



REALITY: CONFIRMATION IS GRADUATION

BY CHRISTOPHER D. RODKEY

I can't tell you how many churches I have encountered that scratch their heads and ask, "Why don't our teens stick around after they're confirmed?" While there are many answers to this question, perhaps the primary answer boils down to whether the parents stress any importance to the teen continuing to be in a church community post-Confirmation.

When teens act like they've graduated from church when they're confirmed, perhaps the reality is that we have devised a system where graduation is the only real option that they have in relation to the church. In a 1969 interview, proto-feminist thinker Mary Daly made some interesting observations related to the church out of which she paraded:

Moving "outside" [of the church] does not necessarily mean leaving. When [Bishop] James Pike described himself as an *alumnus* of his church, the expression conveyed the fact that he was not severing all relation to it, but rather establishing an adult relationship to it. To pursue this analogy, alumni are in fact what an institution of learning is intended to produce—not perpetual students. So also the point of the church is not to foster religious infantilism... Going back would be sorely

analogous to the act of one who would refuse graduation from a university, preferring to retain his undergraduate status permanently. ("Mary Daly and the Church," *Commonweal* 91 [1969] 215)

While this analogy can, I believe, only go so far, Daly makes an interesting point. If Confirmation is the pinnacle of religious education for youth, the moment that culminates everything which came before it in

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church and the final transition into adult membership in the church, then Confirmation *is* graduation. To participate in church beyond Confirmation is often like an alumni/ae event.

Make no mistake about it: we have parties, sometimes elaborate ceremonies, final projects, and checklists of requirements. I remember that at the graduation ceremonies of one of the fine institutions so privileged to call me a student, I actually had a letter soliciting a donation to my alma

mater stuffed into my diploma. I also have been guilty of pushing youth Confirmands to make a dollar-a-month pledge to the church at their "graduation." Even weddings and baptisms take on the form of high school or college alumni/ae events.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with Confirmation; in fact, I think Confirmation can be a meaningful experience for a teen. What needs to be changed is thinking that the whole program of religious education ends at some particular point or time. We need to recognize that our mechanisms of religious education create an educational *institution-alumnus* relationship. Instead, we are called to develop an ecology of education in the church, rather than an institution.

Clearly, we—denominational religious educators—have dropped the ball, surrendering to fads and programs that teach consumption rather than discipleship. We have been afraid to celebrate the small, local congregations in which many of us are located (and even called), and instead we have looked beyond the gifts and graces of the local congregation to something flashy and more attractive. In doing so, we have taught youth to look beyond their home institution for something more. In closing our eyes to ourselves, we have denied



ourselves the right of the young leading us in the dreaming of dreams.

An ecological approach to youth ministry begins with the assumption that youth are confirmed and affirmed along with adults and children at every step along life's journey. A Confirmation experience can simply be one big step, among others, but it is only meaningful within a context of a larger experience of pan-generational church life.

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