

## A Made-in-Alberta High School Religious Education Program

By Matt Hoven, PhD

Curriculum redesign is at the forefront of the provincial government's education agenda. Instead of revamping the curriculum one subject at a time, the redesign will create a common design for schooling content and processes, aligning the curriculum for twenty-first century competencies. Because religious education (RE) courses in Catholic high schools are locally developed courses, they will not be included in Alberta Education's redesign. However, religious educators in Alberta Catholic high schools should ask: Why not coordinate future RE curriculum with the provincial redesign?

The future direction of the RE elementary/junior high program is clearer than that of high schools. A new resource for Canadian Catholic schools is in production and is beginning to replace a very tired *Born of the Spirit* (1990-1997) program that has been in use for upwards of 25 years. Pearson Canada is creating the resource titled, *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ* (2015-),<sup>i</sup> which is based upon a national catechetical framework originally produced by Ontario's bishops and furnished with up-to-date pedagogical practices—including something called the internet (!). The new program has been implemented for Grades 1-3, excludes ECS, and is still under development for Grades 4-8, which makes an early assessment of it unfair despite positive teacher reviews from those who have waited years for its arrival. It does not include Grade 9 in its plans, however, because it follows the school grade divisions of Ontario instead of Alberta. Plans for a new high school program beyond the plans of *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ* are not public knowledge, but one could assume that the success of the elementary program will in part determine if Pearson writes a high school program in the future.

For religious education in Alberta Catholic high schools, it might seem prudent to simply follow Ontario's lead, wait for the creation of new resources, and use them here. The elementary program seems educationally strong and is set within a catechetical framework agreed upon by the Canadian bishops. With greater student numbers for leveraging and working with a successful publishing house, Albertan religious educators should willingly embrace a new national high school program—or so the argument will go. Although this path for producing a resource might be the most straightforward and efficient, it isn't the best thing for religious education in the province. In fact, a one-size-fits-all program will not address the particularities of Alberta and its schooling system and, furthermore, will limit the development of leadership in religious education provincially and within school districts. In short, we should come up with a better plan.

In order to envision a different direction for the future, we need to re-examine our past. In particular, it is helpful to recall the development of high school Catholic religious programming in Alberta prior to the creation of the first national program in 2001. Following Vatican II and the decline of the number of religious priests and sisters in school leadership positions, major questions hung over the purpose of catholic schools—including high school religious education. In the 1970s, locally developed programs would fall short but a 1980s province-wide consortium project would be successfully developed and approved as the RE program for Alberta's Catholic high schools. This article summarizes the outcomes and influences of this project and, based on this history, argues for designing a new made-in-Alberta program. By reviewing this story—a complete history is the focus of an article published in *Historical Studies*<sup>ii</sup>—an alternate route for the future of high school RE curriculum can be argued.

### The Past

By the 1960s, the modern catechetical movement and the Second Vatican Council inspired changes to what was predominantly a doctrinal approach in Catholic RE, as commonly found in the *Baltimore Catechism*. The need for change was felt throughout the world, including Alberta. In 1969, students told delegates at an annual Canadian Catholic School Trustees meeting in Calgary that they wanted less doctrinal teaching and more discussion of current problems. In a word, “We are tired of second rate religion courses alongside first rate academic courses.”<sup>iii</sup> The students complained further that the religion courses were not accredited with Ministry of Education, thus they did not earn credits toward graduation upon completion of the courses. In an Edmonton high school in 1971, things boiled over in a confrontation between staff and students over the mandatory courses and their questionable value. In protest, seventy-five of the school’s 375 students clapped and chanted slogans during an afternoon sit-in covered by local media, including the *Edmonton Journal*.<sup>iv</sup> A resolution would come later that year with both the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) and Edmonton Catholic School District (ECSD) having high school religion courses approved for accreditation—which also meant that these could take place outside the last half hour of the school day—and by 1974 the courses would be accepted as fulfilling requirements for entrance into university. Thus, the districts doggedly resolved to develop new courses and have them approved with students’ needs in mind.

Tensions peaked again at the end of the 1970s. In Edmonton, many staff and students asked for a re-design of the RE program, especially because of the difficulty of the Grade 12 World Religions course. A major survey completed by the school district also uncovered that attendance of students at Mass and visits to the confessional were falling, sometimes drastically.<sup>v</sup> It appeared that the program’s use of the life experience approach was not supporting active sacramental life of students. Adding fuel to the fire was Pope John Paul II’s *Catechesi Tradendae*.<sup>vi</sup> His apostolic exhortation dealt specifically with the tension between theological and life experience learning. The pontiff argued that the two were connected, but firmly asserted that concentration upon life experience could not replace the orderly study of the Christian message. Tensions between the two sides became a major issue in the 1980 trustee elections in Edmonton. Victorious candidates acted swiftly, establishing a long term plan for a senior high program that reflected the papal middle ground. Six weeks later they endorsed, in principle, cooperation with the Alberta Bishops and Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (ACSTA) to devise an entirely new province-wide program.

