

# DOES RELIGION CONTRIBUTE TO YOUTH WELLBEING?

## A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF FAITH, WELLBEING AND THE CONFIRMATION PROCESS AMONG FINNISH LUTHERAN YOUTH – A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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### Introduction

Various studies have touched on the relation between religion and wellbeing, especially since the 1980s. Most empirical studies support a positive connection between these two<sup>1</sup> and show that religion can provide meaning in life<sup>2</sup> and serve as a powerful coping mechanism<sup>3</sup>, both of which contribute to wellbeing. Religious people have also been found to be happier and more satisfied with their lives<sup>4</sup> and to have better health and less anxiety.<sup>5</sup> This positive association between religion and wellbeing has been referred to as the belief-as-benefit-effect (BABE).<sup>6</sup> Previous research shows that the positive association appears to be robust across various cultural contexts.<sup>7</sup> World Values Survey data from 65 countries shows that personal religious identity is positively associated with life satisfaction throughout the world. This association is especially high under conditions of greater governmental regulation.<sup>8</sup> The association between religiosity and wellbeing is mediated by social support and a sense of being respected and of purpose or meaning in life.<sup>9</sup>

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1 Cohen & Johnson 2016.

2 Park 2005.

3 Pargament & Park 1997.

4 Diener et al. 1999; Myers 1992; Garssen et al., 2021.

5 Abdel-Khalek 2007.

6 See e.g. Schuurmans-Stekhoven 2019; Speed 2022.

7 Cohen & Johnson 2016.

8 Elliott & Hayward 2009.

9 Diener, Tay, & Mayers 2011.

However, in an increasingly secular society, religion's role in contributing to wellbeing has been questioned.<sup>10</sup> Diener et al. (2011) argue that the association between religion and wellbeing is dependent on societal circumstances, and that people are more likely to be religious in countries and communities with more difficult life conditions (e.g. low life expectancy). In these conditions, religious people have higher subjective wellbeing and religiosity is associated with greater social support, respect, purpose or meaning and subjective wellbeing. However, in more secular societies, Diener and colleagues found no difference in the wellbeing of religious and nonreligious people. This links to a person-culture effect and suggests that the benefits of religion regarding social relationships and subjective wellbeing depend on the characteristics of the society.<sup>11</sup>

In this paper, we examine changes in wellbeing and faith and their linkage among Lutheran youth in Finland, with a focus on gender differences. Previous studies show that gender plays an important role in religiosity. The greater religiosity of women has been demonstrated in consistent research findings over the past 100 years, and it has even been regarded as one of the most important characteristics about religion.<sup>12</sup> Research shows broadly that men tend to be less religious than women. Both church attendance and private religiosity have long been lower among men than women.<sup>13</sup> This is especially the case among Christians and in countries where Christianity is a majority religion.<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon is so wide that researchers have even argued that women's higher religiosity is a universal phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> Men are found to be less religious than women especially in countries where gender equality is high.<sup>16</sup> Studies conducted in Finland have also for years reported higher religiousness for women.<sup>17</sup> However, most recent studies show that gender differences among younger generations in Finland are no longer as clear as among older generations, and in some studies young men are found to be more religious than women.<sup>18</sup>

Recent studies also reveal important gender differences in wellbeing among Finnish youth. A large national school survey of youth in Finland showed that many measures of wellbeing have declined especially among girls from 2017 to 2021. The decline is especially visible between 2019 and 2021, which implies that the measures taken to control the spread of the virus during the COVID-19 pandemic

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10 See e.g. Cragun et al. 2016; Speed 2022.

11 Diener, Tay & Mayers 2011.

12 Beit-Hallahmi 2014.

13 See e.g. Hackett, Murphy & McClendon 2016; Lummis 2004

14 Pew Research Center 2016.

15 Stark 2002; Beit-Hallahmi 2014; Miller & Stark 2002.

16 Moon, Traner & McDonald 2022.

17 See e.g. Kääriäinen et al. 2003.

18 Salomäki et al. 2021; Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2023.

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possibly, at least partly, explain these changes. These measures taken in 2020-2021 included, among others, social distancing, prohibiting travel and public meetings, and school closures. The research shows that during these years an increasing number of girls especially experienced loneliness, were worried about their mood, and experienced anxiety or depression. The proportion of girls enjoying school also declined.<sup>19</sup>

