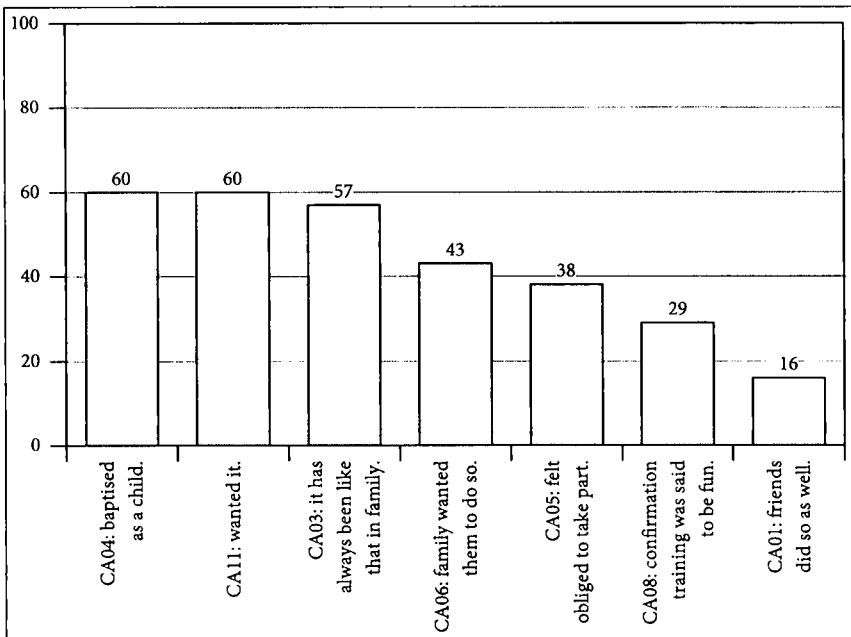


N = 229-237; the share of those with positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

*Motivation, Interest and Personal Purposes*

External motives coming from peers, adults, parents or obligations did not apparently play an important role in enrolling in the confirmation group for most confirmands surveyed. For as many as 57-60%, family traditions or already being close to the church by baptism were as inspiring as their own will to participate (Figure 52). This result strengthens the importance of church and family traditions and shows the relevance of tradition in the missionary endeavours of the church. However, particularities of the age group in question, like the probability of a conformist response as well as the fact that a high share of respondents has been brought up in a religious family should also be taken into account here.

Figure 52: Motivations for participation (t<sub>1</sub>) in Hungary (%)

