

# “HOW DO WE REACH THEM, LORD?”

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE CANADIAN MISSIONS

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Catholic parents have a responsibility to ensure that their children are raised and educated in the Catholic faith. While the process of education goes on for a lifetime, it also requires a certain amount of schooling, particularly during the formative years.

Catholic parents in Canadian mission communities deal with numerous challenges daily. Living in communities where work is seasonal and resources are minimal, their primary goal is survival. Food and shelter for their families are the most immediate needs. Some of these communities don't have a local parish, let alone a Catholic school, for their children to attend. This reality means that many Catholic parents do not have the means to provide their children with a solid Catholic upbringing. The task of providing religious education often falls to dedicated missionaries.

Rev. Brian Colbert, Diocesan Director for Catechetics in the Diocese of Grand Falls in Newfoundland and Labrador, sees this first hand. “The people of the diocese have traditionally depended mostly on the fishery and forestry to sustain them,” says Fr. Colbert. When the fisheries were shut down, financial hardship spread throughout the community.

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*“The stick and the reprimand  
bestow wisdom, a child left to himself  
[or herself] brings shame on his [or her]  
mother.” Proverbs 29:15*

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In 1997, the provincial government discontinued funding to Catholic schools, forcing parishes to find ways to pass on the faith. In response to this challenge, Fr. Colbert implemented the home-based curriculum of the *Born of the Spirit* series so that parents became the first educators of their children in the ways of faith.

“This initiative was the first stage...to meeting the spiritual needs of people in the diocese as well as to give people in the

parishes some hope in the midst of the many losses they have sustained.... Without funding from Catholic Missions In Canada for a salary and supplies in our initial efforts, we would not have been able to operate, or even begin,” says Fr. Colbert about the project start-up.

A similar story is unfolding in a mining community in Thompson, Manitoba, where there is only one Roman Catholic Church and nearly half of the population is Aboriginal. The area has no Catholic school, so once again, the task of religious education for the community's children lies with the parents and local missionaries. Unfortunately, the community has very few stay-at-home moms and retired residents so the option of the local parish providing and overseeing a home-based religious education program, similar to the one running in Grand Falls, is not possible.

Local missionaries, like Sr. Andrea Dumont, must try to provide religious education for the children. This task is challenging enough, but it is made worse without the support and involvement of parents who wish to have their children educated in the faith but are not present at mass.

The issue of religious education is present in every mission community in Canada. Each community has stories, like Fr. Colbert's and Sr. Dumont's, documenting the struggles they encounter as they pass on the faith. There are so many of these stories that Catholic Missions In Canada entitled the spring 2006 issue of the magazine *Teaching our Faith* to showcase and honour the hard work of Catholic missionaries.

One must remember, however, that this hard work would never have been accomplished had it not been for the generosity of donors. Many individuals, parishes and church organizations like the League see the importance of religious education and have helped missionaries like Fr. Colbert with the challenges he faces daily.

The importance of a solid religious education that is taught by the missionaries and is captured in the magazine can be summed up best in Isaiah 54:13, “All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the prosperity of your children.” †