

1

OWN THE SITUATION

The rest of that generation were also gathered to their ancestors, and a later generation arose that did not know the LORD or the work he had done for Israel.

—Judges 2:10

Who's to blame when it comes to failing Confirmation prep programs? Everyone has his or her own opinion. And while we can play the blame game, the real question should be, Who owns the problem? Because when you own the problem you take the first step toward finding a solution.

One night as I was setting up for our high school program, our pastor stopped by to see how everything was going. I was in the middle of making copies of our small-group questions for our leaders and feeling a little stressed out. I didn't want to let on that I was feeling overwhelmed, so I replied, "It's all good, just a little busy work before the students get here."

He smiled and responded, "Oh, good. By the way did you know that one of the new couches that you recently bought is broken?"

I wanted to ignore what he had just said; there was a lot I had to get done. But those couches had been the source of a good bit of tension. I had spent months researching and comparing prices, and hours explaining and pleading with leadership why our ministry needed those couches to grow disciples. In the end I had won the battle in proving why this investment in youth ministry was so important. It took me a year to earn the right to have those couches, and now one of them was broken!

Something inside of me snapped. I couldn't ignore it any longer, so I walked out into the hallway where our students congregated.

There it was as clear as day. It was as if someone had decided that the \$400 couch from IKEA would make a great trampoline.

My frustration grew to anger. If I had the strength of the Hulk, I would have picked up that couch and thrown it across the hall. I vowed vengeance and set off to find the responsible party. That's when the IKEA couch witch hunt began. Fortunately, there were not a lot of people in the building, so finding a guilty party should have been easy. It was not.

I quickly removed the pastor from my list of suspects; there was no chance he was responsible. I concluded that none of my adult volunteers would have committed such a crime without confessing. I went to Chris, our student worship bandleader, who was coordinating a practice. I asked him for an account of all student band members. They all had alibis.

I started wandering around asking anyone who was in the building about that couch. I needed someone to blame. I was confused, anxious, and angry. And I was avoiding the one thing I should have been concerned with: fixing the problem. I had a broken couch that needed to be removed, and instead of getting it out of people's way I felt driven to find someone to blame.

FINDING THE PROBLEM

Finding out who is responsible for the woes of Confirmation preparation is a witch hunt. In the end all you do is make yourself more angry and frustrated. When it comes to fixing the problem we tend to dwell too much on who's responsible for the problem and not enough on exploring who is responsible for the solution. Not only do we look for someone to blame, but also we buy into a few myths that perpetuate the lengthy search.

Myth 1: Teenagers Just Don't Care

When teenagers don't meet the requirements or don't show up, we tend to believe that they just don't care. It's easy to accuse teenagers of being apathetic when it comes to their faith. After all, it appears

as if they are too immersed in the material world and their own particular activities and social connections to really focus on Christ. We tend to see teenagers as self-centered, immature, and driven to engage in events only when it seems everyone else is, or at least when the cool crowd is involved.

The reality is that teenagers do care about the spiritual life. Regardless of the topic, the question they ask is, “Why does it matter?” The problem is that we often tell them what they need to do to “get” confirmed without taking the time to explain why Confirmation matters, why church matters, and why having a relationship with Jesus Christ matters.

As youth ministers, catechists, and directors of religious education (DREs), we need to clarify the purpose of Confirmation, first in our own minds and then with those we invite to the sacrament. We need to take the time to explain why it matters in the lives of our young people. When you can answer that big question for them, then you can expect a return on your hard work and your investment in the process and in their lives.

Myth 2: The Parents Have Given Up

It’s easy to blame parents and resign ourselves to the myth that they have given up. We often believe they let their teens walk all over them and that the only reason parents are doing this whole Confirmation thing is so that their parents will back off. We all find it easy to believe (and complain) that parents are more concerned with getting their teen into a good college than helping them get to know Jesus.

The truth is that parents need assistance. While they are primarily responsible for the faith formation of their teens, there isn’t any clear manual to help them do that. In fact there is often precious little real support for them in our parishes. If you are coordinating your Confirmation preparation, you need to make sure that parents know they aren’t alone. Don’t just supply resources; instead, be a resource they can go to when their teens will not talk to them.

Myth 3: The Director of Religious Education Is a Control Freak

Some of us believe that all our parish DRE wants is control and that he or she doesn't care about really helping teens understand. We think the DRE is a school-principal wannabe, wanting to be "the boss" rather than a partner. We think to ourselves, *Maybe if she watched a little television she would know what's going on in the world.*

Most DREs have a lot on their plate. On top of regular religious education, we might be asking them to take on much more. It's crucial that parishes find these ministers support and eventually appoint someone (paid or volunteer) who will focus solely on sacramental preparation.

Myth 4: The Youth Minister Is Reckless

This myth holds that youth ministers really only care about being a friend to the youth of the parish. Being their friend makes them feel good, important, and as if they have a place in the parish and the world. We think all they know is games, what toppings on pizza taste good, and how to throw a Frisbee. Youth ministers are more of event and activities planners than people responsible enough to lead the next generation. How do they even stay employed?

Like the DRE, youth ministers' plates are often too full with a variety of responsibilities outside of their core job description. Plus, youth ministers get into ministry to be relational. If your Confirmation program is not relational, you are creating a competing and broken system. Give your youth minister guidance and crucial support.

Myth 5: The Pastor Doesn't Want Anything to Do with the Process

Does he even care about teenagers? The only time he talks about them is to complain. He's constantly slashing the budget and never shows up to any of the classes.

