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## Teacher Faith Formation as Response to an “Existential Crisis” in Catholic Schools: Western Canadian Superintendents’ Perspectives

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**Abstract:** The shortage of teachers who can strongly identify with the religious mission of Catholic schools is at the point of an “existential crisis,” according to a system leader in Catholic schools in Western Canada. Drawing upon exploratory interviews completed with ten chief superintendents (who oversee large school districts), this paper reveals that while school districts offer various forms of faith formation regulating the personal lives of teachers amidst divergences between Church doctrines and social trends is complicated. Because the complexity of teacher faith formation is incredibly difficult to address, we discuss three key areas to renew the state of affairs: focusing on the individual teacher’s journey, creating content that is dialogical and seeks to integrate faith to life, and coalescing of Catholic educational partners to forge the political will to better support teacher faith formation.

**Keywords:** Catholic schools, teacher shortage, faith formation, superintendents, Canada

In our exploratory research study, Catholic school system leaders (i.e., chief superintendents) in Western Canada expressed the difficulty of finding and hiring teachers who know and live the Christian faith (Hoven et al., 2025). As one superintendent commented, the shortage of Catholic teachers is “an existential crisis” that threatens the long-term sustainability of publicly-funded Catholic schooling in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Northwest Territories (NWT). While

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improved and expanded teacher faith formation programming is necessary for the survival of faith-based schooling, many social complexities (e.g., teachers' personal beliefs, individuals' legal rights and freedoms, schools' financial limitations) can stagnate or bewilder comprehensive planning in this regard. Drawing from the findings of exploratory interviews with ten system leaders, this paper focuses upon the tangled reality of teacher faith formation in Western Canada and sets out to distinguish clear lines of research inquiry and school practice.

### Introduction

Writings taken from Vatican II and succeeding Holy See educational documents plainly advance the necessity of faith formation of teachers in Catholic schools. The Church looks to the crucial role of teachers in Catholic schools not only for academic learning but also for their deepening of faith and role of witnessing to Christ ([Congregation for Catholic Education, 1982; 1988; 2022; Pontifical Council, 2020; Second Vatican Council, 1965](#)). Transmission of a body of knowledge is complemented by the complete formation of young people. Thus, teachers require a dynamic education themselves, so that they may mature as human persons, fulfill their baptismal promises, and support the mission of the school. Sound preparation and formation are necessary for teachers to integrate the Christian faith into their own lives ([Franchi & Rymarz, 2022; Groome, 2011](#)).

While Catholic education researchers advance the full human development of teachers in Catholic schools, they also underline many challenges to this task. [D'Souza \(1996\)](#) describes the difficulty of forming witnesses to the gospel in a pluralistic and postmodern society. Others ([Gowdie, 2017; Groome, 1981](#)) question whether teachers can lead others in faith if they themselves are not disciples first. [Earl \(2005\)](#) places the spiritual and moral character of teachers at the heart of developing a faith-based atmosphere in the school. [Rymarz \(2018\)](#) writes about teacher retirement and a changing social context accelerating the need to form a new generation of teachers. Adequate teacher faith formation lies at the heart of the mission of Catholic schools. Knowledge of this challenge is longstanding and also increasingly problematic with no easy remedy in sight ([Horner, 2023](#)).

The goal of teacher faith formation is maturity of faith, which connects to the long-held ideal of teacher as witness. The term emerged in the early Church from the idea of a witnessing community, *maturia*, as one who "bear[s] credible public witness to Christian faith through lifestyle and example, living as a sacrament—as an effective sign—of its own preaching, even to the point of suffering and death if necessary" ([Groome, 1998](#), p. 190). Groome states that Catholic teachers must be witnesses of the beliefs, values, and lifestyles of the community whom they represent (p. 206). Integrity of word and deed are essential to their credibility as mentors of young people. The [Congregation for Catholic Education \(1977\)](#) further elaborates on teachers as models of Christian life, emphasizing the importance of fostering relationships and transmitting values through personal example. Catholic schoolteachers play a vital role in the mission of the

Church; in fact, “it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose.” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1997, para. 19). When teachers are hired in a Catholic school, they are expected to live out their vocational call by making Jesus Christ the center of their life and, in turn, the center of their students’ lives.

Alberta, Saskatchewan, and NWT have thirty-one school divisions (or districts) with Catholic schools: approximately 225,000 students are taught by roughly 12,000 teachers and administrators in more than 600 schools (Alberta Catholic School Trustees’ Association [ACSTA], n.d.; Government of Saskatchewan, 2023). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the role of churches in health, education, and social services was integrated into Western Canadian society. A constitutional compromise forged a dual system of education, public (generally Protestant) and separate (usually Catholic), to unite a young country. While public schools are now non-sectarian, Catholic schools have maintained their religious nature and still receive full government funding. With enrollment growth rates matching or exceeding public schools (Fletcher, 2018), Catholic schools continue to be an attractive choice for many parents, including those practicing other faith traditions.

