



by David L. Rueter

# TEACHING THE FAITH AT HOME • WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? • HOW IS THIS DONE?

mandating a particular start, students who are not yet ready upon entering the seventh grade should be encouraged to wait until they and their mentor believe that they are sufficiently ready.

Readiness on both the front and back ends is the key. We must remember that the Holy Spirit works the individual desire to make such a commitment to study and to adhere to the promises expressed in the Rite of Confirmation. We must also keep in mind that each student has a unique developmental timeline, which God, who controls all things, also established.

Arthur Repp notes that throughout the history of confirmation in Lutheranism, there has never been a single, uniformly accepted model of instruction.<sup>24</sup> Although we in the Lutheran Church have been solid on our understanding of what we are to teach to our children, we have wrestled with the open question of how best to provide that instruction since the time of Luther. What I have suggested is but one approach. This approach attempts to take into account the learning found in the work of developmental theorists. The hope is that by applying such knowledge, our children will not merely retain the facts of the faith with greater efficiency, but that also through our instruction and the work of the Holy Spirit our youth will build the foundation for a lifelong growing and vibrant faith in God. We hope that they will remain an active part of the Body of Christ rather than making a quick exit from church life immediately after they are confirmed. Isn't that what confirmation is really all about?

<sup>24</sup> Arthur Repp, *Confirmation in the Lutheran Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 155.

## CHAPTER 5

### DEEP IN MY HEART

#### HOW THE DEVELOPMENT OF A THINKING CLIMATE ENCOURAGES LEARNING

"Why?" Depending on your perspective or perhaps the current state of your stamina, the simple question "Why?" can represent the beginning of something wonderful, an exploration of the greater depth of a subject or a rabbit hole down which you may find no escape. In the hands of both teens and toddlers, "Why?" is a potent question. As the father of two boys and a DCE with nearly twenty years of experience ministering to teenagers, I am well acquainted with the power of "Why?" At times, when my sons ask "Why?" questions, they are trying to assess just how much their mother and I are on the same page. They are trying to find out if there is any way they can change our minds or cause us to doubt our course of action. They are also very much trying to dig in deeper to discover just how it is that our decision-making works. From this understanding, they develop their own ability to assess the world around them and draw a wise conclusion on what course of action to take, or at least to assess if the thrill of the potential fun they might have outweighs the potential for the trouble they might get in. Though with a much higher level of sophistication, the "Why?" questions of early adolescents push boundaries in a similar manner.

In each instance, the child has reached a developmental transitional stage in which individuation becomes more important; thus, the idea of merely accepting the answer of a parent or other authority at face value is less of a readily accepted option. While the questioning occurs at

dramatically different levels, the motivation is strikingly similar. In each case, an enlarging world presents more information that needs to be assessed and evaluated.

### THE QUESTIONS OF CHILDREN

As children grow and develop psychologically and intellectually, the manner in which they learn about the world around them changes. What stays constant is the need to know "Why?" At times, this process can be frustrating. At other times, this process is a wonder to behold. My sons are still young. As I write, the oldest is six and in first grade. His "Why?" questions can truly be exhausting.<sup>1</sup> This is due in part to a lack of background information or mental structures with which to make sense of the answers to the questions he is asking. There are natural periods in a child's life when he or she tends toward the asking of more questions. Often enough, these questions are on subjects well beyond the child's ability to comprehend. This is both natural and good for children to do. It may well be frustrating for parents or teachers attempting to provide clarity in the barrage of inquiries, but the alternative is to squelch their inquisitiveness.

My older son is, I believe, somewhat above average in his question asking. While I enjoy his desire to understand, at times neither my wife nor I have the patience needed to help him understand. I may lack the patience to really dig in and try to comprehend the nature of what he is asking, and he may lack the patience to make sense out of my answers. At six years old, my son is still quite literal in his thinking. Thus, when he asks questions that require abstract concepts to answer him, we start to enter challenging waters. My job in formulating answers for him is not merely to attempt to provide an expedient answer to get him back to whatever we were doing prior to his question(s). It is, rather, to take the time to really listen to what he wants to know through his question and to provide not just an answer to that question, but perhaps also the framework that he needs in order to understand the answer. Still further,

<sup>1</sup> Compounding this, he is by nature a highly verbal child, not merely verbal for a boy, but also in comparison to girls his age. He is also a morning person, which I am not. The number of questions prior to 6:00 a.m. is staggering at times. I love it, but it is a bit much to take in before adequate caffeine.

