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What happens after volunteering? 10-year longitudinal research on young volunteers in Finland

Kati Tervo-Niemelä

University of Eastern Finland

kati.tervo-niemela@uef.fi

Introduction

I grew in faith especially during voluntary training and those activities.

I started voluntary activity after confirmation. That led me to other church youth activities in my church. I did not really regard faith as important during confirmation time, but this changed when I was active in volunteer work.

When I was 18 or 20, I realised that there were no more activities for me in the Church and our group of volunteers just fell apart. Step by step, I drifted away from faith issues and I no longer felt like I was welcome in the Church.

The comments above show the importance of church voluntary activity for the youth as well the different developmental patterns that may take place during and after volunteering. Earlier studies show that volunteering seems to function in many ways in making young people committed to the church. Young volunteers are much more likely to have a positive attitude towards the church two years after confirmation time than those who did not volunteer (Porkka/Schweitzer/Simojoki 2017, 108) and are more likely to believe and have a strong sense of belonging to the church (Tervo-Niemelä/Schlag/Koch 2017, 72). However, interest in volunteering and the active step to volunteer seems to need many supporting factors. During confirmation time, contacts with those working as volunteers and opportunities to try volunteer work are important factors in making young people willing to volunteer in the church as well as somebody asking them to volunteer (Ilg, Tervo-Niemelä/Maaß 2017, 122; Porkka/Schweitzer/Simojoki 2017, 104). Those who volunteer are more

likely to come from homes where religion was present at least to some extent in their childhood than those who do not end up volunteering (Ilg/Tervo-Niemelä/Maaß 2017, 122, 125). Friends often play an important part in volunteering as well: typically, friends make the decision to begin the activity together, and the same applies for quitting the activity (Porkka 2004, 93-94). This is especially true for those whose motives to volunteer are mostly social and external (Porkka 2009). Socially motivated volunteers' spiritual motives are typically lower than other volunteers' motives (Niemelä 2001, 118). These young volunteers are more likely to volunteer only for a shorter period while those who are spiritually motivated are likely to remain as volunteers for a longer period (Niemelä 2008, 117-118). However, the biggest drop out tends to take place already before voluntary activity: about half of those who plan to volunteer end up taking part in volunteer training (Niemelä 2008, 152).

Confirmation time as such often marks a turning point in the lives of young people. About half of young people experience that their faith has been strengthened during confirmation time (Hardecker/Bromander 2015, 63; Niemelä 2006). It is clear in many ways that experiences related to confirmation time are the key factor in getting interested in volunteer activity (Niemelä 2008, 149-153). For example, satisfaction with confirmation time predicts voluntary activity in the future (Ilg/Tervo-Niemelä/Maaß 2017, 122). However, satisfaction with confirmation time tends to predict the interest in joining volunteer training more than actual attendance (Niemelä 2008, 153). However, it is obvious that without positive experiences related to church and its faith during confirmation time, such interest does not emerge. The most important motive to volunteer is the perception that it is fun (95%), half of the volunteers join because they want to go to a camp and more than half also want to learn more about God and faith (Porkka/Schweitzer/Simojoki 2017, 93). However, after confirmation time and when reaching early adulthood, young people in general tend to distance themselves from church and the likelihood to leave the church increases (Niemelä 2008; Niemelä 2015). Especially those already distant during the confirmation time tend to become more distant, while the pattern among those closer to church during confirmation time seem to take multiple paths after confirmation time (Tervo-Niemelä/Schlag/Koch 2017).

In this article, the interest is in long-term developmental trends among those young people who end up volunteering and those who do not. What kind of changes take place in a 10-year perspective among volunteers and non-volunteers in youth and early adulthood in relation to church and faith?