Public demand for Catholic schooling in Western Canada requires teachers who support and live out the Christ-centered mission of the schools. Faith formation of teachers has the capacity to unite a school community, to provide a common purpose and set of goals, and to enable a shared Christian journey among students and teachers (Cook, 2015). However, many challenges must be addressed: limited resources, people indifferent to or upset with the Church, and the Church’s moral teachings, especially around sexuality, make faith formation a difficult task for school and Church leadership. Other historical issues, like the clergy sex abuse scandal and the Church’s role in Indigenous residential schools, raise criticisms toward Catholicism and lead to further questions about working within Catholic schools (Groome, 2014).

Complicating the situation is a teacher shortage felt locally and globally (Previl, 2023; United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2023) and, as stated by Holman (2017, p. 187), “the shortage of younger, practising Catholic teachers” exacerbates the situation. In response, Catholic schools in Canada have been forced to hire non-Catholic teachers in many speciality subject areas impacting the sustainability of Catholic schools (Mihovilović, 2021). Thus, the *Directory for Catechesis* (Pontifical Council, 2020) recognizes the normalization of non-Catholics teaching in the schools and names issues that require further consideration, including non-Catholics teaching religion or assuming leadership positions. Mihovilović’s research explores the implications of the role of non-Catholic teachers in Catholic schools, the impact on leadership, and need for proper formation to fulfill the role of witness and teacher in a Catholic school. Can facing these challenges bring out new opportunities for Catholic schools?

In Western Canada, the great majority of aspiring teachers receive training at several public universities spread across the Prairies. In some cases—the University of Alberta (St. Joseph’s College),

the University of Regina (Campion College) and the University of Saskatchewan (St. Thomas More College)—there are small Catholic affiliated colleges that provide a limited number of optional religious education courses amidst the demands of a university program. One small university offers its own education program—St. Mary’s University in Calgary—while Newman Theological College partners with a Christian Reformed King’s University in Edmonton to offer Catholic religious education courses. Teacher education programs are generally directed by Ministries of Education in collaboration with the universities and their Faculties of Education. Thus, the vast majority of teachers in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the NWT are formed in public education institutions that reflect a public mission and philosophy that does not highlight distinctive features of a Catholic education (Kirylo & Aldridge, 2019). The theological and spiritual needs of preservice teachers for Catholic education systems are rarely addressed in public institutions (Franchi & Rymarz, 2017; Morey, 2012). This issue is common elsewhere. In the United States, for example, Engel (2022) explains how even those educated in Catholic universities might receive employment training simply for public schooling.

Once employed by a Catholic school division in Western Canada, teachers are contractually obligated to both live and witness a Catholic perspective and lifestyle not only at the school, but also in their personal lives (An Act to Amend the Education Act, 1987; Wendel, 2017). These requirements are not specifically defined and are instead broadly held, in part because the schools directly receive public dollars unlike US Catholic schools (Hickey, 2024). This contractual obligation does include assumed participation in school faith formation activities. Other requirements may include being baptised in the Church and a letter of recommendation from a parish priest that includes an attestation of faith.

As researchers, we thought that speaking with the CEOs of Catholic schools could give insight and direction into the complex reality of teacher faith formation in Western Canada. Our interviews elicited tensions between the ideal and practice, nudging us to a deeper inquiry on teacher faith formation: Is it difficult to find and hire Catholic schoolteachers? If teacher faith formation is vital to the long-term sustainability of Catholic schools, what are the specific challenges to current teacher faith formation? How might Catholic education in Western Canada find theoretical, political, and practical solutions to the complicated reality of teacher faith formation?

## Materials and Methods

This paper draws on data taken from a research project that examined more broadly the challenges and opportunities for publicly-funded Catholic schools in Western Canada. These districts’ student populations range from the thousands to tens of thousands. After telling a core group of potential participants about the study at an educational gathering, a snowball sampling method yielded a total of ten participants. Ten chief superintendents in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the

NWT were interviewed out of a pool of thirty potential candidates. This analysis refers to all Catholic school system leaders as “chief superintendents” though this position is called “Directors of Education” in Saskatchewan. The superintendents were a mix of men and women, all were Catholic (some became Catholic as adults), and most had attended Catholic schools as children. They had many years of experience as educators and administrators and had taken graduate studies. Their ages ranged from the 40s to 60s. Ensuring participant anonymity was of utmost importance; therefore, no background information is given for any particular interviewee because the pool of potential candidates is so small that contextual details could potentially reveal their identity.