I need to take the time to make things as concrete as I possibly can. This is challenging when the topic is by nature more abstract than concrete.

For example, consider a child raised in a Christian home who attends church regularly and is exposed to the socialization side of the church (whether that is through a circle of Christian families with kids the child's age or through parochial Christian schooling). This child may experience a sort of crisis to discover that not everyone knows about Christ or even cares to know about God generally. The concept of God has, for this child, been previously defined in strictly Christian terms. Therefore, exposure to new concepts of divinity requires new mental structures in which to organize the information.

One summer, while on vacation visiting friends and family in Colorado, my family drove through St. George, Utah, and visited the local Mormon temple. Naturally, this created a situation in which to discuss the distinctions between the Mormon faith and Christianity. Fortunately, we had in recent months been visited by Mormon missionaries, with whom I enjoyed engaging on theological topics, so my son was already generally familiar with the concept that Mormons, though they might claim to be Christians, do not believe that Jesus is God in the same way that we as Christians do. However, when at the visitor's center at the temple, there was a need to sort through the projected message of the Mormon faith as a restoration of Christianity. On a basic level, we were able to do this and build upon the mental structures of true and false concepts of the nature and identity of God. As both our sons grow and mature in their understanding of the world, there will be many more conversations to fill in blanks that cannot be dealt with currently.

There are great parallels between the questions asked in my home and the questions that I have encountered in my ministry to youth and their families. What I love the most about youth ministry are the great questions that young people ask. At the same time, what makes me most exasperated about youth ministry are the questions that young people ask. Youth asking questions is a double-edged sword. Their naturally inquisitive minds seek out the world around them, sometimes desperately trying to make sense of it all. Yet, their minds lack the conceptual categories in which to place much of what they encounter. Youth tend to present their parents and other adults with a blizzard of sometimes seemingly disconnected questions. This is a part of the nature of what it means to be a teenager. What it means to be a leader of youth,



especially in the Church, is to be responsive to their questions. This art requires a combination of patience and wisdom. You will need patience in order to listen actively to the question that is actually being asked and because responding to one question may well lead to many more questions. Patience with yourself is also necessary, as you will need to do additional research at times in order to respond. You will also need wisdom in order to best present what you have learned throughout your lifetime in a way that is accessible to the child.

### CULTIVATING A THINKING CLIMATE

Eugene Roehlkepartain's article *The Thinking Climate: A Missing Ingredient in Youth Ministry*<sup>2</sup> has greatly influenced my thinking related to some of the ways in which we approach not only youth ministry, but confirmation instruction as well. My concern is that if we make the memorization of a certain set of theological facts the main focus in confirmation instruction, we will end up missing a great opportunity to minister to the young people in our midst. Hear me on this—I am not at all suggesting that we downgrade or give a lesser standing to the content of our faith. Rather, I would suggest that the educational process of catechesis that takes place in confirmation is more than the sum total of the content taught. It is about that content at its foundation, but the full transmission of that content is a far deeper project that involves addressing affective and behavioral aspects. Therefore, whether you are a parent, pastor, DCE, or youth leader, the establishment of an open thinking climate in your home and church is critical.

So what is a thinking climate? Based on Roehlkepartain's work, I would define a thinking climate as one marked by a pervading acceptance of deep thinking and questioning rather than a particular programmatic approach. Let me repeat a part of that—a thinking climate is not a program or curricular approach. You do not have to change your curriculum in order to establish a thinking climate, though at times such a change might be helpful. Rather, a thinking climate has more of an impact on how through teaching methods, students are able to enter into

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate: A Missing Ingredient in Youth Ministry?," *Christian Education Journal* 15, no. 1 (1994): 53–63.

a space in which deep thinking and questioning is not merely accepted, but encouraged.

A thinking climate in confirmation instruction begins with meeting your students where they are in terms of their knowledge of the faith. They may not have come to you with a wealth of biblical knowledge. They may not have been in worship much, if at all, prior to beginning instruction. They might have little to no idea what it means to be Lutheran as opposed to Catholic or Baptist. They may very well be the epitome of biblical illiteracy. A thinking climate allows engagement where they are in their understanding of the Lutheran faith as it relates to their own life and faith.

