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WHO ARE WE WALKING WITH?

FROM NUNS TO NONES – A CHANGING DEMOGRAPHIC

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WALKING EACH OTHER HOME

The work of faith formation is of primary importance within Catholic schools and school districts. The reality is that traditional formation can no longer be presumed. Formation is an active process that grows and develops over time and adapts to changing conditions. It is shaped by a variety of personal and social circumstances. An enhanced understanding of those who make up the Catholic community today is informed by exploring the demographic research to better understand the experiences, needs, and predispositions of those who serve in Catholic education, as well as the community that is being served. The insights gathered are intended to prompt reflection and support dialogue at the local level between school boards, parishes, and dioceses. The reflection questions are offered to guide boards in their discernment of formation experiences.

Authentic staff formation is necessary to support a flourishing Catholic Christian identity for educators regardless of role and responsibility. While on-going formation is primarily regarded as the personal responsibility of those who choose to pursue a vocation as a Catholic educator, there is clearly a role for Catholic schools and school systems to encourage such commitment as well as a responsibility to facilitate opportunities to support those who accept this vocational call. Catholic educators are best able to fulfil the responsibility as ministers of the gospel when they embrace and commit to their own spiritual formation, both individually, and as a professional community.

“Catholic schools seek to encourage students to develop a loving relationship with Jesus in part through the example of staff, witnessing to the joy of life as promised in the gospel.”

The challenge facing school boards is to engage all staff in meaningful ways, in order to invite their full participation in this mission; to connect and commit to the Body of Christ. Limited knowledge, and personal lived experiences that may have led to sometimes ambivalent and conflicted relationships with the Church, invites a creative imagining to respond to our current reality. It is naïve to assume that all who share the mission of Catholic education are equally prepared and equipped to embrace this work. Catholic educators are individuals, gifted with unique talents, shaped by personal experiences, and each engaged in a personal faith journey. Our acknowledgement of this reality should not be an occasion for judgement but rather should be understood as an invitation to growth — an expression of our Christian commitment to accompany one another on the journey as followers of Jesus.

“Spiritual formation that might have been presumed among those involved in Catholic schools in the past can no longer be inferred and innovative approaches are required if we are to effectively meet the diverse needs of all those who we are called to accompany.”

For educators it is intuitively understood that an accurate understanding of the learner, their needs and their interests is a prerequisite for developing positive learning experiences.¹ While the holistic process of faith formation is much broader than most instructional processes, this same principle can provide a useful insight and be used to guide the development of effective approaches and programming to support processes by which individuals grow in their spiritual awareness and advance in their personal journeys of faith.



Circumstances and experiences are unique to each individual, and each person has their own story which inevitably shapes their perceptions and world view; however, some common dispositions and tendencies can be attributed based on generational experiences. Insights gleaned from the sociological exploration of generational experience may contribute to our personal understanding of our own worldview and that of others, building collective capacity to educate, lead, manage, communicate, market, engender trust and build community across generations.ⁱⁱ

AN OVERVIEW OF GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

It is helpful to begin with a high-level overview of each generation's birth years to provide a common understanding of terms, and to gain a sense of each generation and how they intersect with one another. Defining generations helps researchers to explore how coming of age during certain historical events and technological changes influence the way people tend to perceive and understand their interaction with the world. Some researchers use slightly different thresholds to establish the dividing points, but the following dates are generally accepted to delineate generational cohorts:

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|--------------------------------|-------------|
| Silent Generation | 1928 – 1945 |
| Baby Boomer Generation | 1946 – 1964 |
| Generation X | 1965 – 1980 |
| Generation Y (Millennials) | 1981 – 1996 |
| Generation Z (Post millennial) | 1996 – 2015 |

While individuals have their own unique personal stories, the collective experience of social, cultural, economic, political and technological change have profound impact on the worldview and predispositions of each subsequent generation.

GENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE WITH THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Members of the silent generation were born during the era of the great depression and WW II and were the last of the generations to be birthed and raised in the Catholic Church that pre-dated the second Vatican Council. In terms of experience with the institutional church, the baby boomers were the last Catholics born into the pre-conciliar Church but were raised in a transitional era. Most had early experiences

with a cohesive pre-conciliar Catholic culture and practice, rote knowledge of Catholic catechism and were also shaped by the subsequent years of considerable change within the church.