Learning from this small group of top experts in their field (Majid et al., 2019; Morgan & Lambie, 2019) provided fresh insights into Catholic schooling divisions. This specialized group of Catholic educators are faced with the complicated reality of leading large schooling divisions, experiencing the political tensions, fiscal realities, and human resource challenges of faith-based education. With this exploratory approach (Stebbins, 2011), we were able to learn from these elite educational leaders at a macro level (e.g., Cook et al., 2022; Sipper & Batra, 2022). This study received ethical approval from the primary investigator’s home university’s research ethics board.

The primary investigator traveled throughout Western Canada to each chief superintendent’s school division office. Prior to the in-person, semi-structured interview of approximately 50-90 minutes in length, each participant received fifteen questions asking about their background, their school division, and about the ethos/culture of Catholic education in their province/territory. One participant could not meet in person and emailed interview responses to the investigators. Sparkes and Smith (2014) explain that semi-structured interviews “allow the participant a certain degree of flexibility to express their opinions, ideas, feelings, and attitudes. . . . The participant can reveal much more about the meanings they attach to their experiences, thereby providing the interviewer with deeper knowledge” (p. 86). Open-ended questions included: “What are you most proud of as a superintendent;” “How do you promote and support the Catholic identity of your schools;” “When you think about Catholic education in the province, what’s the one thing that keeps you awake at night or gets you out of bed in the morning?” Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional company, and subsequently anonymized with each interviewee given a pseudonym. Each participant then reviewed their transcription and could suggest any additions or deletions to the text. The primary investigator and superintendent then agreed on a final transcription.

Our analysis of the data focused on key themes and concepts rather than the superintendents themselves (Stebbins, 2011, p. 5 and p. 9). The primary and secondary investigators reviewed and coded the transcripts to identify key words and themes in each text. This thematic analysis sought to identify and interpret patterns across the data set (Braun, Clarke, & Rance, 2017, p.12), producing broader themes like, “journeying together,” “leaders as bridge builders,” “pressures and tensions

from outside the school/church,” and “the Catholicity of staff and trustees.” These clustered themes allowed the researchers to begin organizing thematic structures for communication (pp. 12–13). Patton (2014) describes this process of data analysis specifically as “the challenge to make sense of data, reduce volume of information, identify significant patterns and construct a framework for communicating what the data revealed” (pp. 371–372). After coding the data and creating broader themes (Braun et al., 2017, p. 12), it became evident that the theme of teacher faith formation was incredibly significant and worthy of a full-length elucidation.

## Results

Each chief superintendent spoke about teacher preparation and professional development with great interest. Each stated the difficulty of finding Catholic teachers and the challenges of completing meaningful faith formation programming. Societal changes and a lack of resources were common concerns raised by the superintendents. Analysis of the data revealed an exceedingly complicated problem with no easy solutions. Below is a compilation of key results that explain this complex situation.

### Lack of Strong Faith Connections

Young teachers generally showed a weak affiliation to the Church and teacher faith formation becomes increasingly difficult as a response to this shift. Western Canada, like the rest of the world, is experiencing a teacher shortage. Anna stated it plainly: “Finding any teacher is difficult. Recruitment is difficult . . . there’s a labor shortage everywhere.” She added, “We’re challenged to find Catholic teachers—never mind quality Catholic teachers.” Gianna stated, “It’s hard to find [Catholic] teachers now. Harder and harder.” Sofia commented about cradle Catholic teachers who are less prepared to engage faith in the school without proper adult education: “I find that a teacher who’s gone through RCIA or even [has studied religious education as] an undergraduate student seemed to have a better understanding.” She added that she sees fewer school families and fewer teachers at Mass on Sunday. For Anna, the loss of belonging to the Church community limits what the school can accomplish faith-wise. For instance, current religion teachers are often not formed well enough in faith “and cannot do the [religion] curriculum justice.”

Sofia shared that many people are moving away from the Christian faith in young adulthood and that formation is necessary to create confident, grounded Catholic teachers. Wendy concurred by adding, “Our number one biggest challenge is continuing faith permeation [in our schools and curricula] when you have unchurched teachers.” Faith education requirements (e.g., some school divisions require teachers to take undergraduate courses in religious education) are often waived by schools due to teacher shortages in specialised subject areas or because of the remote locations of some schools. Without proper faith formation of teachers, Catholic schools risk their long-term

survival according to more than one superintendent. Domenic explained how his district spends tens of thousands of dollars on out-of-province recruiting. He reasoned that the schools could lose their government funding status, not through the overturning of legislation, but because the schooling system will give it away “through a lack of authenticity.” William similarly commented that Catholic schools are endangered when their own teaching staff are unable to articulate their values.