Roehlkepartain points out that in passing on our faith to the next generation, there is a distinction between spoon-feeding youth answers to questions and encouraging them to think through these same questions so that they can attempt to reach answers for themselves.<sup>3</sup> By providing youth with the answers that we as adults have already worked out for ourselves, we short circuit the learning process. Rather than encouraging them to learn to think through tough issues for themselves, we jump to the end and present youth with our thoughts. This may negatively impact their faith as they may find the issues we resolved for them resurfacing in college, where they will finally have to confront them on their own without any guidance from a trusted Christian adult. We cannot expect youth to handle tough challenges to their faith if they have not personally wrestled with the questions of faith. When we provide answers to which we have arrived, they will perhaps nod in agreement, but they may not really have learned much from us.

Youth don't just need time to hear about the faith; they need time to dig in and wrestle with the content of the faith as it is presented. They need space so that they can bring to the surface questions that may passingly occur to them but do not otherwise see the light of day in discussion. They need to be able to take apart their faith in order to put it back together again.

The reason that there is so much value in allowing youth to do this wrestling in the context of the church is that they will naturally do so at some point anyway. Therefore, why not provide opportunity for this

<sup>3</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 53.

wrestling when they are in a community of faith that allows such exploration in a supportive rather than a hostile environment? Allowing youth to wrestle with deep questions related to their faith will not necessarily cause them to further doubt their faith. Instead, this process allows them freedom to examine their faith and seek the Lord's aid in strengthening their faith.<sup>4</sup> Youth will ask the questions that are on their hearts and minds. The question is whether our churches will be the welcome place they need to be for those questions to be asked and answered, or whether we will instead leave the youth of the church to seek the wisdom of the world.

For children, faith is more naturally something associated with the family. You might not speak of faith as inherited, but children developmentally draw their understanding of faith directly from their parents. They pray like their parents pray. They worship like their parents worship. They formulate concepts about the nature of God consistent with the expressions of that nature that they glean from conversations over time with their parents.

I recently experienced a Sunday when I had to take our boys to church alone. My wife was unable to join us, and—I have to be honest—I was a bit nervous about what would take place. We had been struggling to keep the boys engaged and down to a dull roar in the service. Now I was going to be there with the both of them, but without my wife. I was going to be outnumbered.

Having had struggles with them handling the kids' bags in the recent past, I somewhat bravely chose to bring no toys in with me. In previous weeks, I tried to get my six-year-old to stand and sit with the congregation, hoping to teach him about the liturgy through the process of participation, even at his more basic level. That Sunday, I was not sure if I was going to push that, but to my surprise, I did not have to do anything. He willingly stood with the congregation and me when we stood. He attempted to sing the songs for worship that he knew. His younger brother even did his preschool best to participate. Toward the end of the service, he stood with his brother and me, trying to figure out if he wanted to stand with his hands behind his back or in front. He seemed to be trying

to assess if we were in fact praying and to assume a posture appropriate for that. Early learning is imitative and at times, very cute.

As children grow toward adolescence, the questioning stage that parents seemingly forget from when their kids were in the preschool and early elementary years returns with a vengeance. At a more sophisticated level, the emerging intellect of children as they transition through adolescence toward adulthood offers a barrage of questions that at times causes parents and church leaders alike some concern over their spiritual standing before their Maker.

In our pluralistic society, we cannot keep our young people from encountering a world full of belief systems that compete with and contradict our own. The influence of pop culture will push our youth to coexist with others of diverse backgrounds in a manner in which they are not merely agreeing to disagree, but rather in a way that accepts a sort of "truth" (if you can call it that) for all offered religious, spiritual, or philosophical positions. Rather than attempting to offer a shelter in this storm, the argument behind the establishment of a thinking climate would be that we embrace the changes inherent to the intellectual and spiritual development of our young people rather than fight over the influences upon them. We are called to enter into their lives and establish a supporting community in which questions are valued and not shunned.

However, the research Roehlkepartain conducted for the publication of his article led him to state that, sadly, far too few youth reap the benefits of a thinking climate in their local church.<sup>5</sup> When they need the space to explore their questions and discover answers, they find that the church is not the place where they are free to do so. Roehlkepartain goes on to estimate that half of Protestant youth are not exposed to environments in their churches that are conducive to the development of a thinking climate.<sup>6</sup> While this research is nearly twenty years old, I have found no new research demonstrating that the situation in the church is any different today. There are individual churches and leaders who create this space, but the church at large is anything but known for openness to the free discussion of difficult or even controversial topics. Rather, it is

<sup>5</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 54.

