
the living light

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Religious Education/Catechesis
Artistic and Moral Dimensions of Teaching
Learning From Hispanics
A New Look at the NCDD

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A New Look at the NCDD: Past and Future

Neil Parent

The author narrates the shifting history of the National Conference of Diocesan Directors. Born in the years immediately following Vatican II, the Conference has always sought to promote collaboration and to provide a voice for diocesan-level religious educators. Parent recounts the major achievements of the Conference as well as the difficulties it has faced in the ever-changing world of religious education. The NCDD has existed independently of the United States Catholic Conference since 1982, and has reorganized its bylaws to expand membership eligibility and to enhance decision-making processes. The original purpose of the NCDD remains its guiding vision: to provide a forum that brings together the leadership responsible for advancing the mission of religious education/catechesis.

In the early months of 1991 two events occurred that had great significance for the National Conference of Diocesan Directors (NCDD). One was the funeral of John Russell in February; the other was the Annual Meeting of the NCDD held in Louisville in April. The first was an occasion to look back to the early days of the NCDD and its accomplishments; the second laid plans for the future.

Founder and First President

On February 1, 1991, John "Jack" Russell died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-four. By all accounts Jack was the founder and, in its formative years, the driving force of the National Conference of Diocesan Directors. He served both as its first president and its first execu-

tive secretary.¹ The Mass of Christian burial was celebrated February 5 at Good Shepherd Church in Mount Vernon, Virginia where he and his wife Theresese were parishioners and active with the parish's housing project for the poor. Several former officers of the Conference attended the funeral services and recalled the early years of the Conference.

From 1935 to 1966, diocesan directors of religious education were convened annually by the National Center for Religious Education/CCD.² Meanwhile, in accord with the vision of Vatican II, plans were underway to subsume the National Catholic Welfare Conference and several bishops' committees, including the Committee for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, into a new National Conference of Catholic Bish-

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- 1 Thomas E. Kramer and Robert Stamschror, "The NCDD at Ten," *The Living Light* 14:4 (Winter 1977): 612-13
 - 2 Actually, the first meeting of diocesan CCD directors took place in 1934. Some fifteen directors accepted the invitation of the chairman of the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Edwin V. O'Hara, then bishop of Great Falls, Montana, to attend the convention of the NCRLC in St. Paul. See Kramer and Stamschror, p. 610-11.

ops and its counterpart, the United States Catholic Conference. As the new structures were beginning to take shape, 125 diocesan directors attended the annual meeting held that year in New Orleans. A number of them expressed the view that the time had come for diocesan directors to have their own organization. Jack Russell, then diocesan director in Syracuse, New York, introduced a motion to form a national organization that would enable the diocesan directors to work together more effectively.

Russell's motion carried. Later that fall in Pittsburgh, at the National Catechetical Congress that was held every five years, a group of diocesan directors met with the Bishops' Committee for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine to seek their support. Speaking on behalf of the committee, the chairman, Archbishop Joseph McGucken of San Francisco, informed the diocesan directors that the bishops would welcome the new organization. With that approval and encouragement in hand, the diocesan directors established the structure for the National Conference and elected Jack Russell as president.

For the first couple of years, Russell was able to handle the affairs from his diocesan office in Syracuse, but as the Conference grew it soon became evident that a full-time executive was needed. The NCCB/USCC agreed to have the NCDD locate its headquarters in Washington, and Msgr. Russell Neighbor, Director of the National Center for Religious Education—CCD, provided an annual subsidy to help support the office of an executive-secretary.

The first official program of the new organization was "Project Community,"

Jack Russell's own brainchild. It called for leaders in dioceses—those from schools, religious education, campus ministry, etc.—to collaborate for the sake of building up the local church community. At the time of Russell's funeral, Charles "Mickey" McDonald, who succeeded him as executive director, recalled, "That was Jack's great gift; he tried to get people to work together. Jack communicated deep warmth and intense feeling for people. Without those leadership qualities, I'm not sure we could have founded the National Conference of Diocesan Directors."

The First Ten Years

In 1977 two former executive-secretaries, Thomas E. Kramer (1973-76) and Robert P. Stamschror (1976-79), reflected on the first ten years of the NCDD. Beginning with Project Community, the National Conference encouraged planning and collaboration among the directors on diocesan and regional levels, regular meetings with the bishops of each respective province, and cooperation with other pastoral ministers. These concerns are reflected in the themes of the early meetings of the NCDD. The Conference commissioned a number of research and resource papers to identify issues and assist directors in confronting the changing religious education scene. A sampling of the topics includes "Total Religious Education," "Family Religious Education," "Evaluation of Religious Education Programs," "Motivating Adults for Religious Education," and "The Role of the Parish Priest in Catechetical Ministry." Examples of special projects funded by the Conference include a survey of rural high school CCD youth and a filmstrip to use in baptismal preparation of Native

Americans. In these early years the NCDD awarded grants of \$5000 to the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio and the National Office of Black Catholics in Washington, DC.

