

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

THE NEXT GENERATION: A STUDY OF CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL RELIGION TEACHERS

TIMOTHY J. COOK

Creighton University

The Next Generation: A Study of Catholic High School Religion Teachers is a McGivney Grant-funded study that will examine the critical and growing shortage of credentialed high school religion teachers. Using survey research, this study will assess the national situation and attempt to forecast what the future holds. Ultimately, the study will make recommendations regarding the future recruitment, preparation, and retention of religion teacher candidates.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

Since publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, schools of all kinds and at all levels have heightened standards in curriculum and instruction. For Catholic high schools, providing quality instruction in religion by credentialed teachers is an additional challenge. The project described herein grows out of a concern expressed in *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988), in which the Congregation for Catholic Education underscores the importance of the religion teacher in the faith development of students and recommends that measures be taken to guarantee trained teachers. The document states:

The religion teacher is the key, the vital component if the educational goals of the school are to be achieved. In this area, especially, an unprepared teacher can do a great deal of harm (#96). Everything possible must be done to ensure that Catholic schools have adequately trained religion teachers (#97).

My past and current professional experiences reinforce this concern. As a high school principal trying to find religion teachers and as a professor in the education department of a Jesuit university that supplies religion teachers to Catholic schools, I have seen firsthand the shortage of credentialed high school religion teacher candidates. Two summers ago, a focus group comprised of superintendents, theology professors, principals, high school theology chairs, and teachers shared their concern about the shrinking pool of credentialed religion teachers.

Recent studies indicate that the shortage will only become worse. *CHS 2000: A First Look* (Guerra, 1998) reports that priests and religious men and women still comprise 24% of full-time Catholic high school religion teachers even though they make up only 10% of the overall faculty. If present trends continue, as religious men and women continue to grow older and decrease in numbers, religion departments will rely even more heavily on the laity to fill their shoes. It would seem that a window of time exists for Catholic educational leaders to be proactive in their approach to address the growing shortage of high school religion teachers.

This article will examine this critical issue, which is central to the evangelizing mission of Catholic schools. The purpose of this research project is to collect data that will provide direction for the recruitment, preparation, and retention of future high school religion teachers.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following five research questions were refined using a focus group of Catholic educators from around the country who convened for three days in August 1998 through the generosity of a Lilly Foundation grant.

1. Who are high school religion teachers today?
2. Who will high school religion teachers be in the future?
3. What are the ideal credential and preparation for high school religion teachers?
4. How do we ensure, through recruitment, preparation, and retention, a qualified pool of high school religion teacher candidates for the future?
5. Are there any existing recruitment, preparation, or retention strategies that might be instructive?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

In an earlier work published by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) entitled *Building the Foundations of Faith*, Galetto (1996) studied the knowledge, beliefs, and practices of elementary teachers of religion. This study's survey project is a new initiative in Catholic educa-

tion because it focuses on the high school religion teacher. This study is a natural follow-up to Phase 1 of the NCEA Secondary Department's *CHS 2000* (Guerra, 1998), which collected demographic data about American Catholic high schools, including data about religion teachers.

This research will have a national and long-term impact on Catholic high schools in a number of ways. First, by focusing on the key player in the evangelizing mission of the Catholic high school—the religion teacher—the project cuts to the heart of this educational ministry. Second, the study uses a national sample from which to draw its conclusions. Third, the study has involved and will continue to involve a broad spectrum of people associated with Catholic education at various levels: superintendents, principals, religion teachers, and university theology professors. Fourth, various models for the recruitment, preparation, and retention of Catholic high school religion teachers will be investigated. Some models will come from the international Catholic community, namely Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Lastly, with its eye on the future, the intent of the study is to be instructive for the future.

Grant awards from the Lilly Foundation to convene a focus group, from the Knights of Columbus (McGivney Grant) to underwrite survey research, and from the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education Department (CACE) of NCEA to reconvene the focus group also bespeak the significance of this project.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Part Four of the Congregation for Catholic Education's document *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988) clarifies the role that the religion curriculum and religion teachers play in the overall religious mission of Catholic schools. This section of the document distinguishes between religious instruction and catechesis and forms the basis for the "Philosophy of Religious Education" section of the religion teacher survey.

During the past two decades, NCEA has conducted a series of studies pertaining to Catholic high schools. First came *The Catholic High School: A National Portrait* (Yeager, Benson, Guerra, & Manno, 1985), which included a chapter on religious education. In the same year, NCEA published a report entitled *Sharing the Faith: The Beliefs and Values of Catholic High School Teachers* (Benson & Guerra, 1985) that focused on the demographics and attitudes of high school teachers in general. Currently in progress is a follow-up study to the 1985 study, *The Catholic High School: A National Portrait*, that is entitled *CHS 2000*. Preliminary findings for this most recent study were published in *CHS 2000: A First Look* (Guerra, 1998). Six questions on the survey sent to all Catholic high schools dealt with religious instruction and formation.

Regarding studies of personnel most directly involved with religious education, NCEA has published three that might inform the study that we have undertaken. Galetto's (1996) *Building the Foundations of Faith: The Religious Knowledge, Beliefs, and Practices of Catholic Elementary School Teachers of Religion* is a comprehensive profile of elementary school teachers, almost all of whom customarily teach religion. Although *The Next Generation* study does not delve into the realm of beliefs, the Galetto study was instructive in the construction of the instrument with regard to demographic survey questions and findings. In like fashion, two other NCEA studies were helpful in terms of constructing survey questions that deal with demographics: *National Profile of Diocesan Directors of Religious Education* (Sinwell, Walters, & Walters, 1990) and *A Hopeful Horizon: A Progressive Study of Parish DREs' Training and Educational Needs* (Walters, Smith, & Marotta, 1993).