In this study, we surveyed Finnish Lutheran youth at age 14 to 15 when they attended church confirmation preparation. In addition, we also surveyed young volunteers, YCVs (young confirmed volunteers; in Finnish: *isonen*) who are typically 1-4 years older than confirmands. In Finland, about 75 percent of teenagers are confirmed annually in the Evangelical Lutheran Church.<sup>20</sup> The share is higher than the church membership rate in Finland (65% in 2023). Lutheran confirmation preparation has remained popular among the youth despite declining religiosity in Finland. Attendance is popular not only among youth from religious homes – church confirmation has been able to maintain its strong role as part of youth culture also among teenagers from nominally religious and non-religious backgrounds. The confirmation process typically takes at least 6 months<sup>21</sup>, and in most cases includes a camp period.<sup>22</sup>

International surveys on confirmation work show that religious motives for attending confirmation as well as religiousness among confirmands are in general low in Finland. Finnish adolescents score lower on Christian belief than their peers in most Protestant countries in Europe. For example, two out of three of confirmands in Germany and Austria believe in God and more than half in the resurrection of Jesus already at the beginning of the confirmation process whereas only a third (35%) of Finnish confirmands believed in God and in the resurrection (31%) in 2013. Equally low percentages were found only in Sweden and Switzerland. Consequently, young people from a variety of backgrounds attend confirmation preparation in Finland. Despite low religious motives at the outset, the confirmation process tends to strengthen the religiousness of the youth. Confirmation preparation is a time when the confirmands and young volunteers explore their views of Christianity and the church. Among both groups there is both a negative and positive shift in beliefs and attitudes towards church and faith.

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19 Helenius 2022.

20 In 2022, 74 percent of all 15-year-olds were confirmed, among church members, the share was 91 percent.

21 This is the recommendation of the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland which have given the instructions for the confirmation work in Finland. (See: Great Miracle. Confirmation Preparation Plan 2017, 57.)

22 The percentage of confirmands participating in confirmation work with a camp period has been about 90 per cent already since 1999 (Porkka 2006, 47). In 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage was 86 percent (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in 2016-2019, 2011).

A positive shift is more common, but one in four develop a more critical attitude towards the church and faith during confirmation preparation.<sup>23</sup> Attitudes towards the church and Christian doctrine are more positive among teenagers volunteering for confirmation work after their confirmation (YCVs) than among confirmands. According to surveys, two out of three volunteers have a positive attitude towards the church and three out of four towards Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

In this paper, we examine changes in both wellbeing and faith and their interconnectedness among male and female Lutheran youth in Finland and whether church confirmation preparation may contribute to wellbeing. We ask the following questions:

1. How have faith and wellbeing changed among Lutheran youth in Finland? Are there gender differences?
2. How are wellbeing and faith interrelated among Lutheran youth in Finland? Are there gender differences?
3. How does the church confirmation process contribute to the wellbeing of youth in Finland? Are there gender differences?

## Data

In this study, we used data collected from Lutheran confirmands and young volunteers (YCVs) participating in confirmation work in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022. The data was collected using an electronic survey that was possible to complete using a smart phone. The aim was to make the survey fast and easy to respond to and to lower the threshold for participation. The survey contained about 30 items, most of which were asked every year, but each year the survey also contained certain topic-specific questions. In 2022 these questions focused on wellbeing. The survey was typically distributed by a teacher in the confirmation group at the end of the confirmation period. The aim was to get all confirmands in the group to respond. In most cases this seems to have succeeded. However, some groups only had a few respondents. However, since we had no information on the total number of confirmands per group, we were only able to estimate participation based on the number of respondents per group.

The number of confirmands and young volunteers who replied to the survey each year can be seen in Table 1. The total number of respondents is over 77,000. Of these, almost 64,000 were confirmands and over 13,000 young confirmed

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23 Niemelä & Porkka 2015, 226–227; Schweitzer et al. 2015, 185–186; Grauwald & Lagger 2015, 195; Porkka 2017, 162–163; Tervo-Niemelä 2021.

24 Porkka 2017, 162–163.

volunteers (YCVs). Most confirmands were aged between 14-15 and most young volunteers between 16-19.