The data is collected among young people who were confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. In Finland, 70.7% of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (1.1.2018). Annually about 50,000 young people are confirmed which corresponds to 85.8

per cent of those 15 (in 2016). Confirmation work is by far the largest form of non-formal religious education in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and in the whole country. At the same time, annually about 22,000 young people attend volunteer education after confirmation time to become YCVs, young confirmed volunteers. This volunteer education typically follows immediately after the confirmation time and may last one or more years. About 15,000 work as volunteers per year; this figure corresponds to one third of confirmands (36% in 2016). Volunteers are mostly one to three years older than confirmands, some of them first-time volunteers and some of them more experienced volunteers. This means that volunteer activity is very popular among young people, in which it can be estimated that about one in four young confirmands per age-group end up volunteering after confirmation time. This activity is by far the largest form of volunteer education in the whole county, not only in terms of religious volunteer education, but also if all the forms of volunteer education within all sectors including both formal education and the civil sector. In addition, it is one of the next largest forms of non-formal religious education (after confirmation work) in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and in the whole country. Only children's day clubs attract more 3 to 5-year-old children (38,000 in 2016) but if one takes into account the number of children per single year-cohort, it can be estimated that there are more young people in each year-cohort in YCV-training than there are in church children's clubs (20.9% of those 3-5 years attend day clubs).

The Method

This paper is based on a longitudinal data set collected during a ten-year period in 2002-2011 among young Finns aged 14/15 to 25 years old, starting from the time they started their confirmation time until they were about 25. It is a 10-year follow-up study of young people who went through confirmation preparation and were confirmed in 2002 in the parish of Tampere¹ in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. The study covers the years from the ages of 14 to 25 in their lives. It contains four sets of questionnaires: a questionnaire **(A)** at the beginning of confirmation studies in 2001 (at the age of 14/15) (N=1 322; 90% of all confirmands in Tampere); a questionnaire **(B)** at the end of confirmation time in 2001 (at the age of 15) (N=1 159; 79% confirmands); a questionnaire **(C)** distributed to the subjects five years later, in the spring of 2006 (at the age of 20) (N=416; response rate 30 %), and a questionnaire **(D)** that was completed ten years later, in the fall of 2011 (at the age of 25) (N=276; response rate 21%). As can be expected,

¹ Tampere is the third largest city in Finland with 200,000 inhabitants. The parish of Tampere includes primarily urban areas, along with some smaller rural population centers.

the response rate from the participants has declined from the age of 14 to the age of 25. While the response rate at the beginning of confirmation was as high as 90%, it has declined to 21% ten years later. However, when comparing those who responded to the fourth questionnaire compared to those who did not answer, only one clear difference emerges: women are overrepresented among those who replied to the fourth survey round (68% are women, while women amounted to 50% in the first and second survey round). No other notable differences between the two groups could be found. For example, they were almost equal in their relation to Christianity at the beginning of and after confirmation time.

In this article, the focus is on the last data set (collected when young people were at the age of 25) and in the differences between those who have volunteered in the church after confirmation and those who have not. By comparing these groups in the light of the 10-year longitudinal data collected in Finland, the aim is to find out what kind of changes are likely to take place later in early adulthood among those young people who volunteered after confirmation time and those who did not. This data consist of young people only in one Protestant context, in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland and, therefore, the results cannot be generalised to other Protestant countries, but with this data, the aim is to illustrate the possible trends that may take place in youth and emerging adulthood among those previously confirmed and later volunteered or not in the Protestant church and also to help to predict future patterns among the youth who volunteer and who do not volunteer in early adulthood also in other churches.

In the analysis, short-time and long-time volunteers are separated. Short-time volunteers refer to those who volunteer only for a year or less and long-time volunteers to those who volunteered for a longer period.

Changes among volunteers and non-volunteers in emerging adulthood – the case of Finland

