

May 30, 2011

“Canadians aren’t looking for churches. They are looking for ministry, for those things that can have a significant impact on their lives and on the lives of their families. They are seeking answers to their spiritual needs, their personal needs and relationships... Why bother being involved if they don’t get something out of it? The onus is on the shepherds.”

So concluded Dr. Reginald Bibby, who has been monitoring social trends in the church in Canada through a series of well-known national surveys of adults and teenagers.

Prolific author and chair of the Board of Governors Research Center in the Department of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Dr. Bibby shared the keynote speaker function with Carol Kuzmochka, Director of the Centre for Pastoral Ministry formation at St. Paul University in Ottawa, at the Atlantic Catechetical Association’s biannual conference held at the Ramada Plaza Crystal Palace Convention Center in Dieppe from May 27th thru May 29th as part of the 75th anniversary celebrations of the Archdiocese of Moncton.

Some 200 participants representing the 11 dioceses throughout the Atlantic provinces as well as from Quebec and Ontario, attended the conference whose theme was ‘Transfigurations: Seeing with new eyes, Responding with new visions’.

Armed with statistics that could convince even the most sceptic participant, Dr. Bibby explained the religious situation in Canada where Roman Catholics are better positioned to make a difference because of their numbers. In Atlantic Canada, they represent 54 per cent of the population, that is, over 1 million persons according to Statistics Canada.

“Newsflash: religion is making a global comeback. Christianity is the fastest growing religion in the world”, said Dr. Bibby. “Roman Catholics have gone from 500 million in 1950 to 1 billion in 2000 while Pentacostals, for example, went from 0 to 500 million during the same period.”

According to these statistics, the dominant factor over the years has not been an abandonment of the church, but rather a polarization. Dr. Bibby went onto explain that churches often act as clubs meaning that their members, fearing change and moving out of their comfort zone, resist including new member. “This needs to be addressed,” he said.

While Dr. Bibby occupied himself with statistics and what they mean for the churches, Carol Kuzmochka looked for their implications in faith development. Beginning with Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians that describes a world not that different from ours, Carol suggested that we start by answering the question: “What’s going on here?”, a question that can also be asked after reading Luc’s passage on “The Walk to Emmaus”. “What model for evangelization do we find here? Does it invite us to do anything differently?”

Carol stressed that “catechesis is a vocation ministry that must be respectful of the person, that must lead the other person to self-discovery, be non threatening, relationship building... be based on

catechumenal methods.” She invited participants to look and read the symbols contained in this passage.

“We are created by God and for God: there is a divine spark and undeniable dignity in every human person who is created in the image of God,” she said encouraging participants to move from children to adults, from information to transformation, from programs to process, and from membership to mission”.

In his closing remarks, Dr. Bibby stressed that statistics “represent opportunity, responsibility and provide a starting point for outreach” while Carol invited participants to ask themselves what “insights” their three day reflection bring to their ministry: “do I have new eyes and a new vision for my ministry?”

During the session, participants were invited to participate in a variety of workshops ranging from “Future directions in adult faith education” to “Why is Jesus in the Simpsons?”

Throughout the conference, participants had access to kiosks set up by books publishers such as Novalis and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, the R. D. MacLeans Religious articles store, The diocesan Vision Bookstore, St. F. X. University, the Atlantic School of Theology and Development and Peace.