In our Ontario context, this was the generation who were in the early years of their careers as educators when full funding ushered in the period of rapid expansion of Catholic schools and school systems. They are also the generation of lay men and women who assumed primary leadership responsibilities as the direct participation and involvement of religious brothers, sisters and priests diminished and eventually almost disappeared from the leadership of publicly funded Catholic schools.

The most experienced teachers in our Catholic schools today are of generation X, and they currently hold the majority of leadership responsibilities at school and system levels. Generation X Catholics are the first post-conciliar generation.ⁱⁱⁱ As a cohort they are likely to have had little or no direct experience with Catholic schools administered by religious communities. However, they have been influenced and mentored by earlier lay Catholic leaders who shared their first-hand experiences and stories with the next generation of educators. In general, this generation typically experienced a less structured introduction to Catholic catechism in their own Catholic school education compared to prior generations and statistically are less likely to have directly participated in or experienced some of the traditional devotional practices (fasting, benediction, traditional prayer, regular church attendance) in the context of home and family. However, such markers of Catholic identity are recognizable to them even if often less personally significant in their own faith practice.

Generation Y (Millennial) and Z (Post millennial) Catholics are two or three generations removed from the Second Vatican Council, and the evolving post-conciliar Church is the only one they have ever known. The Catholic Church that they have experienced reflects the growing trend towards polarization evident in secular aspects of society. They came of age in an era with significant media attention focused on ongoing revelations of clerical sexual abuse, Vatican scandals and the Catholic culture wars that paint a confrontational picture of traditional and liberal perspectives debating what is 'authentically Catholic'. Statistically, they are less likely to be regular church-attenders, and generally speaking, the Catholic church plays a less influential role in their personal lives even among those who do choose to attend. They are the generations that popularized the description of being 'spiritual, but not religious' and it seems evident that their relationship with the institutional church is different than that of earlier generations. As each generation has entered into the system,

they have arrived with philosophical and cultural influences that present new and different challenges for the nurturing of their spirituality in a Catholic educational context.^{iv}

GENERATIONAL DISPOSITION TOWARDS ORGANIZED RELIGION

The Church has recognized for some time that a significant and growing proportion of Catholics no longer – and in some cases perhaps never did — regularly ‘practice’ the faith into which they were baptized. Pope Francis notes this trend, most especially in the postmodern industrialized countries of Europe and North America:

“We cannot overlook the fact that in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition.” *Evangeli Gaudium* (2013)

A number of international research projects have considered and compared the experiences and attitudes of subsequent generations towards faith and religion. A review of the literature can provide some useful insights for those developing programs to support faith formation opportunities. Research studies examining data from Europe, the United States and Canada provide evidence of growing disaffection and disaffiliation with organized religion and the institutional Church within members of the baby boomer generation and accelerating with each subsequent generation.

Stephen Bullivant, a professor of Theology, has authored multiple studies over the last decade that explore the phenomenon of the ‘nones’ – individuals who respond ‘none’ when asked to identify their religious affiliation. Bullivant identifies broad patterns of common experience within the generation of millennials and post millennials in terms of their relationship and experience with organized religion. While the data reveals significant variations from country to country, even among nations that share similar cultural backgrounds and histories, the broader trends are clear and consistent. Bullivant concludes, “With some notable exceptions, young adults increasingly are not identifying with or practicing religion...Cultural religious identities just aren’t being passed on from parents to children. It just washes straight off them... Christianity as a default, as a norm, (in Europe and the UK) is gone, and probably for good — or at least for the next 100 years”.^{vi}

Robert McCarty notes a similar pattern of experience in *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation In Young Catholics* (2015), a comparable national study conducted

across the United States. While parish participation and engagement in the formal practice among Catholics has shown a general pattern of decline for half a century, the trend is accelerating and is most pronounced in the generation of millennials and post millennials.