**Table 1. Respondents to the confirmation work’s annual survey in 2019–2022.**

	Confirmands (age 14–15)	Percentage of all confirmands	Young volunteers (YCVs, mostly age 16–19)	Total
2019	12,497	25%	2,642	15,139
2020	14,654	31%	2,974	17,628
2021	18,530	37%	3,818	22,348
2022	18,245	39%	3,738	21,983
Total	63,926		13,172	77,098

Respondents were from 326 different parishes or religious organizations from all over the country. Most respondents were attending confirmation preparation in local parishes (92%). About 8% of respondents were attending confirmation preparation in various religious organizations. Regarding the demographic background information of the respondents, the only item we asked was their gender. Of the confirmands, 50 percent reported being female, 46 percent male, 1.5 percent other and two percent opted not to state their gender. Of the volunteers, 66 percent were female, 30 percent male, 1.9 percent non-binary and two percent opted not to state their gender. In this study, we focused only on the responses of male and female respondents. No other demographic information (e.g. family situation, urban or rural domicile) was sought. The longitudinal nature of our data allowed us to also analyze changes in religiosity and wellbeing before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Restrictions related to the pandemic period were especially active in 2020 and 2021. Data from year 2019 was thus collected before the pandemic, and data from year 2022 was collected after the pandemic.

In this paper, religion is analyzed from the perspective of faith. Faith can be seen as a synonym for belief, but there are also important differences (see Howard-Snyder 2016). Here, we understand faith as being broader than belief and we ask about respondents’ beliefs and their own experiences of how their faith has changed during the confirmation period. We measured faith among the youth using the following measures:

- I believe that God exists.
- I believe that Jesus has risen from the dead.
- My faith in God was strengthened during my confirmation period.

Wellbeing was analyzed from the perspective of respondents' self-reported joy in life and mental wellbeing. We measured youth wellbeing using these two measures, the latter asked only in 2022:

- I enjoy my life, scale 1–7 (1=fully disagree, 7=fully agree).
- How would you describe your mental wellbeing, scale 1–5 (1=very bad, 2= rather bad, 3=in between, 4=quite good, 5=very good).

The correlation co-efficient for these measures was .63 for confirmands and .66 for young volunteers. In the earlier surveys (2017–2021) we only used the first item (I enjoy my life), so for longitudinal comparison we use this item.

To extend the analysis of youth wellbeing in the context of the confirmation period, we asked participants to respond to the following statements and questions:

- I felt I could be myself during the confirmation period.
- The confirmation period has contributed positively to my wellbeing (scale 1–4) (asked only in 2022).
- In your experience, did the spiritual life of the confirmation period (prayer, reading the Bible, silence, music) contribute to your mental wellbeing?

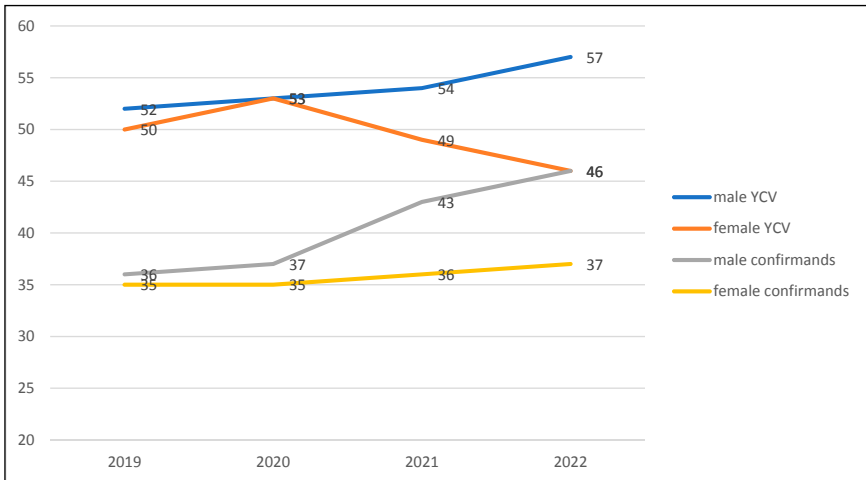
## Results

### *Changes in faith among the Lutheran youth in Finland*

The first research question to be answered was how faith has changed among Lutheran youth. Our data allowed us to analyze this both among confirmands and among young volunteers (YCVs). The years in which the data were collected, 2019–2022, further allowed us to analyze responses before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1 shows that female confirmands' belief in God's existence has been stable, while among male confirmands it increased between the period 2019 to 2022. Similarly, among male volunteers (YCVs) belief in God's existence became more common. At the same time, female YCVs' belief has decreased. In 2022 male confirmands and male volunteers were more likely (+9 percentage points) to believe in God's existence than their female counterparts. The development is interesting as it is contra to general gender differences found in previous studies. Among Finnish Lutheran youth there were no gender differences either among confirmands or volunteers in 2019. This was the case also in 2013 (International data on confirmation work 2012/2013). It is interesting that at the same time as female volunteers' belief in God's existence has become less common, male volunteers' and confirmands' belief has changed in the opposite direction.