The NCDD played a major role in the long consultation process that contributed to the National Catechetical Directory, *Sharing the Light of Faith*. Approximately eighty percent of the individuals responsible for coordinating the consultations at the diocesan level were members of the NCDD. William A. Wassmuth, director in Boise, Idaho, both chaired the National Directory Committee and served as president of the NCDD in the years that the project was coming to fruition (1977-78).

The Decade of the Eighties

In 1980 the NCDD opened full membership to diocesan staff personnel who share in the administrative and service functions of the director. Until then, only the director of a diocesan office could be a full member. Later on, it opened full membership to diocesan directors of adult education and extended affiliate membership to vicars of education, thus expanding the membership base while continuing the focus on diocesan officials.

The 1980s were productive years for the NCDD, especially in terms of resource development. The Conference published sixteen monographs dealing with topics that ranged widely, from the role of the diocesan religious education office, to adult religious education in the Hispanic Community, to developing a parish plan for family catechesis. The National Conference conducted a major project on textbook evaluation. The marketing of catechist pins and award certificates served the dual purpose of

offering a service to NCDD members and at the same time generating funds to help subsidize its expanding operations. As the decade ended, NCDD began publishing the *Adult Faith Journal*. Used in a variety of religious education and other settings, the *Journal* invites the reader to reflect in writing on the Sunday readings.

NCDD's desire to collaborate with other organizations is best illustrated by its taking the lead in forming a coalition of national organizations to study wages and benefits for lay and religious Church employees. NCDD identified the need for such a study and secured a major grant from the Lilly Endowment to carry it out. Nearly twenty national organizations were represented on the project's steering committee. The final report of the study was made public in August, 1990. Each bishop was sent a copy of the project's findings and recommendations.

Also in the closing years of the decade, through another Lilly Endowment grant, NCDD launched research for the development of the parish DRE Perceiver Instrument. Developed by Selection Research Incorporated of Lincoln, Nebraska, the instrument enables diocesan directors of religious education to accurately assess the aptitudes of people for work as parish DREs. The first training for the instrument was conducted in April, 1991.

In the mid-80s NCDD was a sponsoring partner in the National Project on Adult Learning and the Parish. It was also one of three organizations leading a coalition of twenty others on the Catholic Education Futures Project. The first phase of that project culminated with a national symposium at the University of

Dayton in May, 1988. In 1989, NCDD was highly involved in responding to a draft of the Catechism for the Universal Church. Its response, along with those of the NCEA and the USCC Department of Education, were later incorporated into the report prepared by the bishops' Administrative Board.

Reorganization and Change

For all its achievements and services, the NCDD has not always had smooth sailing. The directors themselves and their staffs continued to support the National Conference as it was forced to work out a new relationship with the NCCB/USCC, move its headquarters, and reorganize its structure.

In 1974 the bishops decided to dissolve the National Center of Religious Education—CCD, discontinuing some of its activities and assigning the remainder to the USCC's Department of Education. The decision was made without considering the impact on the National Conference of Diocesan Directors, which had developed a healthy partnership with the Center. Charles McDonald, who in 1972 had moved from his position as executive secretary of the NCDD to become Director of the National Center, worked in close collaboration with Thomas Kramer, his successor.

Meeting in Spokane that October, the NCDD Board passed a resolution that described the decision as harmful to the cause of religious education in the country and called for the USCC to reconsider its intentions. At that same meeting, however, the Board also accepted, pending ratification of the members, an offer from the National Catholic Educa-

tion Association (NCEA) to join it as a member organization. Before that decision took effect, however, Bishop James S. Rausch, General Secretary of the NCCB/USCC, and Msgr. Thomas Leonard, Associate Secretary for Education, communicated their strong desire that NCDD remain at the USCC.

Consequently, the NCCB/USCC Administrative Board passed a resolution in November, 1974, reaffirming its position that NCDD properly belonged with the USCC. A month later, December 18, Bishop Rausch outlined a new relationship between NCDD and USCC. In the proposed arrangement, the NCDD executive secretary would serve part time for NCDD and part time for the Department of Education, and the president of NCDD would serve *ex officio* on the bishops' Committee on Education. NCDD accepted the proposal, which took effect January 1, 1975.³

The issue of NCDD's place at the USCC surfaced again five years later. In 1980, the Department of Education was facing yet another major reorganization, and this time both the national offices of the Diocesan Directors and the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO)—also housed in the Department of Education—were on the chopping block. Concerned anew about the prospects of leaving the USCC, NCDD President Nick Rice and other Conference officials met with Bishop Thomas Kelly, NCCB/USCC General Secretary, and with Msgr. Thomas Leonard, now an Associate General Secretary. In October, 1980, Rev. Thomas Gallagher, the department's new Secretary of Education, attended the NCDD Board meeting

3 For some negative effects of this reorganization, see Berard L. Marthaler, "The Rise and Decline of the CCD," *Chicago Studies* 29 (April 1990): 12-13.

in Plymouth, Massachusetts, to discuss the reasons for the reevaluation of the current structural arrangements between the two organizations. Months went by as the Bishops' Committee for Plans and Priorities considered various reorganization models. Finally on March 31, 1981, Bishop Kelly wrote President Nick Rice, informing him that the bishops' Administrative Board had voted to end the structural relationship between NCDD and USCC. The CYO was similarly affected.