Non-Catholic teachers are often hired to fill positions. Tessa declared: “We do have within our operational procedures [where] . . . if we are unable to find someone who is Catholic, there is the ability to hire someone who is not Catholic in their area of specialty.” Ian explained the importance of providing a faith formation program for non-Catholic staff: “We do not recruit Catholic-only staff. We have a priority hiring policy for Catholic candidates, but we have a staff of all faiths working in our schools.” They may even help plan and organize liturgical events and assist with faith permeation throughout the school. Unsurprisingly, a few superintendents noted that some non-Catholic staff participate in the offered faith formation programs and join the Church.

For William, the faith formation of teachers “isn’t a checklist . . . or an add-on—it’s an opportunity.” He explained that staff and students need to know that their main goal is “becoming the best possible versions of themselves . . . because then they’ll do it. The checklist never works.” He deemphasized formation as merely a requirement and underlined it as being about identity, integrity, and personal growth.

### **Teacher Faith Formation Options**

Superintendents stressed that Catholic school divisions each offered several options for faith formation for their staff. Tessa explained that her school district provides “evening programs for new teachers, required faith courses for religion teachers, . . . a faith day each year, an opening district Mass . . .” Their comments indicated many similarities.

#### *Formal and Informal Courses*

Tessa explained: “[We] traditionally had in place a minimum requirement of two formal courses in your undergraduate degree revolving around faith.” Anna described in-house programming: a “special two-year program for new teachers and faith cafes,” which included coffee and talk about scripture. Sofia described an orientation and formation program for new teachers, while Wendy’s district asked new teachers to take several courses in their first years as a teacher. Many also named Catholic education courses for aspiring leaders.

Lucas explained how all “site-based PD [professional development] must include a faith formation component” that aligns with division goals and mission. Completing the faith formation in-house gives more control to the districts. William wondered if the academic theological learning provided by Catholic post-secondary institutions fit the needs of teachers and preservice teachers:



Catholic curriculum and pedagogy are valuable, but scholarly theological content is often useless to practice-minded educators.

### *Teacher Goals and School-wide Planning*

As with other professions, teachers are required to create an annual Professional Growth Plan (PGP) designed to guide ongoing learning. While teachers have authority over their own PGPs, many superintendents encourage them to include a faith formation goal. Sofia said her school district endorsed the use of provincial Catholic educational materials like courses, retreats, and diocesan activities to assist with this goal. Tessa's district created a district-wide faith formation plan: a "faith formation series for all new staff where they come in regardless [of previous formal courses] . . . [with] nuances of faith permeation."

### *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)*

RCIA was named as a valued means of formation. Sofia noted that many neophytes who completed RCIA brought a renewed zeal and knowledge about faith to school communities. Wendy described how the school's faith community sometimes led other staff, including other Christians, to become Catholic. She underlined how these appeared to be authentic transformations; it was not simply about getting long-term contracts.

### *Authentically Catholic*

Domenic spoke about Catholic formation being truly Catholic and "included God and wasn't simply secular humanism." Ian reiterated this point and argued that Catholic schools must articulate how "our Catholic schools' mission and ministry are based on Jesus Christ." They asserted how faith formation must articulate a living faith in God.

### *Relationship to Parish*

Superintendents expected staff to attend Mass each Sunday and wanted connections built between the schools and parish. However, making this legally binding seemed heavy handed. Wendy emphatically stated that she would not stand before her teachers and say, "you all have to be at Mass" every Sunday. Most school divisions require teachers in Catholic schools to provide evidence of faith practice and parish participation prior to being hired or before tenure is offered. The evidence required is typically a letter from a priest; this testament of faith ideally includes reference to participation in a ministry.

### **Legal and Ethical Considerations in Teachers' Personal Life Expectations**

Regulating the lives of teachers outside the school is a delicate subject, both legally and ethically. Determining the role faith plays in personal lives of teachers is a dangerous tightrope

superintendents try to navigate. Because Catholic separate schools are constitutionally-protected, superintendents and principals have the authority to preferentially hire a Catholic over a non-Catholic teacher and hold them to a higher moral standard. Matteo, despite acknowledging the value of weekly attendance and his own personal devotion, tried to let a teacher's private life remain private: "my job is to ensure what they are doing in the school." All professionals are responsible for their actions away from the workplace however, and so Lucas stated that "we have the power . . . [to] influence what you're doing outside of working hours." He added, "I have the [contractual] powers as the chief superintendent . . . to say, 'I hired you, you're a Catholic teacher. But on the weekend you went and did this?'"