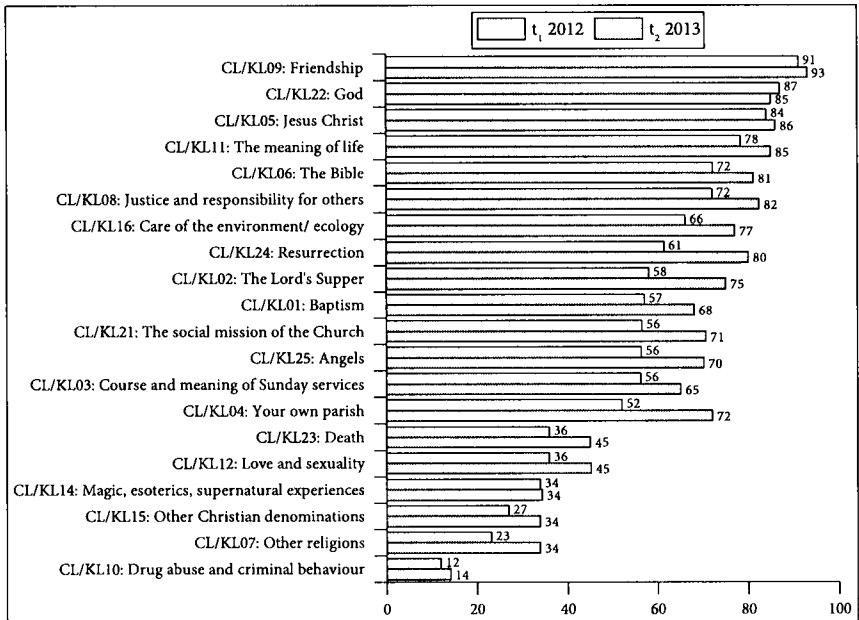


N = 839-843; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

As Figure 53 displays, interest of confirmands in diverse topics included in or related to confirmation is rather multi-faceted and variable. The first group of topics which respondents are highly concerned with, included strictly church-related (God, Jesus Christ, the Bible) and more general ones (friendship, the meaning of life, justice and responsibility, ecology). The share of those being interested in these ranges from 66 to 93% at the beginning and from 77 to

91 % at the end of confirmation time. The second set of topics is which only 52 to 58 % of confirmands are interested in at the start, included church-related topics in the narrow sense. However, by the end of confirmation time, 65-79 % of the confirmands had become interested in these topics of a theological nature (resurrection, the Lord's Supper, baptism, angels) and about the Church as an institution (the parish, the Sunday service, the social mission of the Church), what can be interpreted as a remarkable growth and a manifest success of confirmation work. Finally, the third group of topics appear to be rather unpopular both at the start and at the end of confirmation time, the share of those interested ranging only between 12-36 % and 14-45 %, respectively. While topics like death, magic, crime or other religions might sound sinister in a church environment, love and sexuality can be a topic which teenagers may find too intimate so that they prefer to discuss them in a more confidential setting.

Figure 53: Interest of confirmands in topics of confirmation work in Hungary (%)

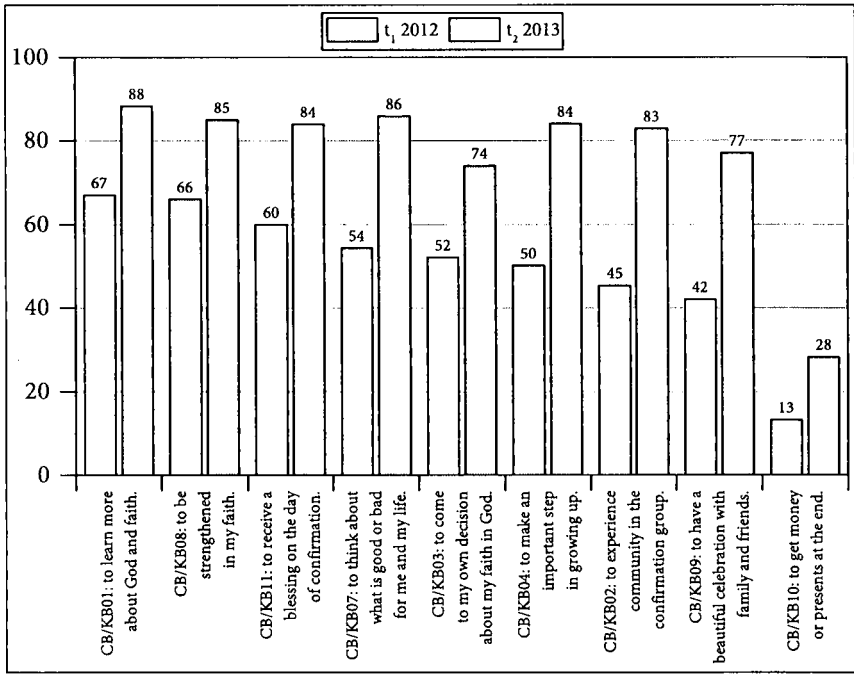


N = 213-237; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not interested, 7 = very interested).

Personal purposes also show a high awareness of the aims of confirmation time. More than 50 % of respondents think that faith-related educational aims are why they participate (or, maybe, have to participate) in confirmation time. External incentives like money or presents (a purpose for 13 % of the respondents)

as well as the family celebration after confirmation (42%) are mentioned among the least important ones. However, together with their own personal development (50%) and experiencing a good community (45%), these items display the highest increase of 30 to 40 percent points as experienced during confirmation time by about 80% of confirmands surveyed. This does not apply to the question of presents and money: only as few as 28% of respondents considered it important as the day of their confirmation approached (Figure 54).