A very disappointed NCDD eventually reached an agreement with the USCC whereby it could remain at the USCC until June 1, 1982, to allow both for a smooth transition and for Executive Secretary Rev. David Beebe to complete his term.

With the formal severing of the ties between USCC and NCDD, NCEA once again invited the NCDD to join it. A number of meetings were held with NCEA officials, but the NCDD Board decided that the decision must come from the members. They were presented with three options: (1) to exist as an independent organization; (2) to exist as a subdivision of NCEA; or (3) to exist as a participant in a collaborative relationship with other national groups concerned with Church renewal and pastoral ministry. At the annual meeting in Los Angeles, April 18 - 22, 1982, the membership voted in favor of the first option. Sister Susanne Hofweber, OP, was chosen as the executive secretary of the newly independent organization.

On June 1, 1982, the NCDD and the CYO left the USCC and opened a shared office in northeast Washington. The CYO later reorganized itself into the National Federation for Catholic Youth

Ministry (NFCYM) and found separate office space to attend to its growing needs.

New Bylaws

At its October 1988 meeting in Oklahoma City, the NCDD Board set in motion a process to revise the organization's bylaws. Although it had severed formal ties with the USCC six years earlier, the basic structures and operational procedures of the National Conference of Diocesan Directors had remained essentially the same as before the separation. The Board therefore appointed a special task force to reexamine the bylaws and explore ways to enhance the Conference's effectiveness in the rapidly changing field of religious education.

The NCDD Board had originally set April, 1992 as the target date for the task force to report, but practical considerations dictated that the process be accelerated. When Michael Liberato resigned as executive secretary in the fall of 1990, an occasion presented itself to redefine (and rename) that position. Further, a new slate of officers was set to take over the annual meeting in April, 1991. The Board, therefore, recommended that the Conference discuss and take action on the proposed bylaws at that time so that the new officers could begin implementing the structures and operational procedures without delay.

The new bylaws create the position of executive director to replace that of executive secretary. According to Don Kurre, who chaired the task force, the new structures build on the recognized strengths of the NCDD while introducing features that will enable it to respond more readily to changing circumstances. "The most significant feature of the new

bylaws," Kurre reported, "is the introduction of a General Assembly; a forum that enables the membership to endow the Conference with both vision and energy. Matters of finances, policy formulation and other Conference governance issues are left to a smaller, more task-specific Board. This should enhance the Conference's decision-making processes considerably."

Another significant feature in the new bylaws is the expansion of the membership. Representatives of diocesan organizations of parish DREs and other professional groups that have a specific religious education mission are eligible for membership. Diocesan vicars and secretaries of education, classified as associate members in the old structure, may now enjoy full membership. The broadening of the NCDD's membership base reaffirms one of the original purposes of the NCDD, namely, to provide a forum that brings together the leadership responsible for advancing the mission of religious education/catechesis.⁴

The expanded membership is an acknowledgment of the gradual change that has become a quiet revolution in Catholic religious education in the U.S. When the National Conference of Diocesan Directors was organized in 1969, all but one of the diocesan directors was a priest. Today, only ten percent of the membership are priests. Lay women account for 34.5 percent, women religious for 33 percent, lay men for 21.5 percent, and brothers for 1 percent. Clearly, this is an organization whose membership has changed dramatically over the past two decades, reflecting evolving condi-

tions not only in the ministry itself but also in church leadership. In the early years, when the NCDD had official status under the umbrella of the USCC, it reflected an attitude that religious education/catechesis was chiefly, if not solely, the responsibility of the hierarchy. To a large extent the new bylaws symbolize the general perception, encouraged by the bishops themselves, that the educational ministry of the Church takes many forms and is the responsibility of all the faithful.

The challenges facing religious educators in the 1990s are immense. Some bishops and lay organizations with their own agenda voice doubts about the value of the religious education enterprise, lamenting the passing of old structures and methods. The NCDD, for its part, cites significant advances in adult religious education. It is cautious in making claims of success across the board, but the NCDD has done more than wring its hands in addressing the needs of unprecedented numbers of Catholic children and youth, said to be eighty percent, who do not attend parochial schools. Even so, the 1990s cannot be a time of apportioning blame or defensive posturing. On the contrary, the leadership in religious education/catechetics must move forward with renewed energy and vision.

The success stories are there. But they must be discovered, proclaimed, and replicated for the benefit of greater numbers. The NCDD places high priority on collaboration among all engaged in pastoral ministry so that the best talents and strengths of the Church can be brought to the fore.

4 For more on the bylaws see the NCDD newsletter, *Focus* 3:2 (March 1991).