

RELIGIOUS ANIMATION
A SERVICE TO BE DISCOVERED

A solution to several problems!

A response to individual and family needs!

An asset for the community!

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CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION
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TO : COMMISSIONERS, DIRECTORS-GENERAL, AND SCHOOL BOARD ADMINISTRATORS

FROM : THE PROTESTANT COMMITTEE OF THE CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION

A Growing Need : Religious Animation

As you probably know, the Ministère de l'Éducation presently finances in part, by means of a supplementary allocation, fourteen elementary school pilot projects in religious animation; at the secondary level the monies for this service are included in the complementary services allocation.

Although the Education Act (articles 6 and 226) gives Protestant pupils the right to services of religious animation, the application of this nevertheless turns out to be a large challenge. Where, in effect, does one find the person who is best able to contribute to the resolution of the different problems which confront the school community and to accept the challenges of pluriculturalism and pluriconfessionality? The answer : the religious animator.

It is easier to define the role by saying what it is not. A religious animator is not a teacher, nor a social worker, nor a psychologist, and still less a pastor. Such a person might have, however, academic and/or professional qualifications in any of the professions mentioned, which would assist in the actual mandate. The role is similar to that of a chaplain : working with a heterogeneous clientele with a great variety of religious experiences. Like the chaplain, the animator is not there to convert new members to a specific religious group nor to lead them to a given Christian denomination. The animator walks "alongside him or her who suffers" ensuring that he or she has spiritual support and an attentive ear. A number of pupils live with spiritual, family, personal or relationship problems.

For this reason, the religious animator must take pains to build with each pupil a personal relationship based on trust.

To do this, the animator must be :

- ▶ present : two or three days a week to ensure a quality relationship;
- ▶ visible : before and after classes, at recess, at lunchtime, at different school activities, in the staff room... everywhere that it is physically possible;

- ▶ flexible : in accord with the established school timetable and at those times when his or her presence is needed;
- ▶ available : during school trips, festivities or other activities where he or she may help the teaching staff and thereby come to know the pupils better;
- ▶ volunteer : to supervise pupils during musical or theatrical activities, or sporting events;
- ▶ helpful : ready, if needed, to help the teacher, whose hands are full, with one or more pupils having difficulties in reading, writing, mathematics...

One of the most important tasks remains that of helping, within the area of his or her competence, the MRE teachers.

How can Religious Animation be Financed?

As has been mentioned above, there are allocations from the MEQ for this service at the elementary level and, a budget allocated within the complementary services allocation of each School Board.

It is apparent that those resources are insufficient. In order to satisfy the growing demand for services of religious animation, due to their popularity in communities which already have them, several strategies have been adopted where a sharing between local congregations - School Board - MEQ has developed. Other possibilities include : the use in part or in its entirety of the budget for school success; the creation of trusts or foundations; close contact with local congregations for financial and personal support, and even the possibility of "counselling"; volunteers; part of the budget for career counselling and even the contributions of private enterprise.

Let's be creative. Every means is good. To serve our student clientele and to respond to their needs remain our basic priorities. Even if we live in an era of shrinking budgets, nothing can stop a real desire to act.

Who Qualifies as a Religious Animator?

Ideally, the candidate should have the following criteria set by the Protestant Committee. Any qualifications, however, that approximate these requirements should be considered.

- ▶ Academic training : 30 credits in theology, in psychology and/or in the moral and religious development of children;
- ▶ Personal abilities : patience, understanding and sensitivity, availability, good listening, habits, motivated and respectful of different points of view;
- ▶ Community knowledge
- ▶ Desirable quality : altruism.

Religious animation offers *the best opportunity*, within the context of our school system, *to respond as soon as possible to children in difficulty and thus to avoid the greater probability of excessive costs of institutional intervention, without reducing their number.* In the first place it is a relationship, requiring many abilities and responding to the growing needs of elementary and secondary schools.

Experiences!

1. *A grade 6 girl once told me... "You are helping me through my disease called loss". Her grandfather, the most special of her "old people" friends, those friends who accepted her and loved her most, had died 5 months earlier. As many bright, sensitive young people, she didn't want to increase the pain to her parents, so she shared her memories, her thoughts, her anger and frustration, her poems and her songs with me. I felt honoured and special as she tried to come to terms with the mystery of death... and life... with me as her "sounding board"... her friend!!!*
2. *In the average week this year, in each of these schools, I saw between 5 and 10 students individually, ran 2 support groups for students in "crisis" and met with between 10 to 15 others informally (conversationally). I also made occasional visits to classrooms. The majority of the issues raised were emotional problems signaled by inappropriate behaviour and relational difficulties which can be traced back to problems in the family.*
3. *A grade 4 student wrote... "Thank you very much for talking to me and trying your best to help me. I think you made me feel special. You're someone who WASTED their time just to talk to me. Your voice is so gentle and your words are so real. Everything is true and I thank you very much."*

4. *For almost 150 students this year, the chosen route to deal with what was going on in their lives was through their religious animator. Of 20 students followed more closely, 19 claimed that not only did their relationship with the religious animator help them get through the year with fewer behaviour-related problems, but they further claimed that their academic standing improved as they experienced an ease in the emotional tensions in their lives through their relationship with their animator.*

6. *Some other comments :*

"I can tell you things I can't tell anyone else!"

"I feel safe with you."

"You're my Thursday friend."

"You're my best friend or my forever friend."

"When you left my only friend left."

Conclusion

Religious animation in school responds to diverse and unnumbered needs. It contributes to a greatly improved quality of life for pupils. One should not hesitate to procure this service whose costs are negligible in relation to the totality of benefits which it ensures for the school community.

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