Figure 1. Responses of male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) to the statement “I believe that God exists” in 2019–2022 (%). Share of positive responses (5–7) on a scale 1–7. N=63 326 (confirmands), N=13 172 (YCVs).



Similar results were found when respondents were asked to evaluate their own faith and changes in it during the confirmation period. Figure 2 shows the share of those who felt their faith in God had been strengthened during the confirmation period. The share increased among male confirmands and volunteers but remained stable among female confirmands during 2019–2022. Among female volunteers the developmental patterns are more complex, with an initial increase in the number of those who felt that their faith in God had strengthened during volunteering in the confirmation program between 2019 and 2020, but decline after that. It is important to keep in mind that the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, which could explain the change in their experience. However, the increase in 2020 was only momentary and, by the following year, their experience had normalized to the pre-pandemic level.

Figure 2. Responses of male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) to the statement “My faith in God strengthened during the confirmation period” in 2019–2022 (%). Share of positive responses (5–7) on a scale 1–7. N=63 326 (confirmands), N=13 172 (YCVs).

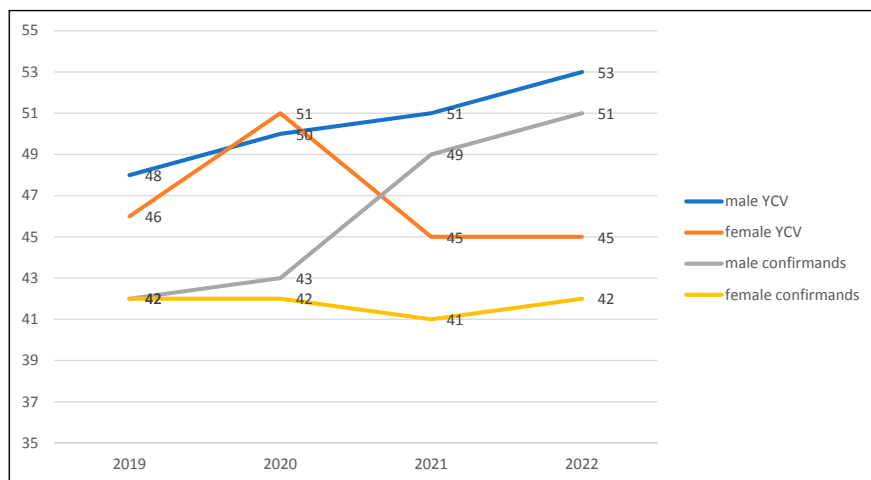
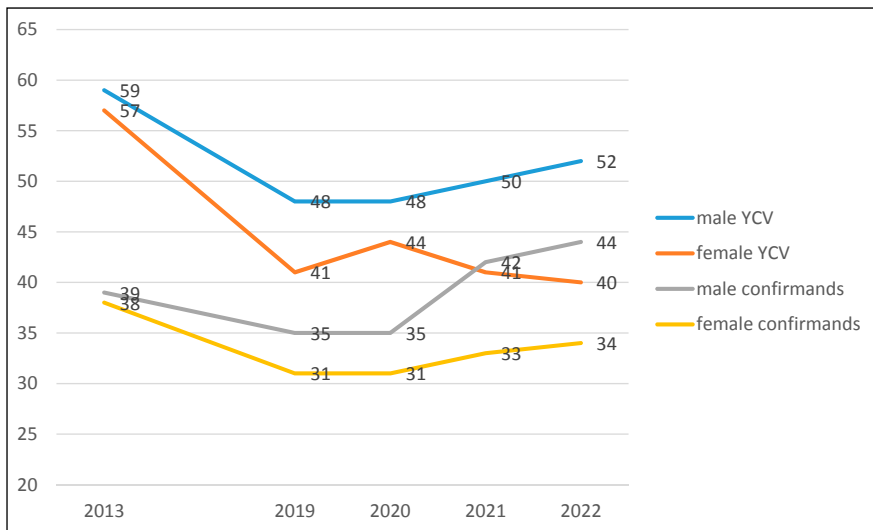


Figure 3 shows respondents’ belief in Jesus’ resurrection. The development is almost equal to the development seen in Figures 1 and 2. However, the gender gap when comparing belief in Jesus’ resurrection is even bigger than in belief in God. The question of Jesus’ resurrection was asked in an identical form previously in 2013 in an international confirmation study. In 2013 hardly any gender difference was observed: 39 percent of male confirmands and 38 percent of female confirmands gave a positive answer for this item. The corresponding percentage among male YCVs was 59 percent and female YCVs 57 percent. This comparison shows that belief in Jesus’ resurrection became less common between 2013 and 2019 in each of these respondent groups. However, male confirmands’ belief in the resurrection began to increase clearly in 2020 and was more common in 2022 than it used to be nine years earlier in 2013.