Figure 54: Aims of confirmands and their fulfilment (t<sub>1</sub> and t<sub>2</sub>) in Hungary (%)



N = 218-237; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

*Attitude towards Faith and Belonging to the Church*

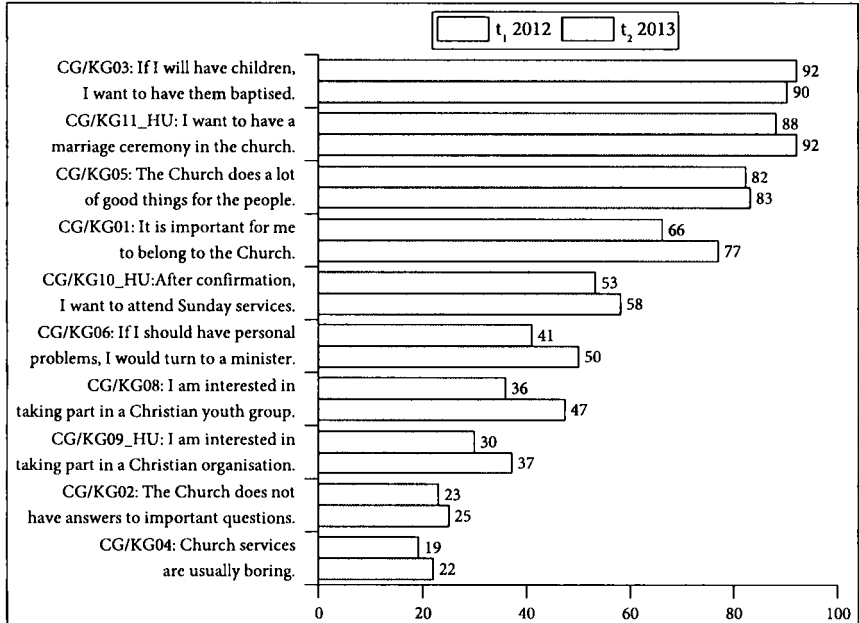
Almost no change can be observed when comparing the responses of confirmands at the beginning and at the end of the confirmation time regarding their attitude towards Christian faith and the Church. Confirmands surveyed were highly accepting of the Church (with average points 4.12 at the beginning and 4.1 at the end of confirmation time on a 5-point scale) and open to faith (4.15 and 4.17, respectively) which could be a consequence of their family background and previous religious experiences. It must be added again, however,



that the possibility of conformist response schemes cannot be completely eliminated.

This openness does not apply to all analysed aspects of church life. Figure 55 summarises a set of opinions and impressions about church and worship services that indicate the attitude towards belonging to the church. With the exception of a minor decline in a variable that is otherwise the most approved one indicating the wish to have respondents' future children baptised (92% to 90%), all items are rated with higher acceptance at the end of confirmation time than at the beginning. However, interest in direct personal involvement in the church community characterises only a bit more or even less than half of the respondents after confirmation time despite an obvious increase (attending regular Sunday services: 58%, participation in a Christian youth group: 47%, membership of a Christian civil organisation: 37%, turning to a minister with personal problems: 50%). At the same time, the relatively low approval of statements expressing disappointment also increased during confirmation time. 25% of surveyed confirmands agreed that the church did not have answers for their questions and 22% found church services boring.

Figure 55: Opinions about services of and belonging to the Church (t<sub>1</sub> and t<sub>2</sub>) in Hungary (%)

