

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-),ⁱ 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*ⁱⁱ—an alternate route for the future of high school RE curriculum can be argued.