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10-22-2008

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Haenicke, Diether, "Sixty years later, a confirmation celebration of the start of adulthood" (2008). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 52.

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Sixty years later, a confirmation celebration of the start of adulthood

*By Diether Haenicke
October 22, 2008*

My friend Christian called to let me know the details for the celebration of our Diamond Confirmation. In my home town in Germany, church confirmations, just like wedding anniversaries, are big affairs. After 25 years, it was the Silver Confirmation, and now, after 60 years, it will be the Diamond anniversary.

My schoolmates expect me to join them for the festivities, hence the phone call. After church last Sunday, they met and decided that the celebration should be the weekend before Pentecost, to be followed by a class reunion on Monday. My schoolmates, most of whom still reside in my hometown, have always graciously scheduled class reunions to coincide with my visits to Germany, and so there have been many of them. We gather at the same cozy local pub where our fathers and grandfathers once drank their beer and where three generations of pub owners have stood behind the bar.

But this confirmation anniversary, so Christian tells me, will be quite different. There will be a meeting over coffee and cake Saturday afternoon for the surviving classmates and their families to get reacquainted. Half of the group is still alive. On Sunday morning there will be a festive church service with communion, followed by a communal meal and a walk to the nearby cemetery to visit the graves of our dead classmates. After that, coffee and cake again, German style, followed by farewells and hugs and promises to show up for the next big anniversary, named the Grace of God Confirmation, 10 years hence, when the teenage boys and girls of yester-yesteryear will be 84 and their ranks even slimmer than today.

I remember these anniversary confirmations from my youth. I clearly recall the boy of 14 thinking how unbelievably archaic the men and women of 60 and 70 looked then.

They were truly old. When we old diamonds march into church next spring, those taking confirmation classes right now will have similar thoughts, I am sure.

I was confirmed in the Lutheran church with about 50 schoolmates in 1949 at the age of 14. World War II had ended four years earlier, and we still lived under American military control in the American Occupation Zone. The Federal Republic of Germany was formally established as a sovereign state only a few weeks after my confirmation.

A full year of religious instruction preceded our confirmation. One afternoon each week we assembled in a small, beautiful 14th century chapel and were instructed by the pastor in the tenets of our faith. We had to learn the entire Protestant catechism by heart, and I can recite it to this day. We also had to memorize the many church hymns sung on Sundays, certainly all of those by Martin Luther, who was a prolific writer and one who believed that a good hymn should have at least 10 stanzas. On Sunday mornings, during services, we had to sit as a group in the front pews, attendance was taken, and we were regularly examined, in front of the congregation, on the progress we were making in our religious instruction. Confirmation was serious business.

It was also an important social milestone in our lives. After confirmation, we wore long pants. Before, most of us wore short pants and long woolen stockings. That change meant a lot to me. The problem was to find long pants in those troubled days. A seamstress disassembled one of my father's suits, turned the cloth inside out, and created a perfect dark suit for my first day of manhood. It was more difficult to find a white shirt with long arms. It eventually came via the black market, accompanied by a tie, given by an uncle. I had gathered beech nuts in the surrounding woods during the preceding fall, and a bottle of beech nut oil was traded for a pair of black shoes my size. I thought I looked stunning in my outfit: Grown up, at the threshold of manhood, a small town boy eager to take on the world. And I felt ready to face God and the congregation on confirmation Sunday.

I look forward to that reunion with my boyhood friends. What stories we shall have to tell each other!

This column was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette mlive.com/kalamazoo