Reginald Bibby, a Canadian sociologist, has authored numerous books that examine the status of religion in this country over the last four decades. His research suggests that similar attitudes towards traditional religious practice are evident within millennial and post millennial Canadians. His research documents that the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed dramatic declines in participation within all mainline Protestant churches and the Catholic church was similarly impacted. In studies conducted from the 1950s through the 1990s individual Catholics self-report a steady decrease both in regular church attendance and a significant drop in the Church’s influence in their lives. The trend of decline appears to flatten somewhat in 2001 and 2011 census data, in part reflecting the impact of immigration patterns within Canada, but the general pattern holds true. Across Europe, Great Britain, the United States and Canada, identification with organized religion and regular participation with church has declined with each successive generation since the baby boomers and the trend that gained momentum within generation X has accelerated within the millennial and post millennial generations.

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

In *Canada’s Catholics: Vitality and Hope in a New Era* (2015), Bibby and Reid distinguish between participation in organized religion and religious identity, stressing that they are two very different questions. Regardless of their interest in or level of involvement with the institutional Church, Bibby notes a strong inclination for Catholics to see themselves as Catholic. In a 2015 survey some 80% of Canadians who were raised in Catholic homes continue to identify themselves as Catholic even though a significant majority of those show little interest in active participation or practice. Even within the 30% of Catholics who describe themselves as embracing their faith, the majority reported that they seldom attend religious services. Their conclusions about identity and disaffiliation offer interesting and useful insight into the mindset of millennial and postmillennial Catholics in Canada.^{vii} The majority of Canadians baptized Catholic continue to identify themselves as Catholics and say that their faith is important.



“ While it is a possibility that the phenomenon of disaffiliation with the institutional church that is such a prevalent experience amongst generation X, millennials and post millennials generally is less applicable amongst those who work within Catholic schools it is reasonable to assume that generational experiences and perspectives are largely consistent with the population as a whole.

There is little if any research to date that has focused specifically on those who work in Catholic schools, and certainly that data would be helpful, but for purposes of practical planning, available research and direct anecdotal experience support the working assumption that staff in Catholic schools and school systems have a complex relationship with the Catholic Church. What emerges from some of these seemingly contradictory findings is an underlying insight that is relevant to the work of adult faith formation: significant numbers of Catholics continue to identify with the faith, and to value it, yet they do not feel the need to be active attenders because their experience of group involvement in the context of traditional religious practice has not been perceived as supporting their personal faith journey.

UNDERSTANDING THE WHY

Understanding the reasons that give rise to this pattern of distancing may provide useful insight for those creating faith formation opportunities. As Bullivant notes in *Why Catholics Leave, What They Miss, and How They Might Return* (2019), “Each person’s story of how they have become distanced from the church is unique, intimately bound up with his or her own individual biography. Without losing sight of this, it is possible to recognize recurring themes that are shared across different narratives and to identify several broad overarching patterns to different stories of distancing.”^{viii} Often there is no single reason that prompts a decision to cease the practice of the faith into which they were born. Respondents identify a variety of factors contributing to a gradual experience of dissatisfaction and a sense of simply feeling not at home which grew over time. In very general terms, however, the factors that emerge from research tend to cluster into one of two categories: head and heart.

Head: Intellectual, Doctrinal and Moral Reasons

Studies from Great Britain, the United States and Canada identify that difficulty with Church teaching and lack of understanding, are often contributing factors that prompt Catholics to distance themselves from active involvement with the Church. The intellectual struggle with beliefs or practices specific to the Catholic church which they find challenging,

troubling, or problematic is identified by millennials and post millennials as sometimes contributing to their distancing from active participation in the Church. Not surprisingly, matters of marriage, sexual ethics, life issues including contraception and euthanasia, and the role of women within the Church all are featured prominently. However, while these issues are identified, they are seldom identified as ‘deal-breakers’.

Perceived tensions between science and faith, rationality and theistic belief are often identified as among the reasons for limited or discontinued involvement with Church amongst millennials and post-millennials. Data suggests that most millennial and postmillennial respondents think about and struggle with life’s big questions (e.g., the meaning and purpose of life, why suffering takes place, how a person can experience happiness, what happens after death) with the same frequency as members of earlier generations but are far less likely to turn to church teaching to find answers to these perennial questions.

In *Canada’s Catholics*, Bibby notes that the millennial and post millennial generations are far less likely to believe that morality and values are linked to church involvement and God.

“ On multiple issues many of those who self-identify as Catholic hold opinions that are contrary to formal church teaching, and age/generation is the single most significant variable, with each subsequent generation being more inclined to hold opinions contrary to Church teaching, more comfortable in publicly acknowledging such differences, and less inclined to see it as problematic or a source of tension in terms of their identification as Catholic.