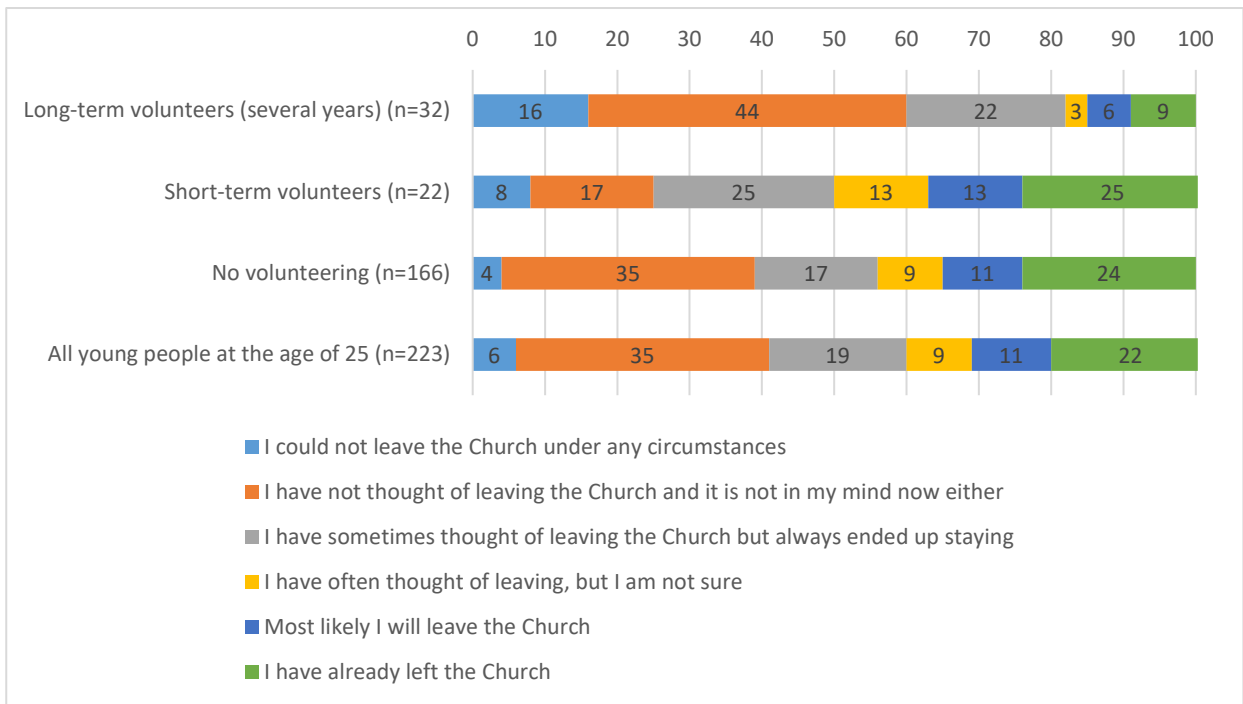
The earlier studies among young Protestants show that there seems to be a trend between the age of 13/14 to the age 16/17 among the Protestant youth that those who are distant get more distant after confirmation, while those with a close relationship to the church tend to be strengthened in their relationship (Tervo-Niemelä/Schlag/Koch 2017). One important factor behind different developmental patterns seems to be volunteering: whether young people have been active after confirmation in church volunteer work or not.

Looking at the Finnish 10-year longitudinal data and the changes that take place after confirmation in a 10-year perspective, the first notion from the data shows that the question of belonging to or leaving the church becomes vital during emerging adulthood. The data from young adults who were

confirmed ten years earlier show that at the age of 20 as many as seven per cent had left the church and five years later as many as 22 per cent (24 per cent of men and 20 per cent of women) had left. This corresponds with the estimates that can be drawn from the church statistics. The longitudinal data also shows that the general attitude towards church membership has turned notably more critical and also more decisive after the age of 20. At the age of 25, only six per cent of those who were confirmed 10 years earlier thought that they could not think of leaving the church under any circumstances. However, while the share of those who think that they could not think of leaving the church had declined and the share of those who had already left had increased, the share of those who had thought of leaving but decided to stay as members had also increased (from 11 to 21). At the same time, the share of those who had not thought of leaving at all or were unsure had declined. This means that between the ages of 20 and 25, these young adults had increasingly taken clear stands and decided on their church membership status: staying or leaving.

However, there are noteworthy differences among volunteers and non-volunteers, and more precisely among long-time volunteers and other young people. Volunteering does not necessarily make young people stay in the church, but the likelihood is much bigger. This especially applies to long-term volunteering. On the other hand, the influences of short-term volunteering seem to be much more limited. At the age of 25, less than one in ten of long-term volunteers have left the church while one in four of non-volunteers and short-term volunteers had left the church (see Figure 1). In addition, the attitude towards church membership differs among volunteers and non-volunteers. Of the long-term volunteers, 82 per cent either could not think of leaving the church under any circumstances or have not ever thought of church leaving or if there have thought of it have always ended up staying, while 50 per cent of short-term volunteers and 56 per cent of non-volunteers.

