

Catholic Connections established to address threats to Catholic institutions, and to raise awareness in community

By Kiply Lukan Yaworski

A new provincial group is working to raise awareness among ordinary Catholics and the broader community about the value and contributions of Catholic health care and Catholic education – and to tap into grassroots support when Catholic institutions are threatened.

Established early in 2008, Catholic Connections includes representation from the Saskatchewan Catholic School Boards Association (SCSBA), the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan (CHAS), Catholic Health Ministry of Saskatchewan (CHMS), the Catholic Women’s League, the Knights of Columbus, the Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Saskatoon, and the Roman Catholic dioceses of Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Regina, and Keewatin Le Pas.

“Catholic Connections was established to help the Catholic and non-Catholic community better understand and appreciate the distinctiveness of Catholic health care and Catholic education, and the threat to their continued existence,” explained chair Arch McKay of Saskatoon.



Arch McKay

“There is a definite threat out there,” said McKay, noting that the creation of Catholic Connections came about partly in response to the loss of the Catholic hospital in Humboldt as a result of a heated controversy about a tubal ligation policy adhering to Catholic teaching. The elimination of Catholic school systems in Quebec and Newfoundland also demonstrates how institutions that are taken for granted can be lost, he added.

“The Catholic community has the potential to have a very strong voice, both provincially and federally, but unless the average person is made aware of this, and values and speaks up for Catholic institutions, they can be taken away,” McKay said. “We need to help people understand what Catholic health care is and what Catholic education really offers, because I don’t think everyone really understands or recognizes what is going on, or how these Catholic efforts benefit the entire community.”

Saskatoon Bishop Albert LeGatt, who represents the bishops of the province on the committee, said that the new organization is truly about focusing on the connections that exist throughout the Catholic community in Saskatchewan.

As an example, he noted how a parish-level ministry of care that reaches out to the sick and suffering is fed and strengthened by all that is lived out in Catholic health institutions and by all the work done through CHAS. Similarly, the catechism taught in a rural parish is connected and enriched through the efforts of a Catholic school system elsewhere in the diocese, which provides a network of resources and support. Connections can also be seen in how Catholic colleges such as St. Peter's in Muenster and St. Thomas More in Saskatoon accept students from across the province, not just those from Catholic schools, he said.

“Catholic Connections is that effort of connecting and more clearly linking all of those key players involved in Catholic education, in Catholic health care and in diocesan and parish life – both for the strengthening of resources and for supporting and advocating the continuation of Catholic health institutions and Catholic education in our province,” LeGatt said.

Even for those Catholics who live in a community where there are no Catholic schools or Catholic health care facilities, this is an important issue, agreed Ken Loehndorf, executive director of the SCSBA and a member of the Catholic Connections board.

“Solidarity is exactly what we are trying to create: the recognition that we need everyone's support to promote and protect Catholic health care and Catholic education in our province,” he said.

Loehndorf stressed that the society at large benefits from the work done in Catholic schools and Catholic hospitals.

Helping people understand the distinctiveness of Catholic education and Catholic health care is crucial, Loehndorf added. “There are a lot of people out there who think that Catholic schools are a crucifix on the wall and prayer every once in awhile and a religion class. Well, it's a whole lot more than that,” he said, stressing the permeation of values throughout a Catholic school as well as the strong focus on social justice, outreach and service. “The graduates we produce have a whole different attitude toward life, and come out in a position to be very strong contributors to society, enriched and formed by the teachings of our Catholic faith.”



Ken Loehndorf

Catholic health care also brings something unique and needed to the province, said Bert Yakichuk, chair of CHAS and a member of the Catholic Connections board.



Bert Yakichuk, CHAS chair

“Providing resources in ethics, mission and spiritual care and social justice is a part of our mission,” Yakichuk said. “The health care ministry of CHAS is rooted and modeled after the person and compassionate healing ministry of Jesus Christ, the divine healer.”

Both Catholic education and Catholic health care provide service to people beyond the Catholic community, without forcing faith on anyone, said McKay. “We invite folks to come in and be part of a faith-filled Catholic education, but we’re not trying to convert them,” added Loehndorf, stressing the difference between evangelization and proselytizing.

An upcoming “Affirming Faith” Catholic education conference in April will provide another opportunity to hear more about what Catholic institutions offer, added Loehndorf.

Catholic Connections is willing to provide more information to any group who wants to know more about what is going on in the province in terms of Catholic health care and Catholic education, said McKay. Participation in Catholic Connections is already broadening awareness of the issues for many leaders in the member organizations, he added.

“Catholic Connections has been established to muster support from the whole Catholic population for these key areas of living out the Church’s ministry of education and health care, in order that people will not see these as just the domain of certain institutions or groups, but as something that belongs to all,” concluded LeGatt.