

Canadian vocation efforts face challenges of vast geography and language divisions, among others. Yet new vocation promotion projects continue to emerge.

Vocation ministry in Canada today

by Susan Kidd, CND

In order to convey a picture of vocation ministry in Canada today, it helps to understand a little about the country. Canada is huge and diverse. We are the second largest country by landmass, (6.2 million square miles), nearly 5,000 miles east to west, covering six time zones and surrounded by three oceans. Our population is just under 32 million. Like many other countries, our divorce rate is nothing to be too proud of: 45 percent, slightly less than the U.S.'s 49 percent.

Canada's first settlers were Roman Catholic, religious women and men, actually. Many of our judicial and governmental practices have strong Judeo-Christian overtones. This is beginning to change to reflect the diversity of our country. The most recent example of this is our recognition of same-sex marriages, which passed into law in June, 2005. Diversity has been and continues to be our hallmark as Canadians. We are proud of our welcoming attitudes to immigrants and refugees but still have room to improve in accepting them once they are here.

A little earlier than for our U.S. brothers and sisters, news of clergy sex scandals broke in Canada almost 25 years ago, with court settlements leaving many communities and dioceses bankrupt. Trust levels

plummeted, and the church as a "sacred institution" came into deep scrutiny. To this day parents hesitate to encourage a religious vocation for their child because of the painful scandals of the 1980s.

In some Canadian provinces the constitutional charter that guaranteed religious education was opened, and such rights were revoked. Provinces lost their government-funded Catholic school systems. Today some retain education systems based on religious denomination, but not all provinces or all religions. The usual pool of vocation candidates seemed to dry up.

Attendance in our churches seems to be mainly the older population, although World Youth Day 2002 helped. Canada sent twice as many pilgrims to World Youth Day 2005 in Cologne, Germany than we did to the 2000 event in Rome. Supporters claim involvement in our own World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto is the reason for increased participation among Canada's young Catholics.

A surge of energy in 2002

In addition to World Youth Day, 2002 also saw the Canadian church preparing for the Third Continental Congress on Vocations to Ordained Ministry and Consecrated Life. Energy and enthusiasm filled our church and our young people for the years leading up to both events. We religious asked ourselves: How will we get young people to attend? Will they come? What will we do with them afterward? Even before both events were finished, the conversations began regarding follow-up and national initiatives for youth and vocations. There was a spark in the air and it was good!

However, time, other commitments, and finances

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seem to get in the way of the Spirit sometimes. Our Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops felt that vocation and youth initiatives belong better at the local level than the national (besides, it saves money). Many dioceses realized the resources involved in youth ministry meant other areas had to go without. Court settlements have also been part of our Canadian reality. In the months and years following 2002, energy sagged, and enthusiasm dropped. Only now local groups of vocation directors and youth ministers are having conversations about our shared needs and ideas. There is life and some energy being felt where very recently there had been a sense of hopelessness.

Our one religious leadership conference, the Canadian Religious Conference, serves both men's and women's communities and both language groups, French and English. Therefore it is a bridge for many congregations. For religious and diocesan vocation directors it remains a challenge to network across geographic and linguistic lines. The religious and the bishops' conferences have the technical ability to offer simultaneous translation in French and English for various meetings and conferences, but this remains a costly endeavor.

National vocation network links people

The National Association of Vocation and Formation Directors (NAVFD) has shifted its structures in an attempt to create networks for communication. The organization has evolved over the years to meet the needs of our members. This year a process began that encourages our members to be involved at the local level, as well as nationally. In the past we have printed newsletters, hosted national conferences and responded to local needs. More recently we have served as a conference planning association. We are attempting to increase communication between and among our members.

At our most recent national conference, NAVFD hosted 140 delegates, mainly from English Canada. (Currently, French and English-speaking Canada operate independently in areas of vocation and formation ministry—due in a large part to language and sometimes cultural differences.) Our national conference featured speakers, workshops, plenary sessions, and plenty of time for delegates to interact with each other.

For the last three years, we have been pleased to have Paul Bednarczyk, CSC, Executive Director of NRVC with us. This year he conducted a workshop on "Self-Care of the Vocation Director." Response from confer-

ence and workshop participants is very positive regarding having our NRVC partners with us. The Continental Congress on Vocations provided Canada and the United States a wonderful opportunity to work together on a common project. NRVC and NAVFD continue to look for ways to collaborate and help each other. As a co-presenter for the NRVC Orientation Program, I continue to keep my NRVC contacts alive (I'm a former member of the NRVC Board) In program planning NRVC and NAVFD offer different opportunities, thereby encouraging members both north and south to take advantage of both groups.