To date, while there have been attempts to study religion teachers on the elementary level, parish and diocesan Directors of Religious Education (DREs), and high school teachers in general, no study exists that concentrates on current and future high school religion teachers. In view of the fact that the survey instrument for *CHS 2000* (Guerra, 1998) contains only two questions that deal directly with high school religion teachers, this research serves as a perfect follow-up.

DESIGNS AND METHODS

FOCUS GROUP SESSION (AUGUST 1998)

Through the generosity of a Lilly Foundation grant, 12 representatives from the National Catholic Educational Association, university theology programs, diocesan superintendents, high school principals, high school religion department chairs and teachers, as well as one representative each from Canada and Australia, convened for three days at St. Benedict Center in Schuyler, Nebraska. The focus group laid the foundation for this project by refining the research questions and discussing other research-related issues. The focus group concluded the three-day session with the following belief statements:

1. We reaffirm the need for data-gathering.
2. We think the research questions are well suited for this research project.
3. We commit ourselves to broadening the conversation and to raising awareness.
4. We realize that solutions will occur side-by-side with information gathering.
5. We affirm that there is no one right way to address this issue. Various locales will most likely develop varying strategies.
6. We recognize that solutions will require out-of-the-box thinking.

INSTRUMENT DESIGN FOR DATA COLLECTION (JANUARY-DECEMBER 1999)

Using suggestions and feedback from the focus group and with the help of a statistical consultant, the chief investigator and associate designed two survey instruments. The "Religion Teacher Survey" consists of 70 questions in the following categories: personal background and experiences, preparation and experience, philosophy of religious education, rigor of religion courses, teaching responsibilities, motivations for teaching religion, job satisfaction and future plans, and comments. The "School Information Sheet," which is to be completed by the religion department chairperson or school administrator, consists of 19 questions that center on school characteristics such as location, governance, enrollment, and religion teacher recruitment experiences and strategies.

DATA COLLECTION (DECEMBER 1999-APRIL 2000)

Step One: A computer-generated random sample of 300 Catholic high schools was selected. This number represents approximately 25% of the 1227 (McDonald, 1999, p. 4) Catholic high schools in the United States.

Step Two: Letters of invitation accompanied by return postcards were mailed to the principals of the randomly selected schools asking them to participate in this study. To increase the level of participation, initial letters were followed with a second letter and then personal phone calls. Altogether, 200 schools agreed to participate.

Step Three: A packet of religion teacher surveys, along with a school information sheet and a business reply envelope, were mailed to participating schools. To ensure anonymity, religion teachers were asked to return their surveys sealed in an envelope to the principal or person designated to administer the survey. A confidentiality statement on the School Information Sheet indicated that school information would not be reported in a way that identifies a particular school, thereby ensuring school confidentiality.

DATA ANALYSIS (SUMMER 2000)

Data from the teacher surveys and school information sheets will be analyzed with particular attention to how the data relate to the five basic research questions. Survey questions concerning demographic characteristics, educational background, and reasons for teaching religion will identify who the high school teachers of religion are today. Combining the teacher survey data with the school information sheet will allow analysis of geographical trends or school type (e.g., rural or urban, small or large, diocesan or private, coed or single sex) trends in who teaches religion today.

Data on the future plans and job satisfaction of religion teachers will be used to assess the nature of the future pool of religion high school teachers and to identify trends that will help address the questions of how to ensure a qualified pool of religion teacher candidates in the future. Information from the school information sheets on experiences with recruitment will also inform analysis concerning the extent of the nationwide shortage of qualified religion teacher candidates.

Analysis of the teacher surveys will identify the types of teacher preparation that are most highly correlated with teaching satisfaction as well as the relationships between different types of teaching preparation and different teaching philosophies. These analyses address the question of the ideal preparation for religion teachers. The strategies of those schools that identify themselves as having the least trouble recruiting qualified candidates will be examined for lessons that might be applied by other schools.

RECONVENING THE FOCUS GROUP (AUGUST 2000)

Reconvening the focus group will take place after the initial data analysis and before the final report is written and published. The purpose of reconvening is to give the focus group the opportunity to study the survey results, recommend additional analysis, and offer direction for the final report with regard to future strategies for addressing the research findings. The focus group will also construct a timetable and protocol for dissemination of the research findings.

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS (2000-2001)

Dissemination of research findings and recommendations will occur through an NCEA publication as well as through presentations at the fall 2000 meeting of the Chief Administrators of Catholic Education (CACE) and the spring 2001 NCEA national convention. Dissemination will enable dioceses and Catholic higher education to collaborate better on future high school religion teacher recruitment, preparation, and retention.

CONCLUSION

As the Catholic school community looks to the future, a defining issue for measuring worth and effectiveness will be the quality of religious instruction and faith formation of students. Key players in this process are religion teachers. As the proportion of religious men and women religion teachers continues to shrink and as current lay teachers continue to age, a window of time exists to construct a proactive approach for the recruitment, preparation, and retention of future Catholic high school religion teachers. *The Next Generation: A Study of Catholic High School Religion Teachers* will supply

important data that will provide direction for recommendations designed to ensure that qualified teachers continue to staff Catholic high school religion classrooms for decades to come.

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Timothy J. Cook, Ph.D., is assistant professor in the Department of Education at Creighton University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Timothy J. Cook, Department of Education, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178.

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