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WALKING EACH OTHER HOME

EMERGING FROM THE UPPER ROOM: RENEWING THE PROMISE IN A POST- PANDEMIC WORLD

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Breathing New Life Into Adult Faith Formation

The description of the days of the early church immediately following the news of Jesus' resurrection presents an image of the disciples as locked away in the upper room, hidden and isolated. Frightened and dispirited by Jesus' death on a cross, they were unsure of what might happen next. In that particular time and place, immobilized by fear and uncertainty, they responded by choosing to withdraw rather than risk venturing forth, opting instead for the perceived safety of seclusion. But it was precisely in that moment of desolation that Jesus' promised gift of the Spirit was poured out on them, and they were filled with new hearts and a courageous determination to make Jesus and his gospel message known. In that moment, uncertainty, fear, and apprehension were released, and new opportunities were embraced. Inspired and strengthened by the Spirit, the disciples left the upper room and set out to proclaim the good news of the Lord they had known and who accompanied them, and who had shown himself to have overcome death and risen to new life.

In numerous ways our lives today parallel those of the early disciples. When the pandemic first interrupted our lives, we found ourselves hidden away in virtual isolation. Out of fear of COVID and the threat it imposed, we were unable to gather in our places of learning, work, and worship, and found ourselves separated from one another. We were also frightened and dispirited, not only by the imminent concerns about health and safety, but also by the cruel realities of the times and the sometimes harsh and deeply polarized responses to the challenges we faced. Perceptions shifted and even as we longed for the familiar experience of lives shared fully within community, the perceived risk and threat of being with and among others was a source of uncertainty and anxiety as we found ourselves not only separated but

divided within our local and global communities. Against this backdrop, many also struggled with disillusionment over the painful failures and struggles within our Catholic Church. As citizens, educators, and people of faith, there was a deep sense of loss, disappointment, and grieving for what was not made manifest, and a future that has not fully transpired.

What lessons might be learned by considering the experience of the disciples of the early church? While we may find ourselves discouraged, frustrated, weary, and afraid, we also know that Jesus has risen from the dead and as a result, we too have the promise of everlasting life. Yet, at times, we also hesitate to bear witness to him and the hope that is ours to share because we are uncertain about how best to proceed, or perhaps fearful about how our words and actions will be received in such turbulent times. Like the early disciples, we also find ourselves in a moment when we are challenged to release the apprehension, fear and uncertainty, to embrace new challenges. Fear may sometimes cause us, individually and collectively, to respond with dampened fervour and diminished imagination, but it need not be the case.

“The image of the disciples, emerging from the perceived safety of the upper room reminds us that we are called to respond with a courageous, whole-hearted, aspirational vision and rekindled spirit of who we are as church, and who we are as community.”

Just as it was in the upper room, it is in this moment that we hold fast to the belief that Jesus pours out the promised Spirit on his people, to enliven us, to fill us with a fervour for the gospel and to rekindle in us a passion to renew the promise of Catholic education as our part in shaping a renewed church.



While buildings closed and we were unable to gather in churches, classrooms, hallways and lecture theatres, our minds were opened to new ways of learning, staying connected, being together, and moving forward to positively impact change.

“The pandemic exposed a raft of challenges, injustices, and lessons, all of which reinforce the importance of facing reality with clear-eyed courage and heightens our responsibility as Catholic educators to respond with justice and service.

In some ways the experience of physical isolation and social distance served to remind us of the fundamental understanding of the church as the Body of Christ and the people of God who journey together. What was learned cannot remain simply reflective and looking back but must spark a renewed vision, wisdom fueled by experience, and ignite an expectation of transformation.

Adult faith formation is integral to the mission of Catholic education. Within a faith community, Catholic educators are called to accompany one another in the ongoing process of spiritual growth. In *Renewing the Promise*, the Catholic Bishops of Ontario reinforced this responsibility when they wrote. “We all know from past experience that we cannot give what we do not have. Shared responsibility for Catholic schools is little more than words without an awareness of the need for personal transformation and attention to our own spiritual growth. Whatever our age and our role, we are called to a process of maturation and integration in our life of faith”.ⁱ

The staff who currently hold responsibility for the animation of Catholic school communities, the education of students, and the leadership of Catholic school systems have demonstrably different formation needs than in previous eras.

“Catholic schools and institutions are called to be welcoming places of encounter; places where students, families and staff are met with open hearts. This encounter is a dynamic and continuously developing formation process and growth toward wholeness and becoming the person God intends each individual to be.

Both for students within Catholic schools, and for the adults who work with them and accompany them, the experience of being formed happens in community.

The process of maturing and walking each other home is a journey of discovery, of deepening relationship with God and responsiveness to God’s influence in one’s life and being. It is to become co-creators with God for the benefit of the community, the world, and creation. It cannot be achieved

alone or in isolation. We are after all, “relational people created in the image of a relational God.”ⁱⁱ

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, makes clear that we are one body made up of many members and each individual brings something essential to the life, ministry, and culture of the church.

“Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body — whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ...Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

No member of the community is of greater importance nor lesser importance. Each individual member is needed and part of the interconnected and interrelated wonder that is the Body of Christ, the church.

While genuine transformation is inspired and enabled through the compelling grace of God, God’s grace can be experienced through the work of human hands, and real transformation takes place in community.

“Transformation can be cultivated and nurtured through the courage and consistency of individual and systemic responses, and the work of the spirit can be made manifest by committing to the ongoing care of souls, with particular attention to shaping and forming in faith the adults who serve in our Catholic schools.