<sup>6</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 54.

<sup>4</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 53.

known as a closed institution, asserting truth claims rather than engaging in respectful debate.

## YOUNG ADULTS LEAVING THE CHURCH

Young adults dropping out of the church today often find the church to be controlling, surface level in its thinking and discussions, anti-science, repressive of disagreements, exclusive, and anything but open to doubt.<sup>7</sup> Let us explore each of these to see how the church can hinder its own cause due to poor public perception.

### CONTROLLING

The Church has a tendency to like to control its own message. There is a propensity toward overprotection, manifesting itself in a restrictive internal climate that is at odds with the larger culture. For a generation with such an affinity for the arts and creativity as the Mosaics,<sup>8</sup> this can be a serious issue. Through creative expression, young people may well work out the meaning of their faith. As they do so, they may express less than orthodox beliefs as they seek to make heads or tails of life. Rather than view this as a part of their development and help them work toward a more mature faith or a clearer understanding of the Christian faith, churches all too often attempt to cut off the artistic expression, somehow hoping that the doubt, as might be expressed on canvas, might not be entertained at all. The problem with this line of thinking is that what is expressed is not necessarily an issue created by expression in the creative process, but rather the reality of a young person's faith as he or she moves from a childlike faith to a more well thought through adult faith.

Rather than attempting to control how youth express their faith, the church should take the task of creating creative space for young people to explore expressions of their faith. Yes, they will get things wrong on a regular basis. A young songwriter hoping to express his faith through music will err theologically and will need to be corrected. But rather than fully stifle the impulse to express his heart of faith in song, the church

<sup>7</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 92.

<sup>8</sup> Mosaic is the term coined by researcher George Barna to describe what is more widely known as Generation Y or the Millennials. Barna preferred this term as he used it to emphasize the creative side that he saw as a distinguishing feature of the generation.

should offer a sounding board and a place of sharpening and learning. In this way, the church can bring artistic expression back into the church in a new and reinvigorated way and dispel the belief that the church seeks merely to control. We need to teach the Gospel and trust that in time its truth will come into full bloom in our youth.

### SURFACE LEVEL

When I say that youth find the church to be surface level, I mean that they view the church as lacking the deep thinking and reflection necessary to handle today's complex faith-related questions. Too often, people falsely see the church as solely offering proof texts, at times out of context, instead of actually engaging with the culture to ascertain the true and full nature of the questions at hand. It is like the husband who answers his wife based upon what he thinks she is asking about only to find her frustrated at him for not listening.

Rather than equipping youth with the critical thinking skills needed to assess and evaluate faith challenges for themselves, too often apologetics is degraded into the provision of preset answers, often not even relevant to the questions at hand. This happens when youth are trained to memorize facts but are not taught to really listen to the concerns and objections of others. There seems to be a concern that if we discuss questions with our youth related to the faith, then this will in and of itself undermine their faith. I would argue that if we are creating a thinking climate well, we will tap into questions that teens already have, whether on the surface or not, and offer a safer place in which to ask and to explore the implications of answers to those questions. We are not creating the questions so much as being far better attuned to the reality that those questions exist and are in need of a substantive response on the part of the church.

By not allowing full, deep, and penetrating questions to be asked, churches have given the impression that they lack depth and certainly have ill-equipped their young people with shallow understandings of the Christian faith. The world presents youth with real and challenging questions. Youth who head off to college with the faith maturity of a child often find their faith unraveling. Some may return with questions about their faith that we did not prepare them to deal with. Others will seek answers from local churches or campus ministries, many of which are non-Lutheran, where they may find the willingness to facilitate the

critical thinking that they need while at the same time offering fellowship that includes encouragement and support. Still others forsake their faith entirely, lacking the confidence that the church has any answers to offer.

We need to be intentionally pro-active. To think that our "church kids" should not be asking these questions in church is foolish. When they avoid or don't answer these questions, churches may end up leaving the impression that there may not really be any good answers. Once again, this can cause a weakening of faith as youth encounter challenges to their faith for which they are not prepared to respond.