The distinction between the private and public life of the teacher also went the other way. Gianna explained that "your personal life should not be front and center in class." Tessa spoke about boundaries between a student's and a teacher's private lives and defended how teachers should not be required to know about medical treatments, like puberty blockers for transgender students: ". . . not in a million years would I ever expect a staff member to have a deep conversation" about something outside their expertise. Should administrators be delving into the private lives of teachers?

### **Church Doctrine and Social Trends**

The divergence between Church doctrine and social trends can be substantial and can leave many teachers more apt to side with widely accepted social values. Polarization often arises due to differing values, beliefs, and interpretations of morality held by religious institutions and the broader society. Matteo said, "Teachers would rather not deal with [controversial issues] or deal with them at a cursory level and say something that they might regret later." Lucas summarized: "there's lots of groups and lots of pressures on our Catholic faith, like . . . Indigenous residential schools, [and] . . . gender is another one." Pandemic issues like mandatory vaccinations and masking mandates also created real difficulties internally for Matteo and Sofia's school districts. School teachers feel these tensions acutely, especially when they sign teaching contracts that include a Catholicity clause that demands personal support of the school's religious mission. Because teachers in Catholic schools belong to provincial teacher professional associations with public school teachers, many superintendents noted an additional layer of complexity when it came to differences between the Church and mainstream society.

There were three major points of discussion. Starting with sexual diversity, Wendy recounted the conflicting positions at the board level in a discussion about participation by teachers in a Pride Day Parade. She explained, "it was a surprise to everyone that two teachers just decided to go," forcing the board to respond and feeling "burnt" by allowing the discussion in the first place.

The introduction of a diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI) committees by some school divisions has made their engagement in LGBTQ policies seemingly more open "to question (Catholic)

practice perhaps a little bit more fervently,” stated Tessa, making schools engage in difficult discussions. Tessa described how “heart-wrenching” it is to know staff members who remain in the closet. She added that in those cases “I think we’re working towards removing stigma and fear of employment.” Domenic believed that “serving the needs of students who are LGTBQ is a significant stress, as our teachers often feel we could be doing more . . . We have to continue to determine how we interact and respond to a culture that is increasingly misaligned with the teachings of our Church. We can’t ignore societal trends such as Pride Week.” Domenic lamented that Catholic schools fight the perception that they are not safe and caring to the LGBTQ population and countered “that it is often our teacher faith leaders that students first reveal they are, for example, gay. I think this is because students see these authentic faith witnesses and those capable of unconditional love.” Wendy and Lucas added that school divisions have participated in Pride Day festivities ranging from fully to not at all, sending mixed messages to other Catholic schools and the wider population and causing misunderstandings in the long run.

Second, critical race theory (CRT) was touched on and the question of race and what school districts are doing to support anti-racism practices were named, for instance, by Gianna. Some spoke about the importance of Catholic Social Teaching as a way to work collaboratively with CRT—or at least give a religious angle on social issues. Domenic stated: “it’s a part of an intellectual tradition’s association with Marxism, obviously that’s what everybody wants to say is horrible,” but Domenic said that school officials need to impress upon everyone that CRT is part of “Catholic social teaching on racism . . . and elements of critical race theory align with Catholic social teachings. And so, if someone ever accuses us of doing critical race theory, we’ll say no, we’re doing Catholic social teaching.”

Third, in response to the violence done to Indigenous cultures and languages, a great effort has been made nationally to understand this cultural destruction and to work toward reconciliation in Canada. Anna and Wendy explained that specific funding for Indigenous learning resources is allocated for all schools, unlike faith formation. Wendy noted the strangeness of having more people working on Indigenous learning in her central office than on religious education. The former can overshadow the latter. She commented that this has led to inter-faith confusion about different beliefs in the Creator: “I have little ones going home and saying the turtle is God,” (The creation fable, *Old Turtle* [Wood, 1992], describes creation and the nature of the divine. Many Indigenous cultures call the territory we now know as Canada as, “Turtle Island,” creating apparent confusion in some children). Teachers can feel similar fear when teaching religion or Indigenous education, where they worry about misunderstandings or saying the wrong thing.

These three areas of polarization create a more challenging environment for faith formation. Beyond these, however, there are relational reasons for discord. William commented that some people have angst toward the Church and working within Catholic institutions: “As I get older,

I realize it's less about formal arguments and more about a feeling of hurt . . . . 'Somebody said something to me,' or 'Somebody did something.'" The challenges of running Catholic schools within a government system led Domenic to comment that there are many reasons to be "less Catholic," such as the ability to attract more students and to use monies allocated for faith formation for other needs. For him, schools' rationale for neglecting their faith identity was a list of "cop outs."

