

# 2008 CONFERENCE KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

*The three keynote speakers for this year's conference in London covered a range of topics that were all relevant to our lives as Catholic principals and vice-principals. We were immersed in youth culture, encouraged to embrace our faith tradition even more strongly and taken down a nostalgic road to relive the history of Catholic education. Max Valiquette, Archbishop Thomas Collins and Sean Conway, all left us with questions to ponder and actions to consider.*



**Max Valiquette**

Max Valiquette, an expert on youth culture and marketing was the opening keynote speaker. He is the founder and president of *Youthography*, Canada's leading youth-marketing consultancy. Max shared some of the research into Youth Culture and challenged us to bear this information in mind as we are running our schools.

The demographics of the youth culture are changing. The age group comprised of 10 to 29 year-olds makes up 27 per cent of the population in Ontario. Max spoke of the 4 X 5 factor. The population in the 10 to 29 year-old group divides into four equal 5-year cohorts. Our students are living in an era where home offers less. Eighty per cent of them come from families with only one or two children at home. This creates a greater reliance on friends. Sixty per cent of women are working outside of the home. This coupled with single-parent households means that many children are alone from after school until their parents get home from work.

Our students are entering adulthood activities earlier but actually getting to adulthood later. They are experiencing a prolonged pre-adult stage. Even our youngest students are *playing teenager* and being influenced by media.

He spoke about the *Big Six Youth Values*: relationships; communication; information; diversity; empowerment; and what sews them all together is technology. Wireless technology and the internet have had a huge impact in our world.

The internet has changed the way young people manage information. Adults tend to put information into folders and sub-folders in their Microsoft Outlook. Adults take information and sub-divide into smaller and smaller categories until they are satisfied that it is filed in the correct place. Young people leave everything in a pile. Google Search can find information faster than we can possibly find it through our organization systems. Imagine growing up in a time where the internet was always part of your life. This completely changes your relationship with information. Meanwhile, we should ask ourselves if our curriculum and school culture have changed to meet the needs and cultural traditions of our students.

## **Media in Transition**

Max Valiquette discussed looking at media, advertising and culture in aggregate, as there has never been such a huge shift in media habits as over the past decade. He spoke of the 3 C's of *Media*.

1. **Change** - Change is constant and regular in the form of rampant technological change. Young people manage this change better than adults do. Young people have on demand culture, which they navigate through their phones or through their computers. As technology has changed and improved, it has also dropped in price, making it more accessible. Apple has released seven new iPod models in five years.
2. **Charge** - Consumers are in charge of when and how they interact with media. Adults used to pay little attention to youth culture. Now baby boomers are paying attention to youth trends. The internet and digital culture have changed everything. Music, movies and TV shows are available on demand. There is a seemingly infinite choice of what to consume, when and how. Youth have a greater voice in the world, along with more power and more influence over the consumer market.
3. **Challenge** - Consumers challenge the traditional top-down model of cultural creation. Young people either directly create

culture or set trends that the corporate world replicates. Some of the most significant changes in youth culture were invented or distributed by young people. Who invented Google, Napster, MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and Blogging?

The implications of the 3 C's are that: Youth is in control. There is a convergence of culture that all comes back to the internet. There is an inordinate amount of choice for our students. Max Valiquette went on to say that, cultural barriers are dropping and left us with the challenge to keep up with our students. He suggested that schools need to change to adapt to the changing needs of students. Technology is critical to this change. Ask your most forward-thinking students where they see things going. He suggested holding a regular symposium with students by starting a focus group to figure out where they are and what is coming next.



**Archbishop  
Thomas Collins**

Archbishop Thomas Collins led us through a reflection based on this year's conference theme, *Sowing the Seeds of Faith*. His words served to celebrate and reflect on the role of the principal. He stated that leadership matters – really matters. Schools are shaped by the mind and heart of the principal. How are we called to sow the seeds of faith? Our schools need to be Christ-centred and we are called to spread the faith with the same zeal, fire and excitement that Jesus showed.

Archbishop Collins challenged us to know where we are. He suggested that we are in a providential time and we have to value the gift of Catholic education. We do not have the luxury of passivity and of watching the world go by as our Catholic education system is challenged. We need to concentrate our minds. A vision allows us to see the direction in which we are going and to focus our intentions.

Archbishop Collins spoke of four markers or principles that should guide us more effectively to sow seeds on fertile soil rather than on the rocks. We must focus our vision through the following lenses.

### **Life is a pilgrimage**

The Book of Exodus is rich in imagery of the Jews moving from slavery to freedom. On their journey they went through a purification in the desert. They finally crossed the river Jordan and entered into the Promised Land. This imagery is profoundly at the heart of teaching children and of Catholic education. We are caught up in our slavery – pride, anger, greed, laziness, lust, gluttony. We break through our sins with reconciliation. We need to take time on our pilgrimage to be purified on our journey through the desert of life. The way to the Promised Land will not be easy, but we are guided by our faith. We must learn from the tradition of those who have gone before us. What are the implications for our lives? We need to be patient and know that our journey takes time. We need to recognize our need for dependence on God and others. We need to understand our own weakness and where to find help. Our role as Catholic principals is to teach people to navigate through their pilgrimage of life and to act as a trustworthy guide.