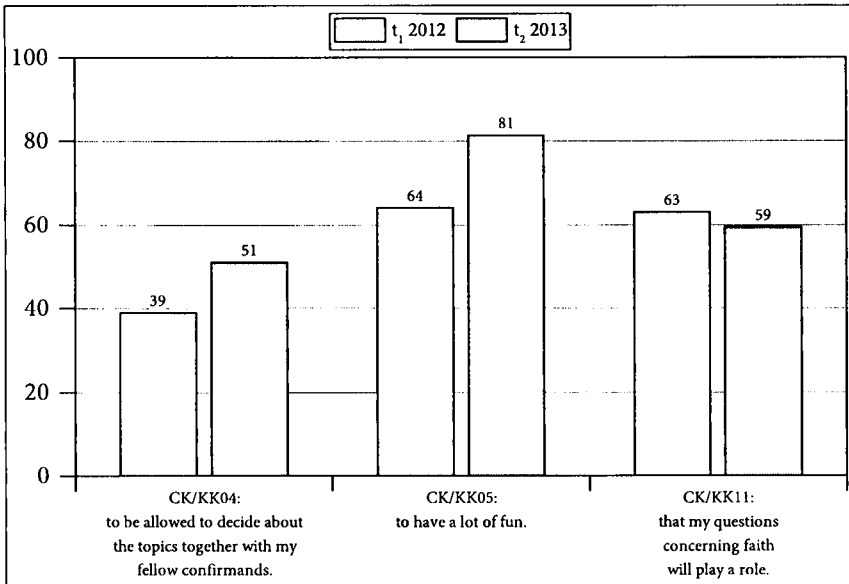


N = 227-237; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

*Expectations, Experiences and Overall Satisfaction*

Items CK05/KK05 were asked in a slightly different wording (meaning »to have a good time«) because the literal translation of the original wording would sound odd in the context of confirmation work. Thus, Figure 56 reports that 81%, the overwhelming majority, of confirmands asked indeed had a good time despite their original expectations, as only 64% were looking for that at the start. Although 12 percent points higher than at the beginning, still only 51% of the respondents had a say in what topics were dealt with in the sessions. This is in line with the everyday experiences that confirmation work usually has its historically accepted educational aims. It is remarkable that a relatively high share of 63% of respondents who expected that their personal questions on faith would be addressed has dropped to 59% when asking about confirmands' experiences. This can be interpreted as a possible drawback of the pre-defined educational content and traditional methods.

Figure 56: Expectations of confirmands and their fulfillment (t<sub>1</sub> and t<sub>2</sub>) in Hungary (%)

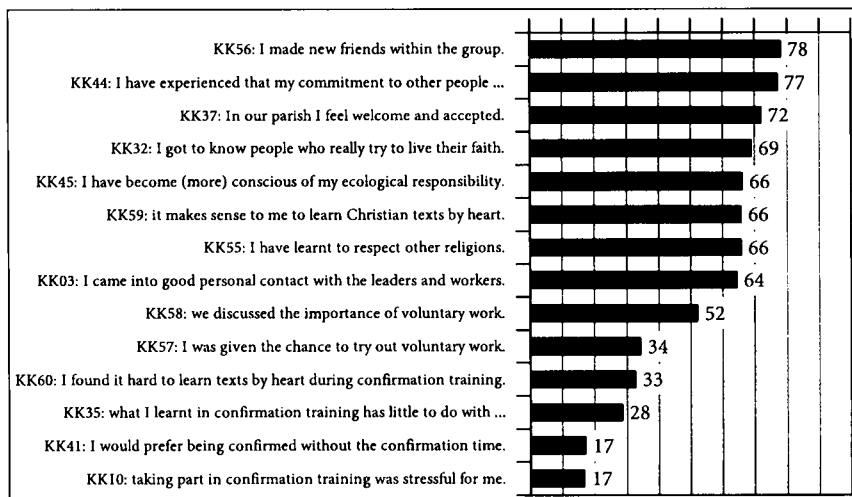


N = 216-236; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

For most respondents confirmation time meant positive and enriching experiences as Figure 57 testifies. However, 17% of them reported that confirmation work stressed them or they would skip it completely, 28% could not relate its content to their everyday life and 33% found it hard to learn texts by heart

what, on the other hand, 66 % found useful. It is even more telling that while more than half of them (52 %) talked about volunteering, only a third of them (34 %) had the opportunity to practice it during confirmation time. This empowering way of involvement is evidently still not a widespread popular method of church-related youth work and shows that confirmation and youth ministry are still two different branches of the overall ministry of the churches in Hungary.