Catholic teacher shortages, creating the necessary variety in faith formation, respecting teachers' private lives, and shifting social values make teacher faith formation a real challenge for leadership. These serious issues raise concerns about the long-term prospects of finding teachers supportive of the religious mission of these Western Canadian schools. Major headwinds blow that seriously complicate robust teacher faith formation programming in the region.

### **Discussion and Implications**

While the superintendents described different forms of teacher faith formation, there was a sense that maintaining the status quo was insufficient. As our title declares, the lack of teachers who can witness to faith is at the point of an "existential crisis." There is no easy solution to this complex human issue. Each leader looked at this challenge from their own perspective, highlighting what was most acute to them. Analyzing these viewpoints at first left us in research paralysis, where we felt disoriented about possible divergent implications of our results. Over time, a collaborative vision came to light. By classifying major factors separately, consensus becomes possible and we avoid a paralysis induced by the issue's complexity. We think that both practical and theoretical newness is possible by distinguishing between three major discussion areas: (a) the individual teacher participating in faith formation; (b) the content to be learned and discussed; (c) the political will to make the necessary organizational changes.

#### **Teacher Identity as a Feature of Faith Formation**

Recognizing the individuality of each teacher is a vital feature of faith formation. It must engage each person's unique way to contribute to the larger mission of the Catholic school. It has long been recognized that teachers teach both curricular content and their personhood to students ([Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977](#)). Pope Francis stresses the importance of a solid formation informed by a vision of the educator that "depends more on who they are as persons and on how they live than on what they say" ([Pope Francis, 2015](#), para. 4). Teachers present knowledge and skills while modelling how to live. Given this integral aim, a straightforward game plan about teacher faith formation is next to impossible because Christian education is first about the formation of the human person—that is, the teacher—amidst shifting cultural realities ([Franchi & Rymarz, 2017](#)). Teacher faith formation must take the personhood of the individual seriously.

It was encouraging to see interviewees report different pedagogical practices in faith formation. They spoke about division-wide faith days or a combination of faith and wellness activities, which included presentations on a host of faith formation topics. They described formal courses and social events like “Theology on Tap” that used a more active pedagogy. There was some attention paid to the individual learners’ needs and interests.

If we understand faith formation as “a life-long process of coming to accept God’s unconditional love graciously and respond in love to God and to one another” (Bellows, 2013, p. 34), then it needs to favour spiritual depth and human processes over what is most efficient and cost-effective. The one-day faith formation assembly can be helpful as a stepping stone into other forms of learning, whereas many Catholic school districts recognized that varied, ongoing formation was more impactful. A diversity of teacher formation opportunities can best respond to teachers’ vocational and spiritual journeys. From a leadership standpoint, this effort requires a larger, strategic plan. This is no small endeavor, but it is a vital step in teacher education, their ongoing development, and their subsequent support of students (Gardner et al., 2017).

If quality faith formation must consider the lives of teachers (Franchi & Rymarz, 2022; Gowdie, 2017; Groome, 2014; Pontifical Council, 2020), then strategies cannot simply be a “checkbox” for administrators who want to show their trustees that they support the schools’ religious mission. Faith formation must consider circumstances and teacher concerns. Also, teachers face ever-increasing expectations in their daily work lives (Alberta Teachers Association [ATA], 2024). Demands stemming from professionalism and accountability create a job situation where theological education is seen as “one more” task for the teacher. Packing faith formation with overly complex theological notions also does not guarantee success (Stuart-Buttle, 2018). Further, inspired by Pope Francis, faith formation should support teachers’ vocation to reach out to those who are marginalized in the school.

Another challenge to teacher faith formation is its openness to all staff, especially those who follow other Christian traditions, religions, or nothing in particular. Constitutionally-protected, preferential hiring of Catholic educators in Canada is limited to teachers and administration only, as many office staff and educational assistants—along with some teachers—are not Catholic. Although the staff are contractually obligated to participate in faith formation at the school, wise leadership practices would find a way to enable these people’s support of the faith mission (Mihovilović, 2021).

Recognizing each educator’s background in faith formation can feel threatening for those who want theological knowledge to function as the gatekeeper or those who worry about potential costs of a more individualized educational plan. To rectify this conundrum, many superintendents started with the statement that faith formation is a *journey*. This approach places process over product. Franchi and Rymarz (2022, p. 171) argue that leaders must “recognize the elastic nature of a

self-declared Catholic religious affiliation.” This position acknowledges that when someone declares themselves as a Catholic that any one of several meanings is possible. For instance, someone may say they are Catholic because they went to a Catholic school. [Franchi and Rymarz \(2022\)](#) want leaders to “recognize the multiple starting points of prospective teachers” (p. 171). Thus, the metaphor of meeting a teacher on their journey has theoretical support and is a good pastoral practice. If teachers see that leaders respect their background while asking for participation in the faith mission of the schools, they will begin to experience the benefits of belonging to a Catholic school community ([Convey, 2012](#)) and how this community can counter negative trends in education ([Hallman, 2022](#); [Palmer, 1993](#)).