While trying to avoid unnecessary doubt by staving off challenging issues, parents and church leaders may unintentionally set their youth up for future faith quakes. For many of our youth, it is not so much a question of if they will be forced to deal with challenges to their faith, but rather when and how forceful the challenges will be. We do a disservice to our youth when families and churches fail to prepare students so that they can provide well thought out and deeply reflective responses. The church is full of great thinkers. It is a fallacy to believe that being a person of faith somehow means that one is of lesser intelligence. Both historically and today, many of the greatest minds place their faith and trust in Christ. To leave youth with any other impression is to fail them radically. If we do not connect youth with those great thinkers, both from today and from history, we leave them with the impression that we do not have thinkers capable of offering deeply considered answers. In this way, the church is seen as a place for simpler minds to hide from the fearfulness of the world.

#### ANTI-SCIENCE

One of the areas in which youth receive the greatest challenges to their faith is the field of science. There is a widespread belief among young people that faith and science are incompatible. Bill Nye and Neil deGrasse Tyson have made it a recent mission to prove that science is incompatible with and intellectually superior to religion. Postmodernism has succeeded in asserting that since the scientific method seeks the verifiable, science therefore deals with the facts and faith deals with unverifiable superstitions. Where the two have no conflict, there is no need for one to win out over the other. However, in areas of perceived conflict, science is alleged to have the higher intellectual ground. Historically, this has not always been the case, as there was a time when

theology held the high ground and people of faith (both Christianity and Islam) were responsible for laying the foundations for science as an academic discipline. Ironically, postmodernism, which has had such a negative effect on universal truth, has not managed to do the same to truth as established by science. Rather, religious truth is viewed as subjective, while scientific truth is held as objective. This is an interesting claim considering the postmodern assertion that there is no universal truth and the processes of the scientific method that have time and again led to the overturning of one theory in favor of a new theory that better comports with the evidence.

Dovetailing back to our discussion on the perception of a controlling church, it is important to note that science is not viewed as being nearly so stringent of a controlling agent. Science is seen as open to new knowledge in a way that religion is not. It is seen as open to the testing of truth claims, whereas religion, and specifically Christianity, is not.

In reality, the beloved disciple John instructs followers of Christ to test the spirits for truthfulness in 1 John 4:1. It is patently false to assert that Christianity is not open to verification. Rather, of all world religions, the Christian faith is the one that is most open to verification. We have gone out of our way to explore how we might as tangibly as possible establish demonstrable evidence for the claims of our faith. It is more a case of science overreaching in its claims to discover and verify truth than the faithful resisting deep explorations of our world and universe.

Some would point out that science, when it takes on the form of scientism, falls prey to the same trap in which religious people all too often find themselves. Both science and faith have the tendency to see their own categories of knowledge as superior. In so doing, they fail to take seriously the arguments and the evidence behind the arguments presented by the other side. There are those in science who seem to reject the supernatural out of hand due to a subscription to materialism. At the same time, the Church is seen as antagonistic to the free exploration of the truth in science. Yet, faith and science are not antithetical to one another. Again, not only is history replete with examples of scholarly scientists who were also upstanding and faithful churchmen, but there also remains today a goodly number of scientists who are men and women of faith seeking to understand God's creation and the Creator through their vocation of scientific inquiry.

## REPRESSIVE

Going back to the list of why youth leave the Church, another reason is that they see the Church as being repressive of disagreements. When it comes to matters of sexuality, the Church does not have the greatest record in this regard. The Church is seen as repressive for being so far out of step with the larger society on a range of sex-related issues. From contraception to homosexuality to pre-marital sex, the message of the Church is a repressive litany of "NO!"

The Church has sadly become known more for what it stands against than what it stands for. Young people, even those in the Church, might have a hard time expressing a clear understanding of what the Church teaches on salvation, but they "know" we "hate" homosexuals. Casting Crowns, in their song "Jesus, Friend of Sinners," points the Church and more specifically individual Christians toward relational connections of healing and care as a way in which to respond to this challenge.<sup>9</sup>

When we fail to be relational in our confirmation instruction with our own youth, how well can we prepare them to respond out of love when presented with the accusation that the Church just wants to repress people and the freedom that they should be able to enjoy with their buddies? When we fail to help our young people who are wrestling with their own understanding of God's design for sex, we falsely give the impression that sex is something dirty that we cannot discuss in church. This leaves them to have their view of sexuality shaped by pop culture, complete with a view that the Christian faith and parents are repressive for not wanting their children to enjoy sex with anyone they might desire.

