

Schools mounting ambitious plans with Indigenous communities

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By Michael Swan, The Catholic Register



A drum circle is just one of the many activities at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax that focuses on aboriginal heritage. Photo courtesy Mount Saint Vincent University

Every Catholic college and university in Canada has woken up to the call for truth and reconciliation between Indigenous Canadians and the rest of us.

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“I don’t really see that a university or a place of learning has a valid claim to the pursuit of truth and reason if it isn’t looking at all these factors that really have textured our society, both good and bad.... It would be self-evident to say that reconciliation is one of the calls of our times,” said Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities of Canada chair Gerry Turcotte. “There are very deep and hurtful legacies via the Catholic Church, but also other political and even religious organizations. How do you move forward if you don’t acknowledge those tensions, those wounds?”

Turcotte has recently compiled a 22-page report on Catholic colleges and their efforts to learn about and teach Canada’s aboriginal heritage in partnership with aboriginal people. The college presidents will launch Turcotte’s

report, “Dialogue Together With Action: Canada’s Catholic Colleges & Universities & the Road to Reconciliation” Oct. 24 in Ottawa.

Turcotte hopes the report will inspire more partnerships with Indigenous communities and linkages between Catholic institutions searching for ways to address Canada’s aboriginal reality.

“It’s an incentivising, creative document about what more is possible,” Turcotte said.

In a long list of projects big and small, the one Saint Paul University in Ottawa is shepherding is among the most ambitious. With the help of an \$800,000 gift from the Sisters of St. Ann, Saint Paul is partnering with St. Mark’s College in Vancouver, First Nations University of Canada in Regina and Nipissing University in North Bay, Ont., to equip Native communities to deal with trauma and tragedy.

Saint Paul’s is putting its 42-year-old program in counselling, psychotherapy and spirituality to work in partnership with aboriginal communities, helping to train people in their communities and building a network of support that can deal with suicides or addiction.

“For us it’s about expanding something that’s already there, making it more relevant to Indigenous communities,” said Saint Paul rector Chantal Beauvais. “It’s exciting in a way that we are doing our best to create these spaces where people can feel whole and human.”

Saint Paul’s believes it can find ways to honour and use the traditional cultural knowledge of elders, who are often called on when communities are in crisis. Links between the university and Indigenous community colleges can help equip teachers, social workers, nurses and others in remote communities, said Beauvais.

“It’s a new road for all of us at universities,” she said.

It’s a process of decolonizing the university, according to the rector.

“To be up front and to say, ‘Yes, we have been part of the problem in the past,’ is the first step, Beauvais told *The Catholic Register*. “Maybe there are ways of doing things at the moment that continue to be part of the problem. But now we are genuinely looking for ways to be inclusive in a real way.”

It isn’t just the 94 “Calls to Action” from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada that has universities retooling their curricula and rethinking their relationships with Native people, said University of Sudbury Indigenous studies chair Michael Hankard. Ontario’s high school curriculum has been paying attention to Indigenous history and social issues since 1999. High school graduates arrive on campus looking for more.

“Students are pretty much knocking down our doors,” said Hankard, who lives on the Serpent River First Nation.

Indigenous students are looking for an open and frank acknowledgement of spiritual realities.

“There is a particular urgency and poignancy to Catholic organizations recognizing and working maybe a little bit harder (on reconciliation) — saying this is not set in stone; change can happen,” said Turcotte, who is president of St. Mary’s University in Calgary.

Turcotte and the St. Mary’s administration has worked hard to build relationships with Alberta Aboriginal communities, earning the right to carry a teepee which can be erected several times per year on campus and host teaching by Native elders.

From Métis sash graduation ceremonies to nights spent on campus in the teepee, which must never be left unoccupied, aboriginal students at St. Mary’s are the first to feel the effects of their university’s efforts at reconciliation.

“We had many Catholic First Nations students for whom this was a healing of great consequence — to see this kind of dialogue on campus,” Turcotte said. “It does matter, not just morally but I think psychologically. It’s just a good thing to be doing.”