Engaging theoretical models for teacher faith formation is necessary within a *journey* approach to faith formation. American [Ronald Fussell \(2021\)](#) proposes a model that underlines relational encounters, reflective practice, connections with students, and the co-building of God’s kingdom as a school community. For Fussell, there is no one model or program for faith formation, but instead the focus must be on communal relationships and connecting these with personal faith experiences (especially outside of the school). His framework emphasizes “the importance of personal reflection and encounter with colleagues” (p. 161).

Australian [Jill Gowdie \(2017, p. 172\)](#) offers a “transforming encounters” model engaged in layers of story and spiritual journey. For Gowdie, faith formation is intertwined in the identity and mission of Catholic education, supported by a strong theological foundation, and personally meaningful in the lives of teachers. She also underlines the importance of strategic effectiveness: for example, leaders who target specific groups in an intentional, developmental and incremental manner.

Organizations also offer frameworks. Australia’s [National Catholic Education Commission \(NCEC, 2017\)](#) emphasizes relationships, a culture of dialogue, accompaniment, and a commitment to teaching that embody a spirit of missionary discipleship. For NCEC, effective use of the significant investment in staff faith formation means it ought to be “organized and intentional” and recognize the “uneven levels of knowledge, experience and personal appropriation of the Church’s spiritual traditions and religious practices” (p. 5). Recognizing that Catholic anthropology guides Catholic education philosophy, any framework for faith formation must center on the Christian understanding of the person and that the formation of the whole person, directed toward Christ, is essential.

Despite different nuances in these models, they highlight educational processes and prioritize the individual spiritual and theological growth of the teacher. These models counter the potential lack of structure and direction that the faith formation theme of journey might be susceptible to by emphasizing the value of relationships and educational frameworks. Although some general documents produced in Western Canada—especially ones drawn from Archbishop

Michael Miller about teacher excellence (Miller, 2006)—are helpful, committing to integral model of faith formation would best enliven educator-learners and make room for sound educational-theological content.

### A Need for Open Dialogue

The dialogue between the Church and modern society has both points of convergence and places of tension. This reality makes the content of faith formation inspirational, volatile, or anywhere in between. An open, dialogical, truth-seeking disposition is necessary. In contrast to rapidly evolving modern societies, the Catholic Church as a long-standing institution develops slowly and deliberately. Conflicting expectations and values can result today. Whereas a modern mindset typically views politics and religion on two separate planes (Taylor, 2007), a Catholic education mindset seeks to integrate spirituality and beliefs into modern life. This difference creates conflicts in the perceptions and understandings of individual identity versus communal belonging, individual versus communal rights, and the definition of success and the meaning of life. Moreover, scientifically-based societies generally dismiss belief in an active, transcendent God. Pressures created from a consumerist culture, conflicting ideologies, and relativistic thinking functionally make religious faith look outdated or out of touch (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2017; Taylor, 2007).

One of the few public institutions in Western Canada that openly engages transcendent realities is the Catholic school. Lucas spoke about a psychological feeling, where people sense the uniqueness of Catholic schools compared to their public counterparts: “I had been in public schools, so I could feel and see the difference from going to a public school and then being immersed in a Catholic school” with its prayer and religious teachings. This commonly-stated feeling points to a recognition of something more than a world limited by empiricism and individuality (Taylor, 2007). Engaging in prayer and worship, discussing religious questions, considering moral principles and the centrality of the human person, and making space for religious symbols in a Catholic school lifts the pall placed over the modern world. For example, William wanted faith formation to be understood holistically and to include support for mental and physical wellness: an integrated spiritual wisdom to inspire and guide teachers’ lives.

There is a felt reality that modern society does not want to engage with the institutional Church. Interviewees revealed tensions between Church teachings and different ideologies, for instance, gender studies and critical theory, even though all superintendents affirmed that Catholic schools do care for every child. Contrast a male-dominated ecclesial institution with women making up nearly half of the chief superintendents in English-speaking, Western Canadian school divisions. As the Church continues to reform under the leadership of Pope Francis, it would be shortsighted to promote a strict, over-the-top agenda in faith formation that would decrease resistance to a secular life and alienate people from fruitful dialogue with the Church (Horner, 2023, p. 124).