The pastor does care, but he might not know how to comfortably approach teens. Instead of resenting him for not being more

hands on, invite him to be a part of the planning and vision casting. Think about helping him take small steps toward not just understanding teens but also coming to value their role in the parish. Help your teens get to know him and come to value his role.

While these myths focus on different people, what they have in common is that they are focused on *people*. Too often we place blame on people, when the problem really has to do with *systems*. The reason Confirmation preparation hasn't been working isn't because of a reckless generation or disenfranchised parish staff. It's because what worked half a century ago is no longer effective today. Just like the world around it, preparation needs to change.

If you are going to change anything you need to start looking at the systems that feed and fuel the problem. If you are dissatisfied with your Confirmation program, start looking at the systems that impact and influence it. Here are a few of the systems problems we identified as we began to rebuild our program.

System Issue 1: An Unclear Purpose

If you want someone to commit time and energy to something, you need to answer the question, Why does this matter? Knowing exactly why receiving the sacrament matters is key to having teens, parents, and the church community embrace the journey.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) tells us that Confirmation brings an increase and deepening of baptismal grace:

- it roots us more deeply in the divine filiation which makes us cry, “Abba! Father!”;
- it unites us more firmly to Christ;
- it increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit in us;
- it renders our bond with the Church more perfect; [and]
- it gives us a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross.

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1303

If you've grown up in the church and have a deep understanding of the sacrament, what the *Catechism* teaches is so moving. The problem is that people who are less engaged than you and I want to know what this will look like in their everyday life. Preparing your students for Confirmation is all about answering the question, *Why does this matter?*

Answering that question is not simple. Right now teens are hearing a lot of messages about what should matter in their lives. They are told that grades, scholarships, trophies, and other résumé builders are what will lead them to a fuller life. You and I know the only message that's true is the one from Jesus when he taught, "I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10:10).

Confirmation unites us more firmly with Christ, and that's what brings us a full life. You and I are responsible for clarifying with teens why this part of their journey is so important. Instead of teaching them only (or even mostly) *what* they need to know, we need tell our teenagers that Confirmation preparation is for learning the next steps that will lead to a better you.

That's it. Preparing for Confirmation is learning how to be a disciple of Christ, because we believe that's the path to a fuller and more fulfilling life. Give them a purpose and watch them dive in.

System Issue 2: More Schooling

Teens spend a great deal of their waking hours in school for most of each year. Nothing sounds less attractive to them than more school. To make Confirmation prep even less appealing is that this schooling takes place in the evening, when they are tired and easily resentful of their free time or homework or money-earning time being chewed up by a program they don't really see a value in.

Confirmation textbooks, homework, and testing are only going to lead to frustration and resentment. Plus, if you think about it, how much can you teach in a Confirmation prep course? You might have them for two hours per week over the span of twelve weeks.

That's trying to cram over two thousand years of church history, doctrine, theology, and practice into about twenty-four hours.

The problem with setting up Confirmation preparation like a formal classroom is that you are adding to the constant noise of information overload that teenagers face on a regular basis. In later chapters we'll discuss content in some detail, but the solution to the system problem is twofold.

The first part is that Confirmation preparation needs to be relational. If you are going to break open deep, enriching information with teens, they need to do that with someone they trust. To build that trust you need to find people who are focused on building relationships. You need people who want to meet the candidates where they are in their faith journeys and help them take a next step toward a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.

The second part is narrowing your focus and teaching less for a greater impact. In other words, ask yourself what is essential for candidates to know that will help them continue growing in discipleship after they are confirmed.

The list of topics, tools, habits, and facts that we want to communicate to our young people seems to be endless. It is certainly daunting! The truth is that with the limited time you and I have with them, we have to focus on a few important truths that will have significant impact. In his book *7 Practices of Effective Ministry*, Andy Stanley writes, "If you are responsible for training in your organization you must learn to prioritize information. You have to take a look at what your target audience needs to know and separate what is most important from what is just interesting" (122).

A classroom is all about getting the information communicated, but when you set up your sacramental prep to be relational, it's about investing in your vision, your hope of who the candidate will become.

System Issue 3: No Teamwork

It doesn't matter who is charged with leading the Confirmation program. In the end it's a parish-wide responsibility. What that means

is that the pastor, DRE, youth minister, and everyone else involved needs to join hands and get on board—together.

I'm willing to bet most people feel this way, but when they try to get others to buy in, all they get are empty promises. And while you can't control others, you can influence their buy-in.

The buy-in comes with you presenting the right vision. The buy-in comes from putting others before you. The buy-in comes from being able to communicate that without fully confirmed disciples of Jesus Christ, the Church will falter and eventually cease to be.

If you look at the biblical story of Joshua, you'll discover a man who had faith that God was with him. You'll see someone who had courage. However, you'll also discover his inability to help the next generation come to the Lord.

The rest of that generation were also gathered to their ancestors, and a later generation arose that did not know the LORD or the work he had done for Israel.

—Judges 2:10

How could that happen? It's because no one took the time to share with the next generation what it looked like to have a relationship with God.

It's time to stop playing the blame game. It's time to look at our next generation of Catholic disciples as an investment that can bear fruit and have a greater impact on the Church and in the world than we can ever imagine. Confirmation preparation might seem like a thorn in your side. It might feel like one of those impossible tasks. But it's worth it; you just need to own the challenge, own the situation, find solutions, and trust God.