Figure 57: Experiences from confirmation work ( $t_2$ ) in Hungary (%)



N = 288-295; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

High acceptance of the confirmation time even after it ends is also underlined by the high level of satisfaction with many elements of confirmation work (all items between 82 % and 92 %). The lowest shares of respondents are satisfied with the topics of lessons (87 %), the church services (86 %) and working methods (85 %). While only 82 % were satisfied with other workers, it should be noticed that in most parishes it is the only minister who leads and teaches confirmation groups, and the apparent relative dissatisfaction actually indicates that the confirmands miss other workers.

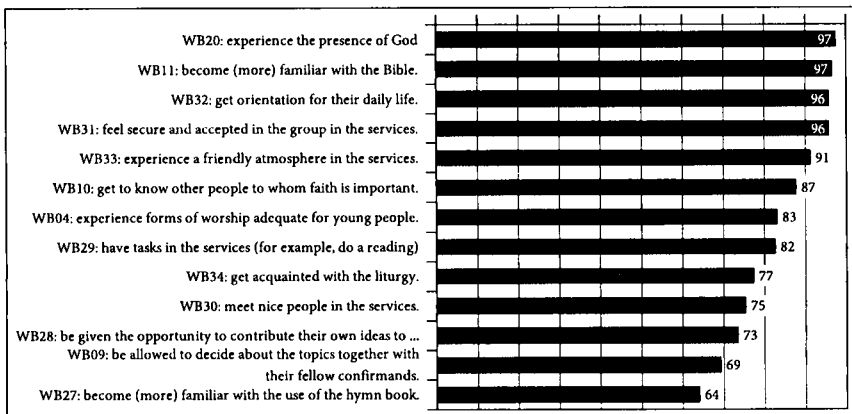
#### *Workers and Ministers*

Given the low number and high dropout rate of responding workers and ministers, only certain selected items that illustrate values and expectations at the beginning of the confirmation time will be briefly discussed here. It must be kept in mind that in Hungary, contribution or presence of volunteer workers is not

typical and both practice and canonical law prescribes that it is mainly the minister who is in charge of confirmation work. Lay members mostly help in organising camps before or after confirmation typically in urban congregations.

Most aims included in the questionnaires might sound appealing for the large majority of respondents. However, as it is presented in Figure 58, minor differences between their acceptance reveal an apparent priority. More than 90 % of workers and ministers agree that confirmands should develop a personal relationship with God, the parish and to the Bible. Getting more acquainted with the liturgy and the hymn book as well as being personally involved in the services or confirmation work itself through their own thoughts or contribution are less recognised.

Figure 58: Aims of confirmation work ( $t_1$ ) in Hungary (%)

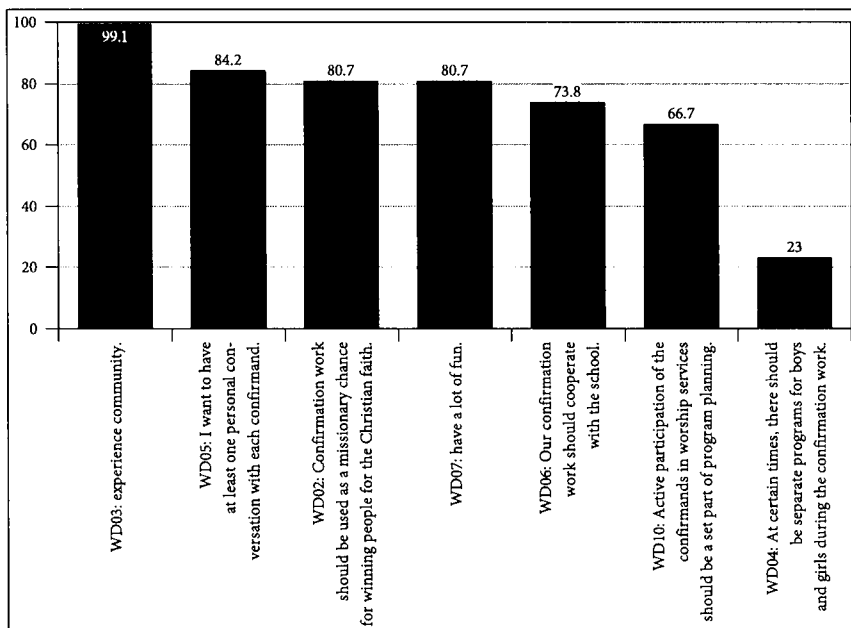


N = 112-114; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not important, 7 = very important).