Fact of the matter is that for many people the Catholic school acts as their local parish, at least temporarily. At the school, children and parents encounter liturgy, symbols, rituals, and spiritual ideas and activities. Faith formation plays a vital role in supporting this reality and requires the school staff to establish a sense of *koinonia*. Only within a context of friendship, concern, and conversation is it possible to encounter and engage with others and God (Sullivan, 2023). Only when the staff are formed both spiritually and theologically can they name and articulate their experience of the sacred. Engaging in spiritual practices of the Church has many potential benefits. For instance, they can assist with mental health issues (Torvell, 2019), as noted by Anna. Many superintendents named the importance of integrating the curriculum with Christian faith. For instance, instead of pitting the Church against critical race theory, Catholic social teaching challenges racism and neo-conservative ideologies in a way that builds up people and the school's faith-based mission (Bradley-Levine & Carr 2015; Vecchiarino, 2018).

### Political Considerations

The future of teacher faith formation depends upon political decision-making: on school and district budgets, in boardrooms, with partners in Catholic education, and in collaboration with state and public partners. Is there the political will to invest in and reimagine teacher faith formation? Detailed, regional strategic plans for teacher faith formation are necessary. This support requires further funding for programming. Because Catholic schools are publicly funded in Western Canada via a variety of funding models, it is difficult to set aside a significant amount of money provincially for faith initiatives. Non-sectarian provincial governments provide no specific money for faith formation. Furthermore, funds are often targeted at specific educational tasks, which means that boards must determine how some aims of faith formation can fulfill the aims of targeted funding. Unlike some Catholic schooling systems that coordinate regionally or nationally, as found in Australia and Scotland, it is exceedingly difficult to pool money to support a larger faith-based initiative. Can school districts in Western Canada forge long-term partnerships to improve planning and infrastructure that support adult faith learning? For example, Anna described one partnership that supported leadership formation: it multiplied available resources and impacted more leaders.

Major hurdles also make pre-service teacher faith formation a near impossible goal. Religious education courses offered by several Catholic colleges augment pre-service teacher education received in a public university system and assists people in their spiritual and pedagogical learning. Gianna advocated for Faculties of Education to “promote Catholic education more” so that more students could be aware of the option to earn credits in religious education. Whereas other jurisdictions like Ireland and Scotland demand some coursework to be hired permanently in Catholic schools (Franchi & Rymarz, 2022), the standards vary across Western Canada and even on a



case-by-case basis. Overall, pre-service teachers earning university credit in religious education or theology is advantageous.

A long-term formation plan includes both pre-service and in-service teacher education. Money, resources, and time will be ongoing issues; however, the political savvy to push for greater collaboration among Catholic and state partners is necessary for the fostering of teacher faith formation. Prioritizing faith formation is perhaps the most vital step to the long-term survival of Catholic schools in Western Canada. Otherwise, leaders should consider the advice from Domenic and Matteo and recruit Catholic teachers directly from the Philippines, Nigeria, and elsewhere (which comes with another set of challenges). There is no easy solution to this “existential crisis.”

### Study Limitations

Our three major discussion areas may not be generalizable for Catholic schools globally. While others elsewhere ought to ponder our conclusions, different contexts will demand local discussions and nuanced solutions. For instance, other Canadian provinces do not hold public elections for trustees, whose primary responsibility is to hire a chief superintendent. With greater overall dependence on ecclesial structures elsewhere, superintendents would likely be more dependent on diocesan organizations. Another limitation of our study is linked to its snowball sampling method. Participants were comfortable to discuss the schools’ faith mission with a researcher, but what about those superintendents who possibly declined the invitation? Perhaps some did not respond because of their lack of interest in or support of the religious mission of the schools. Finally, specific research into the perspectives of Western Canadian teachers on faith formation would give further insight and direction.

### Conclusion

Recent church documents affirm the importance of Catholic schoolteachers: “Teachers in Catholic schools hold a special responsibility for education, which is considered an ecclesiastical office. Their pedagogical skills and personal witness are essential for realizing the formative mission of the Catholic school” ([Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022](#)). The future of teacher faith formation may prove to be the quintessential element in the long-term survival of Catholic schooling. Instead of Catholic schools in Western Canada working rather independently to promote faith formation in the midst of changing social norms, or merely accepting a weakened religious state of being (or giving up their religious mission entirely), we think a more strategic effort is required. Faith formation must focus on the teachers and their life circumstances, enabling them to determine how they can each personally advance the mission of the schools. This requires a clear model for faith formation, one rooted in the Christian tradition and one that is politically and financially supported by school system leaders.

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