

Faithful Companions of Jesus mark two centuries of dedication to education

You can teach a lot – and learn a lot – over 200 years.

When Sister Michelle Langlois stands up to teach her Edmonton junior high students, she's standing on the shoulders of Faithful Companions of Jesus Sisters who have been educators for two centuries.

The FCJ Sisters were instrumental in founding and developing Alberta's Catholic school system. And today, they are ready to face current challenges head on, including adjusting to their own changing roles.



Sister Michelle Langlois

"I feel that sense of connection to the sisters who came before me and helped found the school system," said Langlois, who has served as a teacher and chaplain at St. Thomas More school for three years.

"I do feel like the sisters have a special place in Edmonton and Alberta."

In 2020, the congregation will mark two centuries of dedication to education, particularly among underprivileged and marginalized girls around the world. On April 26, 2020, Edmonton Archbishop Richard Smith will celebrate Mass in honour of the FCJ bicentenary.

"When you think of the sisters at that time, could they have imagined where we are today? It's like night and day when you look at where religious life has come from and where it's going," said Sister Langlois, who at 44 is one of the youngest FCJ Sisters and just renewed her vows for another three years.



Venerable Marie Madeleine D'Houet

What attracted her to the Faithful Companions of Jesus was a kinship to its founder, the Venerable Marie Madeleine D'Houet. A widow with a young son, she saw the lack of education, unemployment and other social challenges in post-Industrial Revolution France, and was inspired to find solutions. She founded the Faithful Companions of Jesus congregation on Holy Thursday, March 30, 1820.

"She, like me, didn't come to religious life until later on," Sister Langlois said. "She was married and had a child. For me, I had taught, I had a house, I had relationships. I had lived a lot of life before religious life factored in any decision. She continued to hear God's call. She developed an intimate relationship with Jesus; as the path unfolds, only He knows where we'll end up."

Following that path led the FCJ Sisters to Alberta more than 130 year ago. They are woven into the fabric of the province's history. They founded schools throughout Alberta and in Calgary, they established the FCJ Retreat and Conference Centre.



In Edmonton, FCJ Sisters were the first teachers in Catholic schools. They founded the city's first Catholic school, St. Joachim, in 1888 and helped establish the separate school district. They were teachers or administrators at schools throughout the city including, St. Mary's, Sacred Heart, Mount Carmel, Grandin, St. Joseph's, St. Catherine's, and Archbishop MacDonald high school.

Mother Margaret Mary High School's namesake was an FCJ. Mother Mary was the first woman religious to attend the University of Alberta and the first to graduate with a master's degree in 1916. She was the first female Catholic high school administrator in Edmonton and she taught for 50 years.

Sister Pat Halpin was the religious education consultant for Edmonton Catholic Schools. Sister Xavier Chollak taught at J.H. Picard school, and sisters also served as pastoral ministers and catechists. They have also been involved in the Archdiocese of Edmonton, as well as in adult education, school board administration, Eucharistic ministers to the sick, and in social development.

Sister Elizabeth Poilievre is a retreat leader and the spiritual director at St. Joseph's College. She has been an FCJ Sister since 1977. Trained as a teacher, she recalls her own decision to join the Faithful Companions of Jesus. She was a parishioner at St. Mary's Cathedral in Calgary, working a "boring job," when she was invited to spend a weekend with the FCJ Sisters.

"I was told there will be other young women there ... There weren't any other young women there!" she laughs. "When I left on Sunday afternoon and I was

walking home, I felt myself singing. And I said 'Hmm, I think that's where I want to be.' They just seemed to be genuine and joyful and very accepting."



Sister Elizabeth Poilievre is a retreat leader and spiritual director at St. Joseph's College. Andrew Ehrkamp, Grandin Media

Today the Faithful Companions of Jesus face declining vocations from a peak period prior to the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

"In France, we have two French sisters left," Sister Poilievre said. "They haven't had vocations in France for years and years and years, and yet that's where we were founded. We may die out here in Alberta but we may hopefully

spring up in other parts of the world and be present there. The world is changing.”

Sister Poilievre said young women are attracted to the structure of a religious community, including wearing a habit – which the FCJ Sisters don’t. At the same time, “it’s not only the structure. It’s a whole way of living and being. That’s what we hope attracts young women to us.”

As older sisters retire from active ministry, there are few younger women to replace them. There are five in Edmonton, and 20 altogether in Alberta. Internationally, Sister Poilievre noted there are 175 to 180 FCJ Sisters with vocations particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines.

One reason for the decline is that young women who are committed to the same mission as the FCJ Sisters have lots of options.

“You don’t have to be a sister to do what we do,” Poilievre said. “You can go and help the poor in Africa and not be a sister.”

Sister Langlois adds: “When you look at the culture today, commitment is not a big sell right now. There are so many options.”

The Faithful Companions of Jesus itself has a growing number of lay associates called Companions in Mission. There are an estimated 15 in Edmonton and Calgary. Sister Poilievre said the program started about two decades ago in response to dwindling numbers. It was an effort to attract lay people who were interested in the charism of the FCJs, and they come from all types of backgrounds.

“We have women who have been nurses, and now they can continue nursing. Some are secretaries and their skills are used – just a wide variety of ministries now, because education is taken in the broad sense” including retreat work, Poilievre said. “We can go to places and sense God there and bring that to consciousness with people. That’s what our life is all about really.”

“They carry that charism into their workplaces, where we don’t. The way religious life is lived now may not necessarily be how it’s lived in the future. All religious congregations are kind of aware of that and we’re trying to be open to that, whatever that means.”

So what is the future of the Faithful Companions of Jesus? Will they be around for another 200 years?

“We are hopeful,” Sister Poilievre said. “Nothing is impossible with God. Our founders used to always say, ‘God has done everything. I was only an instrument and a poor instrument at that.’”