### **Apocalyptic Vision - World is not all there is**

Our conscience navigating with accurate information provides the context of the journey. It provides a vision of the world beyond. Our gift of Faith gives us a sense of revelation of the greater context of life. Faith allows us to see reality in the context of a greater truth. We can become absorbed with things. The most important things are not always the most obvious. The apocalyptic revelation of our vision needs to be clarified. We must give accurate information and be truly caring to those trusted to our care. We must always be guided by principles, with a clear awareness of right and wrong. Archbishop Collins stated that there are two paths, life and death with a great difference in between. The key is to know where we are going.

### **Spirituality of Community**

We are not made to be isolated. The sign of the cross is a powerful symbol of the relationship of generous love with one another. The triad of parish, family and school is rooted in who we are – apostles gathered together. The meal is a great symbol of communion. Communion comes from being children of God. As Catholic leaders, we are called to reach out to people and draw them in because we are all children of God.

### **Sacramental Sense**

God acts and speaks to us in a human way. Archbishop Collins asked us to see God among us. God comes to us in many ways - the Word of God, Sacraments and relationships. Many signs in our schools lead us to God. The crucifixes are an outward sign, but Archbishop Collins called on us to enjoy the beauty of God among us through other signs. Art, music, literature, poetry and song all reflect the beauty of God. We need to proclaim this sacramental sense of our Faith by what we say and mostly by who we are.

Our lives are integrated into this sense of pilgrimage. Jesus is among us. Archbishop Collins concluded by saying, "We are meant to live an analog life in a digital world."



## Sean Conway

*Modern man listens  
more to witnesses.  
They listen to teachers  
if they are witnesses.  
Here is a witness and  
a sower of the seeds of  
modern education.*

This was our introduction to Sean Conway. He has had a distinguished career as a politician and a teacher. He is currently the special advisor for external relations to the principal of Queen's University in Kingston and is a Fellow in the School of Policy Studies. Born in Pembroke, Ontario Mr. Conway was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as a Liberal in 1975 at the age of 24 and for the next 28 years he represented Renfrew North.

Sean Conway began his keynote address with a reflection on the faith-based debate during the last provincial election. He described the debate as quite a significant development and a remarkable stirring of the past.

To set the context, he led us on a historical journey of the key decisions involving Catholic education in the province of Ontario. Sean Conway recommended that we read Robert Dixon's book, *History of Catholic Education in Ontario* to understand the full context of the faith-based debate. In Ontario, the waters of provincial politics are fairly quiet. Ontario citizens have a greater interest in national level politics than provincial. There is a politics of consensus and often a politics of contentment. Ontarians are almost placid. Sean Conway said that this explains why MPPs get away with what they do. On June 12, 1984 Ontario's Premier William G. Davis, announced the extension of funding to Grade 13 for Catholic high schools. Sean Conway noted that John Tory was principal secretary to Bill Davis at that time.


However, the liberal government of David Peterson was left to implement this change. As a member of David Peterson's government from 1985 to 1990, Sean Conway was appointed Minister of Education and Government House Leader. He was responsible for managing the government's legislation for full funding to Ontario's Roman Catholic separate schools. His grandfather Thomas Murray had championed this cause in the 1930s.

Sean Conway stated that the mixture of religion and politics are toxic. Other faith groups are looking for equity and justice. It is not a case of discrimination against Catholic education. They are looking for fairness. He asked us to consider the demographic change in Ontario and especially the GTA, where visible minorities make up 45 per cent of the population. We are living in a different demographic reality.

The faith-based debates were a surprise, not in the sense of equity and fairness, but in how quickly people jumped into the discussion. John Tory just wanted to do the right thing. Sean Conway felt that the election was over after the first week. However, voter turn out was at a historical low. What lessons should we learn from the debate? Religion in politics and public education based on past history is as controversial as it has ever been. Mr. Conway advised that 2008 requires a different accountability and to keep in mind how irrational and passionate this debate can be.

Sean Conway stated that Catholic education is not really in jeopardy, but advised us to be careful, to be prudent and to be inclusive. He advised us not to duplicate the public system. We have a distinctive mission and we must make our reality match our rhetoric. We are facing declining enrolment and as numbers decline people will look more closely. Creativity is born of adversity. Catholic ratepayers have the right to elect Catholic trustees. It is the right of those trustees to hire those that will reflect the beliefs of the system.

Sean Conway was asked if John Tory would have had the same reaction if he had supported one school system rather than extending funding to other faith groups. His response was that the parties (any of them) would have been split on that issue. He also commented that the minority protection of the right to Catholic education granted in the Constitution would never have been granted if they could foresee that Catholics would become the largest religious group.



Artwork by Dawn Greco

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