Figure 3. Responses of male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) to the statement “I believe that Jesus has risen from the dead” in 2019–2022 (%). Share of positive responses (5–7) on a scale 1–7. N=63 326 (confirmands), N=13 172 (YCVs), (data from 2013, see Schweitzer et al. 2015).

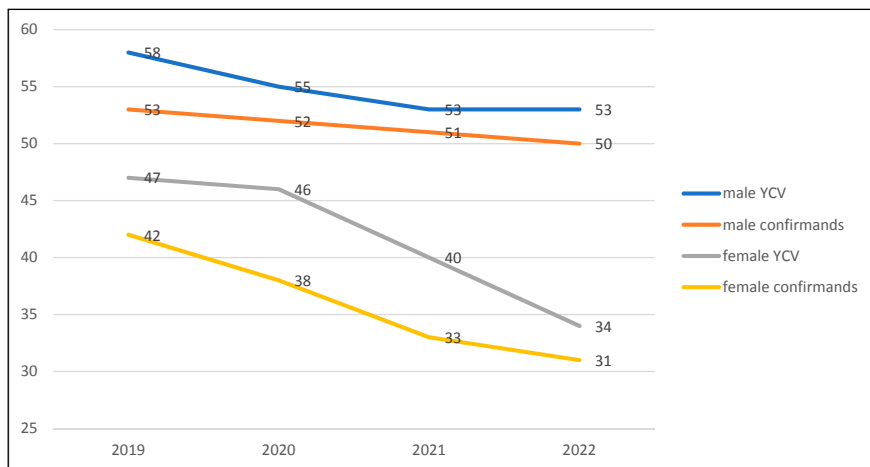


## Wellbeing and its changes among Lutheran youth in Finland

The second research question addressed whether the wellbeing of confirmands and YCVs has changed. Our data were collected before, during and after the pandemic, and therefore allow us to see how wellbeing among Lutheran youth has changed during this exceptional period.

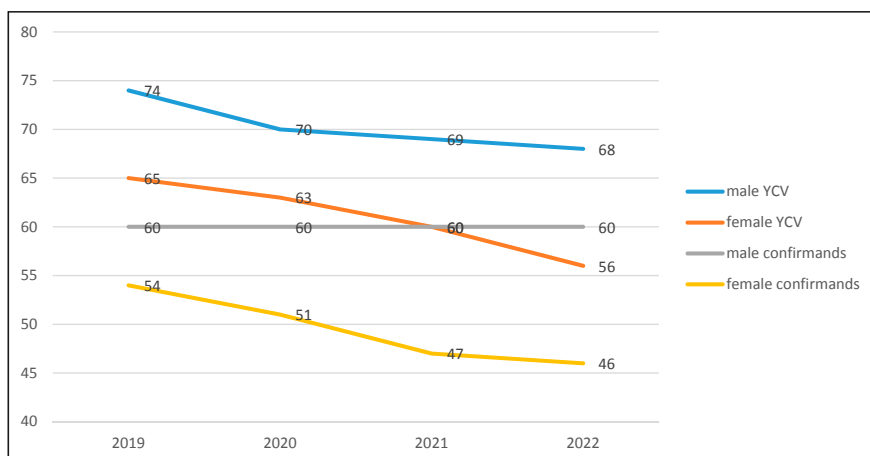
Figure 4 shows the answers to the question of whether the respondents enjoyed their life. A decline is especially clear among female confirmands and volunteers. While there is only a minor decrease in the number of male confirmands and volunteers (3–5 %-points) stating that they enjoy life, a decrease among female confirmands and volunteers of 11–13 percentage points is evident from 2019 to 2022. The decline among female YCVs in 2020 coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic and, therefore, it could be easy to conclude that they are interrelated. However, the decline among female confirmands started already one year earlier, which makes the connection between the pandemic and the decrease in girls’ wellbeing unclear. Most likely, multiple reasons simultaneously influenced the decrease. Nevertheless, if the pandemic is considered as a reason for the decrease, this leaves open the question of why the pandemic affected girls’ and boys’ mental wellbeing in different ways.

Figure 4. Responses of male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) to the statement “I enjoy my life” in 2019-2022 (%). Share of those who fully agreed (7) on a scale 1–7. N=63 326 (confirmands), N=13 172 (YCVs).