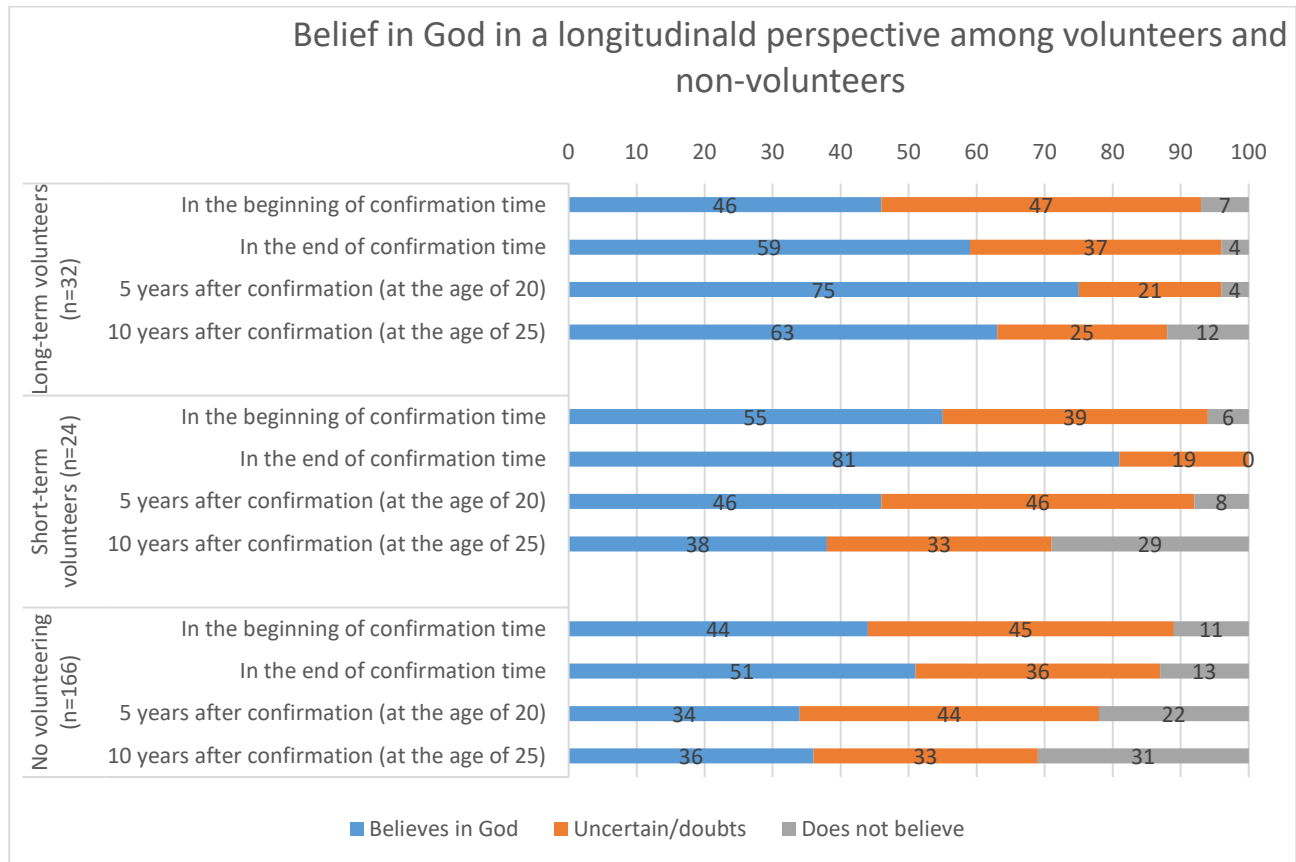
Figure 1: Attitude towards church membership among Finnish short- and long-term volunteers and non-volunteers 10 years after confirmation at the age of 25.



The data show that voluntary activity is a meaningful factor predicting patterns in religious change in youth and early adulthood also more general. Changes in belief follow the same trend as the changes in church membership. In the following figure, changes in belief in God are presented among those who have volunteered (either short- or long-term) and among those who did not volunteer, and the self-estimation of the change in belief is also shown (see Figure 2).

The results show that confirmation time has typically positive influence for belief in God among young people: both for those who later volunteer and those who do not volunteer. However, the positive chances are more common among those who later volunteer. There are also notable changes after confirmation time: long-term volunteers are typically strengthened in their belief also after confirmation while short- term volunteers and non-volunteers tend to distance from faith after confirmation. At the age of 25, almost two out of three (63%) of long-term volunteers say that they believe in God while only 36-38 per cent of short- term volunteers and non-volunteers. Both among short- term volunteers and non-volunteers the share of non-believers has risen clearly after confirmation, but among short- term volunteers this rise has taken place between the years 20 and 25 while among non-volunteers earlier. This means that volunteering activity seems to have kept the short-term volunteers closer to church and its faith for a few years, but this influence has not lasted. Non-believing has also increased among long-time volunteers between the age of 20 to 25, from four per cent to twelve per cent, while the raise among short-time volunteers has been from eight per cent to 29 per cent and among non-volunteers from 22 to 31 per cent.