## EXCLUSIVE

In John 14:6, Christ makes it clear that He is the only way to the Father. To the sensibilities of postmodern youth, making such a claim screams of intolerance. Young people see Christianity as exclusive, and exclusivity is something with which they don't want to be associated. Even youth growing up in the church struggle with such strong claims to the exclusivity of faith in Christ. Our culture has been so deeply

<sup>9</sup> See David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007) for a similar analysis.

influenced by Eastern religious philosophy that having a single path to heaven no longer seems very loving.

In this exclusivity, youth see a God who rejects rather than a God who loves and seeks the lost to make them His own. This perception is a major stumbling block for teens to overcome. They do not want to be seen as intolerant. They have grown up in a pluralistic world and have a hard time understanding religious claims that exclude the majority of the world's population.

## NOT OPEN TO DOUBT

Finally, young people see the Church as a place where doubt is unwelcome instead of a safe place in which to express and explore the doubt so many of them experience either periodically or chronically. In an effort to help project confidence, the Church seemingly fails to allow youth to see doubt as a natural part of faith. In Mark 9, a father, whose son Jesus was about to cast a demon out of, makes a truly classic statement on the nature of faith when he says, "I believe; help my unbelief!" (v. 24). The Christian faith is not without its challenges, and to pretend otherwise is to engage in a life of denial. When parents or churches fail to create a space in which doubt can be expressed, youth fail to be comfortable expressing their doubts.

## HOW CAN A THINKING CLIMATE HELP?

Moving back to Roehlkepartain's work, he asserts that quality Christian education is among a number of essential elements for nurturing a thinking climate.<sup>10</sup> Each of these factors touches on how we ought to approach catechesis through our confirmation programs. Catechesis by its very nature is Christian education. There is and must be teaching that takes place. The emphasis here is the effective nature of that teaching. Presenting material is not equivalent to effective teaching. Understanding your learners is required for teaching to be effective (more on that later). Pastors, DCEs, and others serving the role of catechist should be well-versed in creative educational methodologies in order to engage the heart as well as the mind of their students.

<sup>10</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 54.



The thinking climate must be such that questions are encouraged rather than discouraged. The simplest way to discourage free inquiry into the beliefs of our faith is to make students feel as though their questions are somehow foolish, wrong, or simply unwelcome. As your students are just entering into adolescence, their world is beginning to change radically. They are no longer as certain of themselves or their own identity as they once were. The views of their peers are beginning to hold enormous sway.<sup>11</sup> Your opinion of them still matters a great deal, but the extent to which you allow room for their free exploration of the questions that they have, serious or not in your mind, lays a foundation for the way in which they will interact with the faith in years to come.

Some of the most energizing times I have had in ministry, as well as some of the more memorable lessons I have taught, have taken place on youth group nights without specific agendas. In each church I have served, I have developed the habit of offering open question nights. These nights are designed to be totally free form discussions in which I am put on the spot to address as best as I can the questions most pressing on the hearts of the youth there that night.

As I said, this really puts me on the spot. In preparation for those nights, I have to brush up a bit on the questions that I might anticipate. I also have to be willing to offer a humble "I don't know" for questions that I am not equipped to handle. Matters of complex philosophy or science that I have not yet pondered are not areas in which to bluff my way through. There may be times when I begin to explore possible answers with the youth and even involve them in the process of seeking an answer. However, when I reach a point at which I know that I cannot offer a solid answer, I let that be known. I make a note of the topic and question, offering to do my work to develop a more complete response. I make sure to do that work and to find a time to communicate what I found back to the group and the specific youth asking the question. This last step is critical. I cannot forget to return to the topic and address it. The work to establish a thinking climate relies greatly upon the follow through.

<sup>11</sup> The foundation of parental influence remains the largest influencer, but the influence gap radically shrinks during this time.

The youth in all the churches where I have done this have loved it. It takes time to get them used to and, more to the point, comfortable with asking real and truly deep, heartfelt questions, but once that climate is established, watch out. Initially, the room is quiet. As a leader, this can be a bit uncomfortable. A rookie mistake would be to keep talking in the silence. Even if the silence makes you uncomfortable, you need to leave the space in which youth can take the risk to start asking questions.