An important aspect of wellbeing in the context of confirmation work was the feeling of being accepted as you are without pretense during the confirmation period. Figure 5 shows the same development as in general wellbeing: boys’ sense of being able to be themselves is in general notably better than girls’ and has remained stable, whereas girls’ experience of the same has decreased from 2019 to 2022.

Figure 5. Responses of male and female confirmands and YCVs to the statement “I felt I could be myself during the confirmation period” in 2019–2022 (%). Share of those who fully agreed (7) on a scale 1–7. N=63 326 (confirmands), N=13 172 (YCVs).

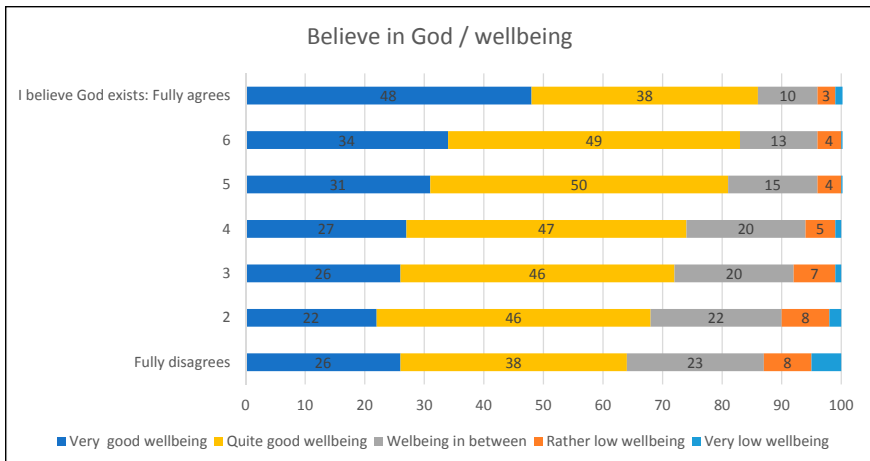


In the 2022 survey we asked via a separate question how the respondent would estimate their own mental wellbeing. Here again we see a discrepancy among men and women: 85 percent of male confirmands and 83 percent of male YCVs estimated their wellbeing either as excellent or quite good, while the corresponding figure for female confirmands and YCVs was 69 and 64 percent, respectively. Nine percent of female YCVs and confirmands estimated their wellbeing as either quite weak or very weak, while the corresponding figure for male confirmands and YCVs was four and five percent, respectively.

### How are wellbeing and faith connected among Lutheran youth?

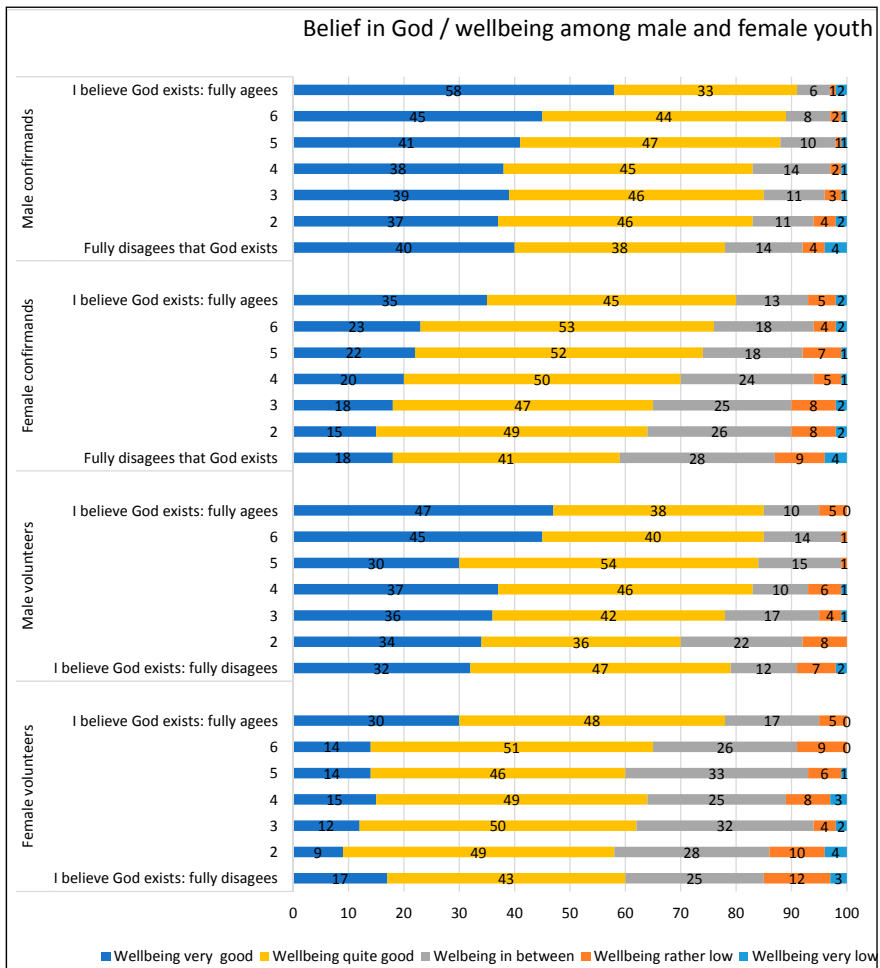
Our data show that, in general, faith is associated with better wellbeing. According to our data from the year 2022, half (48%) of those who believed fully (7 on a scale from 1 to 7) estimated their own mental wellbeing as very good, while about one in four (22–26%) of those who did not believe or were skeptical (1–3). The Pearson correlation co-efficient for youth wellbeing and belief in God was  $.18^{***}$  among confirmands and  $.16^{***}$  among volunteers. The correlation coefficient for wellbeing and belief in Jesus’ resurrection was almost identical ( $.19^{***}$  for confirmands and  $.17^{***}$  among volunteers). “I enjoy my life” similarly correlated with belief in God and with belief in Jesus’ resurrection (both  $.24^{***}$  among confirmands and  $.19^{***}$  among volunteers). Figure 6 illustrates the connection between wellbeing and belief in God among confirmands.