Most workers consider faith-related aims important (WC-items were between 76 % and 99 %). As almost all respondents (99 %) mentioned that confirmands should develop a sense of belonging to the parish, this can be regarded the most widely accepted aim of confirmation. In comparison, learning songs and key texts are considered to be of secondary importance only (76 % and 78 %, respectively). While emotional, community-related aims are of key importance in the view of more than 80 % of the workers and 99 % of respondents were of the opinion that confirmands should experience good community, it is peculiar that involvement through active participation in worship services was an aim for two thirds of the workers surveyed (67 %). Whereas cooperation with schools, an aim of 74 % of the respondents, certainly depends on local possibi-

lities, separate programs for boys and girls are hardly present; confirmation work in Hungary often takes place in a school-class-like form with a curriculum undivided by gender (Figure 59).

Figure 59: Aims of workers by confirmation training ( $t_1$ ) in Hungary (%)



N = 107-114; the share of those with a positive response (5, 6, 7) on a scale 1 to 7 (1 = not applicable at all, 7 = totally applicable).

## 9.5 Challenges and Questions for the Future

Confirmation work is still a great opportunity for Hungarian Protestant Churches to address and educate young people as approximately two thirds of those belonging to the Reformed Church and three fourths of those belonging to the Evangelical Lutheran Church by baptism attend confirmation work. At the same time, the share of adult confirmands is growing. Although there are no reliable church-level statistics in the Reformed Church, some estimates report that about 20 to 25% of all Lutheran confirmands are adults (Sólyom 2010). It is reported that in some urban congregations there are now more adult confirmands than youth.

The Hungarian results of the international confirmation research indicate that for the most part, young people are satisfied with confirmation work. It is

also visible that there are certain models already in operation which advance integration of youth into the community of the parish. There is a need for personal connections after confirmation, for example, in the form of the confirmation group being turned into a youth group or receiving a mentor. Satisfaction regarding the leader of the confirmation group is an important factor in determining if the confirmands will stay in the denomination. This implies that a wider and more diverse methodological as well as personality development and a leadership and training oriented perspective should be implemented in the training of ministers and youth leaders (Hámori/Siba 2015).

Out of the worrying demographic tendencies, organising confirmation groups is a growing challenge for certain minor, especially rural, congregations. There are parishes where confirmation work is organised as early as at the age of 12-13 because children do not leave the community at that age. In several parishes, confirmation work can only be organised before the Sunday service. Nevertheless, due to the lack of alternative programs, group belonging is stronger in rural communities and therefore, it is easier to reach out, address and keep track of young people, whereas the challenge in urban congregations is to address young people because of the great variety of other options of free time activities (Molnár 1998).

Beside the congregations, schools are an important place for building community from the perspective of youth work as well. The recent introduction of elective Religious Education as alternative to compulsory Ethics in public schools raises further difficult questions regarding confirmation work and the integration of young people into the parish community. Due to this new form of Religious Education, more young people, children and families can be reached who did not have denominational relations before. But at the same time, Religious Education in the school also separates young pupils from the church community. It is still an open question whether confirmation work will become a part of this system on the long run.

The outstanding importance of family background also shows that confirmation work is never a solitary action but an important station of religious education. Therefore, it is important to learn to see confirmation work not as the end of religious education but as the beginning of youth work; especially because of its methods, confirmation work is not religious education in the traditional sense and does not only involve getting acquainted with the catechism and the credos, but is community building and addressing the actual questions of life as well (Nagy 1998).