The questions will eventually begin to flow. As youth begin to offer initial, less personal questions, they will learn that their questions are valid and worth seeking an answer. They will additionally learn that the Church is a place in which such deeper reflection is encouraged. They will learn that having doubts is not an end to faith, but an invitation to develop an even deeper faith. "I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24b).

I really cannot say this too strongly: give serious consideration to the questions that your students ask. Establish for them a judgment-free zone in your class. You should show no signs of shock at the twelve-year-old you have known since Baptism who asks if there really is a God, or if the crucifixion was an act of evil on God's part against His Son. These are questions with which they might be wrestling on their own or perhaps issues their parents wrestle with as well. Perhaps they have a teacher who is pushing them to reject Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Taking their concerns seriously, even when they struggle to express them seriously (you know those junior high boys who can't do much of anything seriously), is the key to keeping them engaged and thinking through their faith.

Let me take a moment to mention that I firmly believe that this is a good thing. Having young people seriously and critically thinking through their faith, scary as it is for their leaders and parents, is an essential part of their maturation. Life will hit them with deep questions. The real question is whether they are prepared to think through and respond faithfully. By establishing a thinking climate in which students are able to ask their own questions, we establish in them thinking skills that will allow them to know how to evaluate arguments and reach biblically founded, well-reasoned conclusions. Although it might at times seem that their questions reveal a lack of faith, we can in fact move them

<sup>12</sup> See the movie *God Is Not Dead* for an example.

toward a renewed and stronger faith by aiding them in their ability to understand the intellectual underpinnings of our faith.

The next few factors that Roehlkepartain notes speak to how we can establish that thinking climate. The climate of your teaching must be both warm and caring. By how you respond to questions, you can demonstrate that you greatly care for each student and the state of his or her faith; you can show that you care about their understanding of that faith and are not simply concerned that they know the right answers. Students get enough class time that teaches them to merely seek the right answer rather than to learn to think critically. If the Church can be the place that instills a love and openness for critical thinking as it approaches matters of faith, the very faith of emerging generations will be uplifted and strengthened. Indeed, if we view questions as opportunities for the strengthening of our students' faith—through both the work of the Holy Spirit (something critically essential) and sound reason (something with which God has gifted us but society often seems to neglect)—then indeed their faith may grow far deeper for having been through the process.

Finally, expressing the faith in worship and service to others has become a more pronounced part of many confirmation programs. I would suggest that establishing a thinking climate means that even in worship and service our young people need to see an openness to meaningful reflection on the truths of Scripture and the questions that go along with the reflection. Our worship should engage students in an encounter with God that demonstrates to them the reality of His presence in this world and in their lives. Through worship, they should be encouraged to develop a prayer life that might help sustain them as they wrestle with questions of faith. As they serve others, they should see Christ's love in action and be able to connect that service and love back to the very character of the God whom they serve.

Roehlkepartain offers a series of questions with which I would like to close this section. I suggest their use as a sort of diagnostic tool for evaluating the thinking climate of your catechesis:

1. Are questions encouraged or discouraged?
2. How does the congregation deal with diverse opinions?
3. Are members challenged to examine their faith and everyday life?

4. How do leaders model a thinking faith?

5. Are youth given answers, or are they led to discover answers?<sup>13</sup>

Deep in the heart of all teens, there are questions. That goes with the territory. You cannot enter into a ministry relationship with a group of teens and not expect at some point to have to deal with their questions. The question for you as a leader, however, is whether you will proactively solicit those questions or merely allow them to surface as they come naturally. Granted, one could systematically stifle questions, but for now let us assume that we all understand the folly of attempting such a pointless exercise. If we set out in ministry to proactively seek out questions, we will establish a thinking climate that will encourage deep consideration of the faith in our youth and allow them to be tested within the church in preparation for the testing of their faith that they will undoubtedly face in high school, college, and beyond.

Confirmation is just one such area of educational ministry in which the development of a thinking climate is critical. Children entering into this stage in their lives have a great many questions. A confirmation ministry designed to allow for the exploration of these questions can go a long way toward establishing the foundation of faith for which those of us who have poured much time and effort into teaching have hoped and prayed. It is that to which we now turn as we explore the place of confirmation ministry in the life of teens and the Church.

<sup>13</sup> Roehlkepartain, "The Thinking Climate," 61–62.