Between 1981 and 1984, the Alberta Catholic High School Religious Education Consortium Project designed the new program. When Alberta Education refused to pay to hire specialists, twenty-six school districts co-operated to finance three full-time teacher-equivalent positions and one coordinator position at a cost of approximately \$500,000 (\$1.19 million in 2015 dollars). The idea of a thoroughly cooperative endeavour for religious education was unprecedented in Alberta. Smaller boards had used the earlier programs written by ECSD and CCSD, but this was different. To ensure a province-wide scope, school districts had local advisory committees provide feedback to the project team, which would design the classroom materials. The superintendents’ committee and the steering committee composed of the bishops and ACSTA oversaw the entire project. The program had an unmistakable, home-grown feel.

Disagreements arose, however. Coordinator Bill Myskiw, a teacher with ECSD, met local constituents and committees, especially in Lethbridge and Calgary, to discuss concerns over the direction of the project, its educational approach, and particular theological teachings. From the outset, Myskiw was aware that he was responsible for the safe passage of the program by navigating positions among social progressives and doctrinal conservatives. He ultimately satisfied individual concerns and kept the project team on track.

Public challenges occurred, along with tensions arising at meetings of local committees, but this lively yet somehow functional democratic process in educational design inched forward. In the end, the Alberta Bishops would pay for the program's doctrinal review and Alberta Education would give its approval after (a) a review by the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta and (b) inclusion of a world religion's unit for each grade level.

With the approval of the Bishops and Minister, the Alberta High School Religious Studies Program officially began in September 1984. It was a proud moment for both educators and the larger Catholic community, especially given the collaborative nature of the project. ECSD superintendent John Brosseau commented that "there has been far greater cooperation in the Catholic community among parents, teachers, school districts, bishops, and clergy"<sup>vii</sup> compared to past work in religious education. The collegial nature of the consortium project was a significant event of church renewal for Catholic education in Alberta, especially coming out of the challenges of the 1970s and early 80s. As Myskiw recalled decades later, "Everyone developed ownership of the program. . . [as] all jurisdictions adopted the program."<sup>viii</sup> In a sense, the final product of the consortium acted like a blueprint for Catholic schools. It was a difficult undertaking that included disagreements but was inspired from a grassroots need. In the act of determining the content of faith for the next generation, the consortium project uncovered how Catholic education could function in a post-conciliar church with lay leadership heavily involved and supported by the bishops.

The content of the consortium program was all-encompassing. As a stand-alone curriculum, it rarely referred teachers to outside sources. The careful detailing of theological and social explanations within the course content was deemed necessary: few high school teachers were specialists in religious education or theology and thus support was necessary for addressing questions connecting student experiences, theological content, and participation in church life. To respond to this challenge, ACSTA spearheaded a Religious Education Services (RES) Project and individual school districts employed religion consultants who also assisted teachers and students in religious learning. These support services immediately responded to a variety of instructional challenges and institutional tensions related to teaching religion.

Unfortunately, the end of religious education curricular design in Alberta Catholic high schools came the following decade. In 1994, a new objectives-based curricular framework replaced the lesson and unit plans of the consortium program with resources imported from the United States. By 2001, a new national Grade 10 resource called *Christ and Culture*<sup>ix</sup>—approved by the Canadian Bishops and written by the National Office of Religious Education—would be developed for Ontario schools and implemented shortly thereafter in Alberta. Other national programs—*In Search of the Good* (2004) and *World Religions* (2011)<sup>x</sup>—became primary sources for two other approved high school courses in Alberta. No Canadian program was produced for Grade 11, so various American resources were fitted for a course about Christology and Scripture.

### The Future

What lessons does the consortium project have for future RE curriculum developments in Alberta? First, as stated above by Brosseau, the collaboration necessary to design the program brought together stakeholders in the Catholic community more than ever. A collegial spirit carried the day despite disagreements and tensions as people worked together and all districts implemented the program. Furthermore, the program's approval marked a moral victory. Different stakeholders were invested deeply in the project. More than financial investment, many people's hard work and dreams were spent on creating a

fitting program for youth in Catholic high schools. Giving educators chances to shape RE's future proved impactful, as reported by people interviewed for this research project.