Figure 6. Mental wellbeing and belief in God among confirmands in 2021. N=13 526.



The connection between faith and wellbeing is slightly stronger in female and confirmands than male confirmands (belief in God: males .14\*\*\*, females .16\*\*\*; belief in Jesus' resurrection: males .21\*\*\*, females .23\*\*\*). The share of those with very good wellbeing was highest both among male and female respondents who believed strongly in God (chose 7). Among believing males, the share was 58 percent, while among those not believing, the share was 40. Among females the corresponding figures were 35 and 18 percent. Among YCVs the trend was similar, and also similarly, the connection was slightly stronger among female volunteers (.13\*\*\*) than male volunteers (.11\*\*\*)

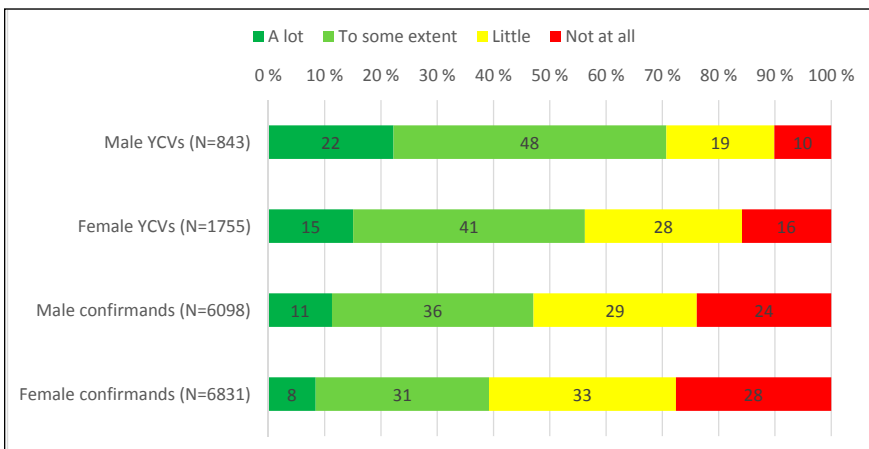
Figure 7. Mental wellbeing and belief in God among male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs) in 2021. N=13 526 (confirmands), N=2 774 (YCVs).



How about the confirmation period? If faith in general is positively associated with youth wellbeing, how does the time spent in confirmation preparation contribute to youth wellbeing? The results show that the majority of young people felt that the confirmation process contributed to their mental wellbeing at least to some extent. This is the case for both confirmands and YCVs. More than four out of five (82%) of male YCVs and almost four out of five female YCVs (77%) estimated that the confirmation period had had a positive impact on their mental wellbeing. The corresponding figure for male confirmands was 67 and for female confirmands 61. The share of those who estimated that the confirmation period contributed to their mental wellbeing *a lot* was 15 percent among female confirmands and 18 percent among male confirmands. Among YCVs the corresponding figures were 23 and 33, respectively. Only 14 percent of female confirmands, 12 percent of the male confirmands, seven percent of female YCVs and six percent of male YCVs reported that the confirmation process did not have any positive impact on their mental wellbeing.