Heart: Practical and Experiential Reasons

Research suggests that the reasons for disaffiliation are more typically practical, personal, and experiential in nature, having more to do with emotional rather than intellectual dissonance. In his research with millennials and post millennials in Great Britain and Europe, Stephen Bullivant identifies and categorizes participant responses to summarize the practical and experiential reasons that respondents offer to account for their decisions to distance themselves from traditional practice of the Catholic faith.

Some reasons identified simply cite the busyness of life, or changes in life circumstances such as changes in family situation, an illness, a move, or a new job. Parochial concerns cited as contributing factors include such things as a general experience of cliquishness or unfriendliness within a parish community, perceived lack of concern or outreach, and inadequate provision for or acceptance of children and families. Negative interpersonal interactions, most especially

at moments of personal vulnerability and pastoral significance such as marriage, death, illness, or family disruption, were far more likely to be cited as factors accounting for a break from faith practice. While revelations of clerical sexual abuse or the exposure of institutional efforts to cover up such abuse were sometimes identified as significant factors accounting for alienation from the Church, feelings of personal judgement or personal rejection are cited much more frequently than institutional failings or negative media coverage as contributing factors to disaffiliation.

The struggle with doctrinal issues can be both a matter of head and heart. Bullivant suggests that while doctrinal disagreement is troubling for some, it is only likely to prompt a break from active participation in faith practice when the issue is less an abstract idea and more a direct and personal experience of conflict that impacts directly on a person's personal life. The struggle to understand or reconcile church teaching or practice on a variety of issues such as marriage, divorce, annulment, remarriage, contraception, LGBTQ+ issues and the role of women in the church is a source of intellectual tension but is sometimes experienced as personal rejection, or the rejection of family members, colleagues, and friends. The feeling of not being recognized or welcomed, and the fear of not being accepted is a frequently recurring theme, most especially among young people. Research suggests that the institutional church, accurately or inaccurately, is often perceived as failing to recognize the dignity of the individual through simple gestures of acknowledgment and hospitality. What emerges clearly among the personal stories related within the research is that what begins as intellectual disagreement with clergy, parish staff or community members sometimes ends up experienced and described as judgement, rejection or even dismissal.^x

Reflecting on data from multiple studies, David Wells suggests:

“The issue of Church teaching, particularly on sexual orientation, is not usually perceived by younger generations to be a sexual issue but rather an issue of justice and human rights. While the Church is anxious about the whole business of sexual orientation, young people have largely decided it is simply not an issue for them. Be kind to people and move on. The issue is not a lack of knowledge — they know their position is at variance from the teaching of the Church, and they have simply decided, as a matter of conscience, that they do not accept the teaching...It is not even the same conversation. For the young it is not a conversation about sexual ethics or morality — it is about inclusion and justice.”^{xi}

Bullivant suggests that the single most significant factor contributing to the phenomenon of church disaffiliation among the young is quite simply the feeling that they do not belong or even that they are not particularly noticed. This sentiment is echoed in the experience of millennials and post millennials in American and Canadian research as well. McCarty, in *The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, (2018) identifies a prevailing sense of not belonging, with many millennials and post millennial respondents expressing the perception that they are simply not known and that their presence is neither recognized or valued — feeling that if and when they choose to stop attending, no one notices, and nobody cares. This drift towards distancing begins early. The majority leave before they are 21. The median age is 13.^{xii}

Community is integral to the Catholic faith tradition. In describing a mature and fully developed Christian life, the Catholic church's *General Directory for Catechesis* identifies 'belonging to community' as one of the essential dimensions and asserts that the parish is called to be a welcoming family where Christians become aware of being the people of God. While worshipping together and learning together are important aspects of community, the full experience of community also necessarily involves a sense of belonging, a place to be known and a place of encounter and accompaniment. The overwhelming evidence suggests that for many millennials and post millennial Catholics, this simply is not their experience or perception of the parish. Although great numbers of the millennial and post millennial generations continue to identify as Catholic, a sense of disconnectedness from the community is a commonly expressed sentiment found in the research.