Second, the hard work of designing the curriculum translated into innovation: the courses and programs became accredited and approved because of engagement with Alberta Education. Today the Minister of Education still approves RE programming but the depth of engagement was greater in the 1970s and 80s. If innovative educators correlated a future high school RE program with the current curriculum redesign, RE would not fall out of sync with the future Program of Studies. People, inside and outside of Catholic schooling, would not view RE courses as second-rate, as is often considered today because of current program's lack of an overarching design. One could say that in the 1970s and 80s religious education in Catholic schools had more "skin in the game," meaning that because they couldn't simply accept an Ontario-made program they necessarily examined creative solutions that ultimately buoyed Catholic education going forward.

The effort to create the 1980s program, thirdly, gave the opportunity to respond to concerns of Albertans. In the consortium project, for instance, particular concerns of the Alberta Catholic community were addressed. To be sure, the basics of biblical theology or Catholic moral thought don't change inside or outside of Alberta, but *how* the teaching resource is contextualized for teachers and students can and should be significant. For instance, it is compulsory that 20% of any Alberta high school RE program study world religions. In a homemade program, this topic could be taught within a suitable framework meeting the provincial demands and ideally could engage learning with and from other religious communities in the province. Other examples of contextualization might consider Pope Francis' teaching on the environment in light of being in an oil-producing province, or the influence of Catholics from Ukraine, Philippines, and some African nations on the local church.

Fourth, in the late 1970s, there was debate in Catholic religious education over the methodological approach to be taken in RE: doctrinal, social action, lived experience, or some combination of the three. Today, a similar issue needs addressing: with the province's curriculum redesign, there is a clear move toward student-centred competencies and learning. Just as math educators are wrestling with what this means for their subject area, so too should religious educators. Algebra and trigonometry still need to be learned, but how mathematics engages current trends in education is the same type of consideration religious education must give. This is not to advocate a religious education that is based on a life experience model—religious doctrines, biblical stories, and moral teaching must be taught if the learning is to be a *religious* education—but there would need to be an effort to face the challenges of the day and interpret how those effect the design of curriculum in RE.

The consortium project writing team, lastly, came to an understanding that teachers needed supportive resources because few classroom teachers were trained sufficiently to teach religion to inquisitive adolescents. Today St. Joseph's College, Newman Theological College and St. Mary's University offer training for RE in the separate schooling system, but many Catholic schoolteachers do not have enough training to teach RE without a thorough, supportive resource. A new program would need to be supportive of new and inexperienced teachers. Diagnosing the abilities of teachers—and their students—through research groups would be necessary to properly calibrate and design a curriculum.

Without a doubt, creating a locally developed curriculum and fully-resourced program in Alberta is more than simply writing a program. Such an endeavour requires a full design plan: research, writing, pilots, re-writing, teacher training, curriculum support, etc. It requires something akin to the Religious Education Services of the mid-1980s, where seconded teachers would design and support the curriculum resources. To the point, we must ask: what are the cost comparisons between a homemade program versus purchasing one from Ontario

or the United States? Further, it is a challenge to coordinate interests among all stakeholders, as noted by Myskiw above, especially with recent tensions between some Catholic education leaders and some leaders with Alberta Education.

It's easy to be apathetic toward RE in Catholic high schools. Religious educators and their school districts, however, must argue for designing a homemade program for Catholic high schools. Hopefully, history can inspire a renewal in RE today.

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<sup>i</sup> *Growing in Faith, Growing in Christ* (Toronto: Pearson, 2015).

<sup>ii</sup> Matt Hoven, "'Rare Beauty' and Renewal: The Consortium Project for Alberta Catholic High School Religious Education," *Historical Studies*, 81 (2015): 53-71.

<sup>iii</sup> Frank Dolphin, "Catholic Education: A New Set of Challenges," *Western Catholic Reporter (WCR)*, 5 October 1969, 3.

<sup>iv</sup> "High School Religion is a Major Challenge," *WCR*, 14 March 1971, 4; Terry MacDonald, "75 Students Skip Classes to Protest Religion Course," *Edmonton Journal*, 4 March 1971, 1.

<sup>v</sup> Ric Laplante, *Senior High School Religious Education Survey Report* (Edmonton: Edmonton Catholic School District, 1979), 23-30.

<sup>vi</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 16 October 1979, in John Pollard (ed.), *The Catechetical Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 1996), 373-416.

<sup>vii</sup> Roma De Robertis, "King Approves Credits for Religious Ed," *WCR*, 9 April 1984, 3.

<sup>viii</sup> Pat Halpin and Bill Myskiw, "Alberta Religious Education Consortium," in *Memories: A Legacy for the Future* (Edmonton: ECSD Archives, 2013), 390.

<sup>ix</sup> National Office of Religious Education, *Christ and Culture* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops), 2001.

<sup>x</sup> National Office of Religious Education, *In Search of the Good: A Catholic Understanding of Moral Living* (Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), and John van den Hengel, *World Religions: A Canadian Catholic Perspective* (Toronto: Novalis, 2011).