Figure 2. Belief in God among Finnish volunteers and non-volunteers at the beginning of confirmation time, in the end of it and 5 years later and 10 years later.



Personal experiences of the changes in belief among the young people support the results shown above. When young people were asked 10 years after confirmation time how their faith in God and relation to faith had changed after confirmation time, almost half (44%) of long-term volunteers said that God and faith are closer to them at the age of 25 than at the time of confirmation and one fifth (22%) says that they have got more distant (see Figure 3). Of short-term volunteers only 13 stated that God and faith are closer at the age of 25 and one third say that they are more distant.

Figure 3. Perceptions of changes in faith in God and relation to faith after confirmation time among non-volunteers, short-term and long-term volunteers at the age of 25.



Answers to open-ended questions reveal a bit more of these changes. The following comments from the short-term volunteers open-up the process of distancing among them:

When growing up and life getting busy, I have not thought of faith as much as during confirmation time. During confirmation time, we are at vulnerable age and easily influenced by others. This is the reason why many become believers during that time. Now I am considering leaving the church. The gay-issue is the main reason; I feel that everybody should have the right to a church wedding (short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

God and faith do not belong to my daily life any longer. During confirmation time I thought of these issues more and when I attended church activities (Short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

I feel that I have grown apart from the church. I feel that I was naïve when I was young, but when growing up, I have started to think differently and question these issues. I feel that I am paying church taxes in vain since those faith issues are not close to me any longer. I have remained as a member mostly just because that is a tradition. (Short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

During confirmation time I had not yet questioned my faith. However, after that I started to question it, which at least so far has led to denying God. (Short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

These comments reveal increasing distancing from the Church and increasing questioning related to faith among short-term volunteers when moving towards emerging adulthood. This distancing and questioning may make them end up to fully leaving the church. Responses reveal that young people tend to start questioning their faith in emerging adulthood, and what was learned in childhood and during confirmation time may not any longer seem plausible. In early adulthood young people may also start to interpret her or his earlier beliefs and attitude as naïve, as something that reflects lack of reasoning. On the other hand, church and its stands and actions may also be one key reason for distancing, especially the same-sex issue was mentioned. At the same time, several short-term volunteers reveal that questioning faith was already there during confirmation time, at least to some extent.

During confirmation time, I still believed at least to some extent in God and that the Bible is true. The more I thought of it and the more I read literature related to the topic, the more I started to realise that it is only a product of imagination. Nowadays, I do not regard myself as a Christian and, therefore, I do not want to belong to a Christian community. (Short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

During confirmation time, it is easy to go with the flow and with the group pressure. There is no space for your own thoughts. When the group-pressure started to ease, my interest in faith also started to loosen, since there was after all no personal interest at all. Now I am planning to leave the church since I never use its service. Price-quality balance; by far too expensive. (Short-term volunteer at the age of 25)

The comments above show that some short-term volunteers were already in the beginning of volunteer activity (and during confirmation time) sceptical towards faith but just felt that they went “with the flow” and followed their friends. This supports the notions of earlier research that short-term volunteering is often linked to social or extrinsic motives (Niemelä 2007, 117-118; Porkka 2009).

On the other hand, long-time volunteers brought strongly up the importance of volunteer activity to both bringing them closer to faith as well as keeping them close. These young adults spoke of the importance of both voluntary activity and church youth work in general. In addition, confirmation time as such was often mentioned as a meaningful experience.