Respondents were also asked to estimate if the spiritual life of the confirmation period had supported their mental wellbeing (Figure 8). Also here, the results were clear: 70 percent of male YCVs and 56 percent of female YCVs estimated that the spiritual life had had a positive impact on their mental wellbeing at least to some extent. The corresponding figure for male confirmands was 47 and for female confirmands 39 percent. However, only a small percentage of confirmands, 8 percent of females and 11 percent of males, reported that the spiritual life supported their mental wellbeing a lot. About one in four reported that it did not support their mental wellbeing at all.

*Figure 8. Did the spiritual life during the confirmation period support your mental wellbeing? Responses of male and female confirmands and young confirmed volunteers (YCVs). N=13 526 (confirmands), N=2 774 (YCVs).*



## Conclusion

In this paper, we have analyzed changes in belief and wellbeing among Lutheran youth in Finland and the possibilities of faith contributing to youth wellbeing. The results are based on a large longitudinal data set collected from 2019 to 2022. The results allow us to analyze the situation before, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results show that the development among female and male youth has taken different paths both in faith and wellbeing. Among male youth, the data show an increase in belief, while among female youth the data show a decline in belief among volunteers and stability in belief among confirmands. Regarding wellbeing, the data show a decline in wellbeing among female youth – both confirmands and volunteers – and stable patterns among men. These results raise questions. It is possible that the pandemic period may have had different consequences for males and females, but it is also possible that there are other factors that we are not yet aware of. More research should be directed to analyzing these issues. This applies both to the question of why wellbeing has decreased among females, but not among males, and to the question of what is behind the increase in belief among young males.

The increase in belief among young males in Finland is against all expectations related to religious change. It is important to point out that this increase has also been found in other very recent studies based on representative samples at the level of the whole population.<sup>25</sup> However, these previous studies have raised the question of whether the increase among young males is somehow linked to bias in the data, as the subgroups (young males) are not very large in these studies. However, the data of this study is very convincing: by focusing solely on youth and with a very large number of respondents (over 77,000). In this study the focus was on Lutheran youth who participate in confirmation preparation. They make up the majority of young Finns, with nearly 75 percent of all youth being confirmed.

The different patterns of belief among male and female youths also raise questions related to the theology and teachings of the church – are they somehow becoming more attractive to men and less attractive to women? Many studies and practical experience have shown that women have been especially critical towards the church for being too conservative and not officially accepting same-sex weddings or even blessings. Women, in particular, have resigned from the church over this specific issue. It would be important to study these issues in more depth, also from the perspective of men – what is it about the faith that attracts them?

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25 See Salomäki et al. 2021; Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2023; Tervo-Niemelä & Spännäri 2023.

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The results furthermore show that faith is linked to positive wellbeing among Lutheran youth. This is in line with various studies which have shown a positive association between religion and wellbeing. This association has been referred to as the belief-as-benefit-effect (BABE). The present study also shows that the time spent in confirmation preparation has positive influences on youth wellbeing. This is not only due to spending time with other young people – they are also finding that the spiritual life that they experience during the confirmation process contributes to their mental wellbeing.

This study shows interestingly that faith is linked to the wellbeing of female youth slightly more strongly than of male youth. At the same time, the study shows that wellbeing has clearly declined among women, but not among men. Among men religious faith has increased, but this is not the case among women. This raises the question of whether religion has some role in the stable wellbeing among men and in the declining wellbeing among female youth. Is the decline in faith one factor behind the decline of wellbeing? Or is the connection more likely the other way around? Previous studies show that people who are privileged, for example in terms of stronger socio-economic background or stronger religious background, are more likely to experience religion as positively contributing to their life than those not privileged. This is called the Matthew-effect. In the context of confirmation work this is visible for example in that adolescents with a strong Christian childhood upbringing or active participation in the parish activities in childhood, had a far higher likelihood of experiencing confirmation time as faith strengthening of becoming volunteers after their confirmation time than the adolescent with less religious influence during their upbringing.<sup>26</sup> This raises questions of whether girls' increased ill-being plays a role in their decrease in faith. Might it be that when girls are not doing well, they are less likely to find church and its faith as something that could be for them? This would require further investigation.

In this research, we have not been able to analyze the role of various demographic factors, including the role of family background or domicile. This means that we have, for example, not been able to evaluate whether the results differ among those living in rural communities or big cities, or if the socio-economic situation of the family plays a part. These aspects should be taken into account in future studies.

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26 Porkka 2017, 173–180; Porkka & Tervo-Niemelä 2017, 178–179

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