In earlier generations a sense of obligation was perhaps sufficient to prompt weekly attendance at mass and participation with the parish community. Research confirms the millennial and post millennial respondents who choose to align with practicing faith communities today are unlikely to do so because they are supposed to, and more likely to do so only if they find it to be worthwhile. Bibby concludes, "For better or for worse, that is the mindset of a majority of Catholics these days. Most are not looking for churches; they are looking for good ministry...They have to find involvement is worthwhile...Catholics need to find that faith and community enrich their lives and the lives of those they care about. If not, most will think, 'why bother'".^{xiii} Community involvement is perceived as worthwhile when it provides the sense of belonging and purpose.



GENERATIONAL INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH

For Catholic schools and school systems, this generational snapshot largely confirms what is generally understood anecdotally based on direct experience.

“Educators and support staff in Catholic schools today are members of generation X, millennials and post millennials. They were raised in and are living in post-modern families, a post Vatican II church, and are immersed in contemporary North American culture. They have emerged with philosophical and cultural influences that present new challenges and opportunities for the effective nurturing of their spirituality in a Catholic educational context. It should come as no surprise, given their dramatically different life experiences, that this cohort have substantially different formation needs.

What lessons can be learned from research on disaffiliation from church, and what are the implications for the development of faith formation programs and initiatives?

1. A Desire to Grapple with Big Questions

Even amid widespread secularism, we spend our lives searching for answers to big questions about what makes human life worth living and what confers meaning.

Research confirms millennials and post millennials are just as likely as those of earlier generations to grapple with huge theological issues: e.g., What is my image of God? Am I loved? What is my place and purpose within God's creation? How do I relate to all that God has created? Why is there suffering? While they are equally driven to engage with these questions, members of this generational cohort are less likely than prior generations to assume that the Church might provide ultimate answers.

2. An Appetite for the Spiritual

While it is helpful to understand the reasons why growing numbers consciously choose to distance themselves from traditional forms of religious practice it is equally important to understand that many who choose to identify as religiously unaffiliated still report believing in God, and even praying regularly. Often millennials and post millennials make a distinction, identifying as 'spiritual but not religious.' Their desire to experience a deep sense of wonder about the universe and a sense of spiritual peace often prompt them to explore or embrace quasi-religious or 'spiritual' practices such as meditation, prayer, yoga, or a belief in heaven while eschewing direct participation in an organized congregation.^{xvii}

3. An Openness to Faith and an Attachment to Catholic Identity

While millennials and post millennial Catholics are certainly less inclined to be involved with the institutional church than earlier generations they continue to identify with and value their faith. In practical terms, they may choose not to affiliate or participate regularly with a parish, and they may make individual decisions that are not always in conformity with Catholic teaching but they continue to see and understand themselves as Catholic. John Allen suggests "whether or not they fully subscribe to the official theology, most Catholics feel in their bones that the Church is a place where they can encounter God and where their hunger for the divine and transcendent is fed. It is their spiritual home, their family".^{xviii}

4. A Need for Relationships Characterized by Trust

The level of confidence in all public institutions has eroded significantly in the latter decades of the twentieth and early decades of the twenty-first century. This broad societal trend has significantly changed the way governments, courts, police services, school boards and health and service providers are perceived generally and the relationship with organized religion must be considered in this same context. Millennials and post-millennials are suspicious of authority, institutions, and ideology, reactive to orthodoxy and absolutism, and accustomed to creating their own conceptions of reality.^{xvii}

“The default position towards institutions is now scepticism rather than trust. Millennial and post millennials are more likely to question and challenge and less likely to accept or defer to authority than prior generations in all aspects of life, including religion.

While their parents and grandparents were likely to participate in the prescribed practice of the faith out of a sense of obligation, millennial and post millennial Catholics are more likely to approach the question as a matter akin to consumer choice. Those who choose to align with practicing faith communities today are unlikely to do so because they are supposed to and more likely to do so only if they find it to be trustworthy, credible, and worthwhile.

