

Reflection Paper

IPL Ministry Course #1

By Darcie Lich

I tend to be rather enthusiastic and effusive, so to say that I have been absolutely loving this course and that I am eagerly anticipating the next one is my best attempt at self-restraint. (Otherwise, this entire paper would be replete with exclamation marks and would likely become very tiresome reading.) I am so very grateful for this opportunity to learn about the history, culture, and spirituality of my Indigenous friends and neighbours, but even more importantly, I am grateful for the opportunity to learn *from* and *with* them. This has been such an enriching experience.

My reasons for participating in this course came from a deep desire not only to grow in relationship with the Indigenous members of my community, but also to heed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action in an authentic and meaningful way. While I cannot undo the actions of my ancestors, my country, or my Church, I can commit to doing my part to restore and heal broken relationships. To a certain extent, it has not been particularly difficult to do so in an educational context – there are more and more opportunities engage in this every day, due in large part to the tremendous work of the incredible First Nations / Métis Education team in our division. But that work is not, and should not be, theirs alone to do. My job is to accept their invitation to learn, and then use that knowledge to inform my own practices not only as a teacher and administrator, but also as a parent and a responsible member of the larger community as well.

However, to say that these were my sole reasons for participating in this course would not be entirely truthful. My work as the Coordinator of Religious Education for our school division

puts me in a uniquely difficult position. As an administrator, my job is to ensure that all of our school division's resources and instructional practices are consistent with our faith and obedient to the teaching of the Magisterium. At the same time, the Ministry of Education requires that schools infuse all subject areas with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) content – Religious Education is no exception. When Catholic parents take issue with the inclusion of things like Smudging or Medicine Wheels in our schools, I am the one who gets the angry phone calls. Sadly, some members of our community feel that FNMI content (other than mere history) has no place in a subject area they consider to be fundamentally sacrosanct, much less in our schools. Bound by obligations to both Church and State, I find myself in a place where I must continually justify and defend the incorporation of First Nations practices and ceremony into Catholic faith-based education. Time and again, we are accused of teaching things that are contrary to our Catholic faith, and time and again I have to explain that these are acceptable within the context of Catholic education. Confirmation bias being what it is, I can easily justify a Smudge in our schools by finding the right articles online, while conveniently overlooking the ones that disagree. And, to a certain extent, I know what is allowable – but mostly just because I am aware of many priests and bishops (some of whom are good friends of mine) who openly participate in things like Sweats, or pray the Great Amen in the Four Directions. Truthfully, my ace in the hole is “Well, Bishop Mark does it. Bishop Sylvain does it. Bishop Murray does it. Archbishop Don does it. If it's ok for them, it's ok by me.”

But that really is not enough. I want to know precisely why they feel these things are permissible, or even encouraged. I want to know how and in what manner we can walk on the road of enculturation before we take a step too far. Where do we cross the line? Why *is*

participating in a Smudge ok? Can we teach about Spirit Animals? If we have a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a school chapel, can we also have a Medicine Wheel?

And so, I came to this program hoping that it might help me find some of the answers. I came seeking solid *“this is ok, this is not ok, and this is why”* boundaries and lots of *“Ah, I get it now”* moments. Within the first fifteen minutes, though, it seemed apparent that I was not going to be getting that from this course. I was briefly disappointed but, as in a Medicine Wheel, I progressed from Visioning to Understanding, and it became clear to me that before I could truly know the ‘whys’ that I came looking for, I needed to know the ‘who’. There really is no way to understand the actions, the customs, or the ceremonies without first seeking to understand the people, the culture, and the spirituality from which they come. My focus shifted, and my interest was piqued.

As we learned together week after week, I found myself moving gradually through Understanding to Reasoning. I was able to appreciate the beauty of relationships and Ways of Knowing, I began piecing together commonalities and identifying differences, and I recognized ways in which our spiritualities and even our theologies were compatible.

As we approach the end of our first course, my progress through the parts of the Medicine Wheel brings me to a place of Moving Forward. And it is not merely a movement from Course One to Course Two. I realize that I have begun a journey that calls me to a deeper understanding of people, not just concepts, and that I need to keep going. Prior to this course, I did not necessarily consider myself to be well-educated regarding Indigenous peoples, but I was at least “woke” (before this term was weaponized, anyway). Reflecting on the course content and my own personal growth, I recognize that I have learned much more than I had expected to

(though not what I was expecting to learn). But I am also humbled by just how much I really do not know.

This is only the beginning. I have more to learn, and I feel that it can no longer be merely ‘incidental’ learning that happens through Professional Development modules that I am expected to take or curricular expectations that need to be integrated into lessons. This needs to be purposeful, deliberate learning which is motivated by a sincere desire to understand, rather than just for the purposes of defending teachers from angry Catholic parents.

My goals have changed. Now, when I reach the end of this program, I want to do more than just be able to point out to others the ways in which we can safely stay inside the “Catholic sandbox” while incorporating First Nations practices and Ways of Knowing. Rather, I want others to see what working toward restored relationship looks like, what cooperation, integration, and enculturation – not just tolerance – looks like, and what understanding and solidarity look like. And I want them to be inspired and intrigued enough to join me as the journey continues.