Understanding that formation needs have changed requires an acknowledgement that faith formation processes must also change. In consideration of the shared experience of the pandemic and lessons learned, Rodger Nishioka, seminary professor and Christian educator, advances the idea that the pandemic was not simply an interruption but rather it was a disruption, noting that in a disruption old ways of doing things, cease in sometimes small and sometimes more significant ways, but the result is always change. Nishioka concludes that faith formation cannot be the same as a result of learning new ways of knowing, new ways of being in community and new ways of worshipping.ⁱⁱⁱ

The absence of well-formed educators and leaders has the potential to compromise the great promise of Catholic education, and left unaddressed potentially threatens the viability and existence of Ontario’s publicly funded Catholic education system. It is imperative to have a plan that recognizes our cultural context, and forms and prepares those who serve in our midst, for faithful ministry in Catholic education.

“ Status quo is not a model for effective formation practices in our current context, nor is it what God desires for us. We are called to build the Kingdom through the cultivation of new models, innovative and engaging experiences, responsive to our time and rooted in research.

Those responsible for today’s work of adult faith formation must move towards a greater understanding of what it means to be led by God’s spirit and a willingness to live with the feeling of vulnerability that sometimes results.

The unprecedented disruption of the pandemic led to considerable dissonance, not unlike that experienced by the disciples in the upper room. This dissonance or disconnect between knowledge and action is commonly referred to as the ‘knowing-doing gap.’ An unconscious motivation to reduce dissonance directly impacts the way we respond to change and innovation, and the way in which we respond has repercussions for the future. The initial response of the disciples to the maelstrom of uncertainty and dissonance they encountered was near paralysis that made it difficult to see a path forward, and so they were immobilized by fear and apprehension.

Recognizing the importance of adult faith formation opportunities is a good beginning, however any conclusions about the efficacy of such mission-critical programs must not be satisfied with acknowledgement of good intention and earnest effort and must ultimately assess impact. Will we be flexible, or will we keep reducing dissonance by insisting that our earlier decisions, processes and programs were impactful and achieving the intended outcomes? Acknowledging the need for change requires critical self-reflection which involves living with the dissonance rather than jumping immediately to self justification or congratulatory tendencies, complacency with long-standing practices, and litanies of activity. Complacency and satisfaction with the status quo, if left unchallenged because of a lack of feedback or supported by feedback drawn from too narrow a base of participants and respondents can sometimes have an equally paralyzing effect on efforts to innovate and create new formation pathways. It is insufficient to simply develop new labels for old activities because “the issues of deep inner transformation will remain untouched”.^{iv}

The challenge lies in living with uncertainty, to make the most informed decisions possible, and modify them when the evidence dictates. It requires that we live into the disruption with the expectation of change. By the grace of God, we will experience a renewal and “through the power of the Holy Spirit be transformed to be more truthful, more just, more

imaginative, more innovative, more wise and more faithful”^v so that the gift of Catholic education endures with renewed energy, passion and the purpose of our faith.

“ Because the student outcomes articulated in the Ontario Catholic Graduate Expectations are profoundly influenced by the example and witness of the adults working with them, adult faith formation and faith literacy are deeply connected to student experience and therefore critically important to the mission of Catholic schools.

There is a compelling need to open the eyes of our hearts, to discern prayerfully and respond faithfully because the mission belongs equally to each one of us. This is a time of promise for Catholic education as we journey together on the road to actualizing the church that the Holy Spirit is leading us to become — a church like that first small group of disciples on Pentecost who were transformed and moved out of the upper room, to embrace and bring God to all people. In the words of Pope Francis, “The Spirit of God has filled the universe with possibilities and therefore, from the very heart of things, something new can always emerge.”^{vi}

The work of breathing new life into faith formation and leadership practices, and making room for something new, can be accomplished in a variety of ways. No single approach or pathway is appropriate in all circumstances or helpful to all practitioners. A holistic process of appreciative inquiry is one path forward that might assist Catholic school boards to move towards a clearer sense of identity and heightened capacity for mission in a post-pandemic world. Alternatively, an approach modelled on the more structured process of school effectiveness review offers a second path that holds potential for moving forward. The workbook integrates these two distinct approaches or pathways into a coherent and comprehensive process for review, modelled on an adapted version of the Appreciative Inquiry Process for Faith-based Organizations. It includes practical resources, templates, and graphic organizers designed to assist board teams on the journey to deepen their understanding and approach to adult faith formation and build capacity for the mission of Catholic education.^{vii}

“ When spirituality is viewed as a journey, the way to spiritual wholeness lies in an increasingly faithful response to the One whose purpose shapes our path, whose grace redeems our detours, whose power liberates us from crippling bondages of the prior journey and whose transforming presence meets us at each turn in the road.” – M. Robert Mulholland



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ENDNOTES

- ⁱ ACBO, *Renewing the Promise*, 2018
- ⁱⁱ Nishioka, *Six lessons learned about faith formation in the midst of a pandemic*, 2021
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Willard, *Spiritual Formation What it is and How it is Done*. 2022
- ^v Nishioka, *Six lessons learned about faith formation in the midst of a pandemic*, 2021
- ^{vi} Pope Francis. *Laudato Si*, 2015
- ^{vii} Nugent and Pautler, *Walking Each Other Home*, Fall 2022

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