5. A Yearning to Belong and for Authentic Community

Millennials and post millennials attach great importance to feeling recognized and acknowledged. Research emphasizes that a sense of connectedness matters profoundly and the absence of a personal sense of

attachment is a major determinant factor for members of this generation when they choose to distance themselves from organized religion. The majority of millennial and post millennial Catholics are not necessarily looking for churches; they are looking for good ministry. Even for those that choose to attach to traditional churches, patterns of participation reflect a growing tendency to value occasional seasonal attendance and a desire for sacramental rites of passage rather than the need to be active or regular participants at a parish level.^{xviii}

In *Canada's Catholics* (2018), Bibby writes, "They do show up once in a while, but the data tells a blunt and sobering tale: for many Catholics, faith is valued far more than group involvement."^{xix} This reveals less about attitudes towards faith and more about the experience of community involvement at the local level. This suggests that the kind of group involvement encountered in traditional parish settings is not effectively meeting the needs of many within this generation of seekers. Careful consideration must be given to the implications for Catholic school systems relative to faith formation programs or approaches in order to ensure they meet the needs of the participants and have a transformational impact.

6. An Expectation of Personalization

As individuals are unique so too is each person's journey of faith is unique. Authentic faith formation has always required that the individual, their personal stories, and life experiences are at the centre of any authentic process designed to support their growth. This is especially true for millennials and post millennials who have come of age in a consumer culture enabled by technology that presumes individualization and customization of all products and services. Within the social and historical context of this time and place, it is imperative that personal stories must be recognized, and individual pathways created if programs are to effectively minister to the needs of this generation.

7. A Preference for Accompaniment

Individualization and customization imply programs and outreach initiatives that meet seekers where they are, and walk with them along their personal pathways, accompanying them as fellow companions on the journey. An openness to personal growth and an interest in spirituality provide fertile ground for faith to be nurtured, but the approach needs to begin with accompaniment rather than instruction. Instruction has an appropriate place in programs of formation. Accompaniment does

not equate to aimless meandering and should not be understood to imply that a thoughtful, intentional, and comprehensive program of faith formation does not set out a pathway that includes opportunity to learn and understand the Catholic faith tradition more deeply. Rather, a model of accompaniment suggests that the process begins with the individual, accepts, and honours their lived experience, and is responsive both to their evolving needs and to their growing capacity to seek transformational growth.

8. A Disposition Towards Action

Millennials and post millennials, members of generations Y and Z, prefer direct action and experience. They tend to engage with the world and with their immediate community in ways that are more likely to be meaningful to them than their engagement with church. Engaging hands and heart in meaningful acts of outreach and ministry is not a replacement for intellectual appreciation of the social teachings of the church but it is more likely to be the point of entry for this generation, given their strong desire to make a difference.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS — THE QUESTION OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY

The insights gleaned from generational research should be considered by those that have direct responsibility for shaping adult faith formation programs and experiences in Catholic schools. The trends identified have significant implications not only for faith formation work specifically but more broadly for publicly funded Catholic schools and school systems. At the core lies a consideration of Catholic identity and mission.

Over the last fifty years, successive popes have emphasized the importance of introducing faith to those who have not yet encountered it, and the work of reintroducing faith to those who might have some loose affiliation, but who have not necessarily incorporated a faith practice into their lives. This missionary outreach to engage and to reengage is usually described as the new evangelization. In *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), Pope John Paul II observed that "entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves to be members of the Church." Pope Benedict XVI reinforced the importance of this work and Pope Francis builds upon this foundation, envisioning a missionary Church looking out beyond its walls, encountering people where they are, accompanying them in moments of challenge, sharing the joy of the gospel and the comforting message of God's unlimited mercy for everyone. This encouragement, to understand the mission and work of Catholic schools



as an important part of the new evangelization, is central to *Renewing the Promise* (2018), the pastoral letter of the Ontario Bishops.

Historically Catholic schools were designed to serve families and educate children who were already formed in faith and worshipping as part of a parish community. Such schools were often founded by vowed religious and staffed by lay teachers and leaders who were equally connected with the local parish and equipped with a well-established sense of Catholic identity. Today, in our Ontario context, an increasingly significant segment of the population – students, parents, staff members, and those who potentially wish to be students, family, and staff within Catholic school communities, fall into the category of those who self-identify as culturally Catholic, but do not necessarily have a strong affinity for the institutional church. Such identification is often grounded in historical or familial connections to the Catholic church or prior personal or familial experience with Catholic schools. Frequently, they have a very limited relationship with a parish, if any, although interest in a school may encourage the possibility of connection. For many, enrolling in a Catholic school is a point of departure and an opportunity for exploration, encouragement, and accompaniment that invites growth towards a more consistent, traditional, and a deeper practice of the faith.