I started voluntary activity after confirmation. That led me to other church youth activities in my church. I did not really regard faith as important during confirmation time, but this changed when I was active in volunteer work. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

It was not until during confirmation time that I started to think of faith and to reflect whether He would be the right road. When I attended church youth activities after confirmation, I got an answer and my faith was strengthened. Those church youth activities were most meaningful. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

My confirmation time was a positive surprise. I got many new friends and after that I volunteered for a few years. My local parish supported us young people very well and the pastors and other people in the church understood us young people very well. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

Some of the long-term volunteers even when reporting distancing from the church, at the same time brought up the importance of volunteering activity in the youth and:

Faith has got more distant and been buried under the daily rush and hassle after those years when I attended church youth activities. I miss those times, church and like-mindedness which united us friends. Currently I feel that there is nothing interesting going on in the Church or parish. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

However, in all cases the closeness that may have started during confirmation time does not stay in adulthood and leaving the church becomes an option also among the long-term volunteers. Sometimes it is linked to active reasoning and reflection.

After confirmation time I was active in church and I studied Lutheran faith very thoroughly. At some point I started to question many things and finally ended up resigning from the church, since the church did not any longer correspond with my world. I do not believe in the Lutheran God and many narrowminded thoughts and apparent and fake friendliness/openness disturbed me. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

There are also stories in which volunteer activity has been disappointing. Other factors may have anyhow kept the young adult as a member and close to faith. However, bad experiences may result in losing the connectedness to the parish and church.

I have more strongly become a believer and felt closer to God when I have grown older. However, I have almost lost the connection to my parish because of bad experiences in church voluntary work after confirmation. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

Some former long-term volunteers may also consider leaving the church or at least feel disappointed with the church and its standpoints even though they feel close to faith, but they are disappointed with the church and its decisions.

I do not really think of leaving the church, but the secularisation of the church and the watering down of its message has made wonder how long could this really continue until I do not any longer recognise this community and feel it as my own. At the same time faith has become more active and clearer part of my daily life. Through my own reflections I feel that I have started to understand better the relation between faith and other areas of life. (Long-term volunteer at the age of 25)

Discussion

In this article, changes in the relationship to church and faith have been presented among short- and long-term volunteers and non-volunteers in a longitudinal research perspective. A ten-year longitudinal data collected among confirmands in Finland has been used. The results show that emerging adulthood is in many ways critical for the relationship to faith and church – and this applies to both volunteers and non-volunteers. It is far more likely for long-term volunteers to remain close to faith and God during these years, but they are not fully protected from distancing either. Distancing may be linked to active reasoning, disappointing experiences, feelings that the church and its standpoints do not correspond with one's world view or it may be just a slow drifting away when the contacts with the church and parish activities are loosening. The results show that, especially among short-term volunteers, the distancing process is typical in early adulthood, among non-volunteers this process has typically began already earlier, soon or immediately after confirmation time, if there ever even has been closeness to faith. Long-time volunteering is typically an indicator of a close relationship to church and faith, but even that is not always enough. The results call strongly for activities among young adults. Even after long-time volunteering, young people may feel that there is no place for them or any activities for them in the church. This accompanied with life changes in emerging adulthood increases the likelihood to drift away from the church.

The result shows that active membership and closeness to church and faith typically needs continuous positive experiences on both the institutional level and on individual level. This means that one needs to feel both the church and its faith as meaningful and important on a personal level and at the same also to feel that the church as an institution and with its activities has something to offer or that the church as an institution corresponds with one's own worldview and values. If the connectedness either on an individual or on an institutional level is weak, the likelihood to leave the church rises especially in the midst of changes in emerging adulthood. Even strong personal level meaningfulness may not be enough if the church as an institution fails to meet the needs of a young adult.

The article was based on a longitudinal data. Using such data gives a possibility to follow developmental patterns on an individual level in a unique way. However, there are also weaknesses when using longitudinal data sets, especially when the follow-up period is long. The biggest one is related to the loss of participants. The longer the follow-up period, the greater the loss typically is. Here, we have been following the same young people for 10 years from the age of 14/15 to the age of 25. During those years, many changes tend to take place in the lives of the participants. It is possible that young people with certain developmental patterns are lost in the follow-up study. In this case, boys are more often lost, but the comparison of religious attitudes in the beginning and the end of confirmation time among those who responded and who did not respond to the last round of questionnaire shows no clear differences in attitudes.

The study and its results also call for further longitudinal studies among young people which would go beyond emerging adulthood. What changes are likely to take place when the same young people, former confirmands grow older, establish their families, get children or face losses and disappointments in life and how do they value confirmation time in a lifelong perspective? Since the loss of the data is most likely vast when the follow-up period is very long, such a study would require a large sample of young people, preferably in an international, comparative form.

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