

Catholic community helps map out COVID-19 present and future

Six months into the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) we've seen the good, the bad and everything in between.

Amid anxiety and fear, there have been acts of selflessness and greater connection that have left a big impact.

Andrea Harrison, a Sherwood Park mom and school bus driver, leaves messages of hope for students on her route. On chalk boards, she wrote messages for each student. One said "Choose joy", "You're important" or "You are loved" and still another said "Have faith".

Families are creating their own time for prayer when they can't attend public Mass. High River parish volunteers help families impacted by an outbreak at a meat-packing plant. And still others reach out to the elderly and lonely, and to the health workers on the front lines of the pandemic.

It's into the COVID-19 maelstrom that the bishops of Alberta and the Northwest Territories have released a [Sept. 14 pastoral letter](#) outlining key principles of Catholic social teaching.

While pastoral letters are teaching documents, this one has an added, unprecedented, dimension.



Andrea Harrison has written personal messages of home to the kids on her school bus route. Lincoln Ho, Grandin Media

[Over the next seven weeks, Grandin Media is hosting weekly virtual discussions on themes referenced in the letter](#) – the inherent dignity of human life, the importance of the family, individual rights and social responsibilities, vulnerability and solidarity, responsibility for the common good, healthy use of information technologies and the value of dignity of human work.

The first panel discussion will be posted on Sept. 21 and each Monday afterwards.

The panelists, assembled from the dioceses of [Edmonton](#), [Calgary](#), [Grouard-McLennan](#), [St. Paul](#) and [Mackenzie-Fort Smith](#), include top experts in their fields and in the Catholic community. Among them are Patrick Dumelie and Troy Davies, the CEOs of [Covenant Health](#) and [Catholic Social Services](#) respectively, national [Catholic Women's League](#) president-elect Fran Lucas and Sr. Lucinda Patterson, the chair of the [Lurana](#) women's shelter in Edmonton.

"What's beautiful about this approach, I find, is that it mixes teaching with story," Archbishop Smith said. "And there are loads of stories coming out of the pandemic ... My hope is that it's going to be the impulse for people to ponder their own lived experience and say 'How is the teaching of the Church helping me here and how can I can work with the teaching of the Church to help others?'"

"It is new. It is sort of breaking ground," added Calgary Bishop William McGrattan. "Maybe this is a risk presenting a pastoral statement in this way, but I think it's one that's well worth taking especially when we're faced with COVID and how it's affecting our world and our Church."

The big question: How has COVID-19 changed society and can the positive changes be sustained?

"The initial response to the pandemic had the world living by the principles of Catholic social teaching without knowing it," said Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith. "It has turned the world upside down, inside out. It has left a lot of people hanging by a thread, a lot of people anxious and worried."

"We just always seem to be needing wake-up calls. The beauty of Catholic social teaching is that, yes it's grounded in the Gospel, at the same time it also arises out of the truth of what it means to be a human being."

Bishop McGrattan said he hopes the pastoral letter, and the panel discussions, will be used in high schools and internationally among those tasked with the same post-COVID response at the Vatican.

Already, local social justice committees in the Calgary Diocese have said they want to form study groups.

"We're not saying we have all the answers, but we want to we want to raise up for them areas of further reflection and dialogue," Bishop McGrattan said.

“It’s not to focus on what’s wrong, but what do we need to change and what do we see as essential and important in a just society.”



Andrea Harrison says the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of her family, both on and off the bus. Courtesy of Andrea Harrison

Andrea Harrison says the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all of her family, both on and off the bus.

“My oldest said ‘You’re a better bus driver than a teacher, Mom!,’” Harrison said, reflecting on the months of online learning from home. “There were times where we fought. I would fight with the kids. They would fight back. When you’re living in a house and you can’t really leave, the confined spaces get to you.”

Harrison said she went through a “dark period” when she couldn’t be as involved. She started volunteering to buy groceries and talk to seniors who were shut in and worried. Now she’s helping to assuage fears of kids with messages of hope – “You are loved”, “Have faith” for example – on her bus.

“The kids, I really feel, got the short end of the stick with COVID because as adults we had the freedom to go out and leave the house,” Harrison said. “The kids were taken out of school. They were taken away from their friends. They were told to home school. Your mom went from the person who scares the bogeyman away to telling you to sit down and do your math. The whole world changed.”

Upon learning they were returning to school, the kids on her route were so

happy, they cried.

“I hope they realize that even one word can make you feel better. These kids, really, their whole world is turned upside down so I’m hoping they can see that we still care enough about them to make them to try to make them happy.”

“There are some days that I feel grateful, and there are other days when I’m mad at everything,” Harrison said. “It was a big struggle to learn to deal with the emotions. But I want the world to say ‘We came together. Let’s stay together. Let’s stop pushing each other away’.

“We’re going through hell and back right now,” Harrison said. “I hope that people will remember that during the pandemic we did stop and help each other, that we did become a community again. I hope we can still stay in that mind frame where we are all in this together. We can get through it together.”

The bishops themselves each have their own stories about the impact of COVID-19.

For Archbishop Smith, it’s the training he and a team of priests received to provide the sacraments to COVID patients even at personal risk, the “unforgettable” image of an empty St. Peter’s Square when Pope Francis called the Church to a Eucharistic holy hour. For Bishop McGrattan it was the opportunity to baptize a newborn boy – the only one in the family who wasn’t wearing mask.



Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Calgary Bishop William McGrattan baptized baby Rome Neufeldt, seen with his parents Jon and Rianna and sisters Grace and Azelie. Courtesy of the Neufeldt family

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only changed the lives of the laity, but it's affecting the Church itself.

"There are parts of the Church, there are parts of our experience of our own lives, where we have to allow God to prune," Bishop McGrattan said. "I do see that we are going to be asked to prune but it's done so that in some ways there's the opportunity for the vine to bring forth greater fruit. And that I think is what the Church is going to be going through after COVID."

The bishops say the COVID-19 pandemic marks a watershed moment, and the pastoral letter and panel discussions can help initiate those conversations on what society will look like.

"I don't think we're going to go back, but I do know the influence of secularization and the desire to go back to what was, will be strong," Bishop McGrattan said. "However, I do believe that people of faith and those that are beginning to see a new way through COVID are going to say 'No. There is a new path. There is a new beginning. And we need to take that into consideration.'"

"When you're alert to danger, everything comes instantly into focus, what is

most important, what I need the most,” Archbishop Smith said. “Here what we’ve seen is we need others. We need the collective. We need the community. We need God.”

[Bishops offer reflection on COVID and the call to Christian renewal](#)