A strong Catholic Christian identity is a critical part of the way educators give witness and example to the students in Catholic schools.

“As Catholic schools continue to enroll students, work with families who desire a Catholic education, and engage with staff who identify as Catholic but who are less steeped in traditional faith practices, traditional structures and approaches to religious instruction and sacramental preparation for students and adult faith formation initiatives for staff must be reviewed.

In an era of church committed to a missionary focus, new evangelization, and active outreach, are traditional approaches for admissions, hiring, and promotion appropriate to preserve the integrity of the faith foundation of Catholic schools? Or do such policies and practices serve as obstacles that close the door to opportunities for re-engagement, ministry, and accompaniment that is now understood to be integral to the core mission and purpose of today's Church and Catholic schools? It is an important question that deserves honest and open conversation involving all the partners in Catholic education as it is not only a matter of philosophical and ecclesiological approach but potentially poses significant legal, political, and practical, operational implications.

We live in a period of significant challenges including, increased secularization, deinstitutionalization, pluralisation, and ecclesial fracture. How do we understand the emerging generation of students, staff and families and effectively rejuvenate to mission?

The responsibility of passing along the traditions and beliefs integral to Catholic education has shifted, in large part, to lay educators and leaders. Innovative, well-developed, and systematic formation programs are essential for the future of Catholic education.

“It is necessary that our educators and leaders know the Catholic teachings that are the foundation of our work. They require a faith literacy in Catholic teaching to animate the language of mission, and to integrate Gospel values into all that we do. The scope and impact are far reaching, from strategic planning, board and school improvement planning to attraction and retention of staff, professional learning, budgets, communications, and decision making.

Formation is crucial for Catholic education to remain an enduring gift. It depends on our ability to awaken to the needs of those we are walking with today to make mission-driven, gospel values explicit in our work and our Catholic school graduate expectations. It is the responsibility of each one of us to build upon and pass on the traditions of those upon whose shoulders we stand. Staff and communities, now and in the future, must know the foundational teachings and stories of those whose ministries we have inherited. We must continually ask ourselves: what differentiates us so that Catholic education is a highly desirable choice for students, families, and staff? Is a strong and positive Catholic identity evident in the ethos of our community?

The sustainability of Catholic education depends on our ability to make our Mission explicit and animate it through our interactions, our community, our curriculum, our professional learning, our decisions, our policies, practices, processes, and our systems. Ultimately, formation shapes and transforms the individual, the organizational culture, and the broader community. These intentions come to life when formation for mission is a key strategic priority in school and system leadership and governance.

We are called to be people of presence who accompany one another. We need wisdom to name the present moment and to navigate generational challenges with courage, humility, and faith. Our schools and churches must embrace the mystery and embodied elements of our Catholic Christian identity and an experience of God, not simply a conception of Him. We need to cultivate formation programs that create

the space for that presence to be known; to invite people to wonder and worship. It means our work will be messier and more unpredictable, but it will be more responsive and transformative.

Some Questions for Reflection

- Is your investment in leadership development and leadership formation sufficient to address the needs in a rapidly changing education environment?
- Do all employees receive an introduction to the ministry of Catholic education within the first years of their employ?
- What is your plan for the ongoing formation process of senior and emergent leaders?
- How are senior leaders held accountable for the formation of others?
- How has your board prioritized formation in the budgetary process?
- What follow-up opportunities are provided beyond required, basic programming?

- How well are your emergent leaders supported through opportunities for ongoing formation?
- Are the programs and the content explicitly Christological, scripturally rich and ecclesially grounded?
- Do they enable deeper faith relationships with God, Church, self, others, and creation?
- Are they shaped by a culture of dialogue?
- Do formation programs invite staff into personal relationship with Jesus and a deeper or renewed participation in the Eucharist and a faith community?
 - Is there differentiation according to individual backgrounds, needs and roles?
 - Is there a stronger commitment to the vocation of teaching?
 - Does it build communal identity and culture?
 - Is it respectful, experiential, and relevant, building on participants' personal stories and experiences?
 - Does it seek to develop the confidence and capacity of participants to serve the evangelizing mission of Catholic schools?

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