Home grown vocation initiatives

Vocation and youth ministry in Canada continue to be energized by grassroots projects. Here are just a few examples. Antigonish, Nova Scotia and St. John's Newfoundland have created, printed and distributed

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vocation-culture material to parishes. Various regions in Canada have a mechanism in place for religious leadership to meet with the bishop. In Eastern Canada my provincial leader added "fostering a vocation culture" to the agenda at one such meeting. In response Antigonish has a wonderfully diverse diocesan vocation committee—married and single women and men, religious women, young adults and diocesan priests. This committee researched content and worked to provide pictures to produce a colorful brochure. Brochures were printed, as was described to me, "one for every hymnal."

St. John's Newfoundland diocese hosted a weekend symposium to address the challenges in fostering a vocation culture. The planning committee (religious women of the diocese and committed lay people) worked for more than a year to offer a weekend session for five representatives from each parish. The process included input from two speakers (Len Altia,

SJ and myself), mixed group interaction, then parish group planning. Local planning happened, and "homework" was assigned for the parish setting. Rural parishes have different challenges than urban ones. As one young adult delegate said, the challenge for them was to have the money to heat the building! Paying a youth director was not possible. Nonetheless, local plans have taken shape, and a diocesan brochure is underway.

Another local group launched a national project. Toronto Area Vocation Directors Association has initiated and supported the growth of a national Web site for vocations, www.vocations.ca, with much assistance from the U.S. and Australian Web pages. Cur-

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rently this site averages 8,500 visitors a month, with some 1,600 of them bookmarking the site. If you type "vocations" on the Google search engine, www.vocations.ca comes up as the second listing. Our Web site is a premier Canadian resource for all vocation inquirers, including youth, families, parishes, schools and, of course, those discerning a Christian vocation commitment. The Web site and other local initiatives give hope to not only our wounded church but also to our wounded world.

Further challenges

While we Canadians are making strides in promoting vocations, the fact is that an inclusive vocation culture is still a tough sell in parishes. Many people like the inclusive tone of the statement that came out of the Continental Congress: "Vocations to ordained ministry and consecrated life—and to single and married life, to lay ministry and Christian witness in a secular society—will flourish in a Church where each member can identify and concretely live out the Father's call to life and holiness, the Son's call to discipleship and communion, and the Spirit's call to witness and mission" (*Conversion, Discernment, Mission*, page 12). Yet the same people still long for "Father" or "Sister" to come to the door for a visit. Often I have been

thanked, even congratulated for speaking of marriage and single life as vocations, even now, 40 years after Vatican II. Parishioners still want to know how many are in the seminary or the novitiate. I don't hear, "Father, how many weddings this summer?" Nor does anyone wonder how many committed single people there are these days. We are a mixed bunch, sometimes giving off mixed messages about vocation promotion.

When it comes to our national organizations, sometimes I look longingly at the United States, Great Britain and Wales, or Australia—they seem so organized! There is a freshness in being able to create new structures that meet our needs. We hope to collaborate with the newly organized Canadian Network for Youth Ministers and the already well-established Canadian Catholic Campus Ministers and Canadian Catholic Student Association. The diocesan vocation directors are another group we want to cooperate with. So many options lie before us that we must consider what is really possible.

We have not yet found a way to link with our French-speaking counterparts in this ministry. However, I was invited to our Canadian Catholic Student Association Leadership Conference in January 2005 to present a workshop on vocation culture. This conference offered simultaneous translation, allowing us to bridge the language gap in at least one instance.

The vastness of our country and the lack of networks continue to be challenges. In preparation for the Congress on Vocations, I recall sitting with Father Raymond Lafontaine, the Canadian co-chair for the event, trying to brainstorm a list of people, organizations, institutions and others that needed to be invited. Our Canadian Catholic Directory helped, but it is so big! We need a resource bank, a network of who is doing what, what works and what does not.

Slow steps are steps just the same

The good news is that we can participate in an international issue of *HORIZON* with something to say. There are many varied initiatives happening across our country—and this article reflects only what I'm aware of. So we move ahead slowly. As I understand it, the Brazilian church hosted the First Continental Congress on Vocations in 1994 and nine years later, in 2003 had a national Year of Vocation. We hosted the Third Continental Congress in 2002, so it might be worth checking back on Canada in 2011! ♦