

[NTC's Carr Award recipient Mike Paonessa lives his faith through action](#)

Mike Paonessa visits the Edmonton Remand Centre every week to pray the rosary with inmates, and drives around the inner-city Boyle Street neighbourhood to provide coffee and food to the needy.

To Paonessa, it's Christian leadership – living out the faith with action.

"We can talk about (the faith), we can read about it, we can study it, we can do all that part of it. But unless we live it and it's a part of what we do in our lives, it doesn't make a whole lot of difference," said Paonessa, the deputy superintendent for [Evergreen Catholic Schools](#) in Spruce Grove.

Paonessa is being recognized as this year's recipient of the [Kevin Carr Christian Leadership Award](#). He will receive the award, named after Newman Theological College's first lay president, in October.

It's recognition he appreciates, but finds unsettling.

"I'm not the type of person that goes looking for the limelight. I like to do my work in the background, so it's a little bit odd for me," Paonessa said, but "I'm happy and honoured to have been recognized."

While he feels blessed by the honour, he said he can't take all the credit.

"I'm not just receiving this because of what I do, but of all the people that support me too."

A veteran educator, Paonessa has served as teacher, vice-principal, and administrator for more than 30 years.

As deputy superintendent, he led the Evergreen School division's indigenous education projects and its response to the calls of action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Last year he led the collection of 7,500 pairs of new underwear that were given out to homeless and needy people at the Uplift Day of Mercy sponsored by Catholic Social Services. He also organized the collection of chocolate bars for the Edmonton Remand Centre inmates at Christmas.

Paonessa said praying with the inmates is personally fulfilling.

"I'm very clear with them when I sit with them, 'You've made some bad choices, but that doesn't mean you're bad people.' So I'm here to help support them and

anything I can do, hopefully, will help them.”

He also demonstrates faith in action by handing out coffee, muffins and sandwiches to the poor and homeless in inner-city Edmonton.

St. Teresa of Calcutta, who founded the Missionaries of Charity to serve the poor, sick and dying in the slums of Calcutta, India, is a role model.



Mike Paonessa
Chris Berthelot, Grandin Media

“There’s this great quote from Mother Teresa, ‘Calcutta is right here, in our families, in our communities, in our schools,’ so we certainly can’t forget that,” Paonessa said.

Evergreen Catholic Schools Superintendent Cindi Vaselenak, one of his nominators for the Kevin Carr Award, said Paonessa embodies the best in Christian leadership, witness and community engagement.

“Mike has been, since the day he got here, an exceptional Catholic role model,” Vaselenak said. “He’s very comfortable speaking about his faith and sharing his faith experience, and he responds from a faith perspective.”

Paonessa was born in Italy and came to Canada at age 5. He inherited his family’s strong faith, becoming an altar server shortly after moving to Canada. While in university, he taught catechism lessons.

“My wife (Rosie) always bugs me, because when we got married as we walked up to do our marriage, the first thing the priest said was, ‘I didn’t think I’d see you, I always thought you were going to go to the seminary!’” said Paonessa, an active member of St. Charles Parish in Edmonton.

News of the Kevin Carr Award came as a surprise, he said, in a call from Jason West, president of Newman Theological College. They both play key roles in EXCEL, the Excellence in Catholic Leadership Academy. It's a joint program between Evergreen, St. Thomas Aquinas, and Elk Island Catholic school divisions and Newman, to help school staff develop their leadership skills in Catholic education.

Vaselenak said: "The amount of (staff) that have formal education – whether it be masters or more courses that are faith based – or understanding of what Catholic leadership is, has greatly improved. Mike's behind a lot of the work of that."

All three of Paonessa's children have followed his example by becoming teachers.

The Kevin Carr Award began in 2004, and previous winners include retreat leader [Sandra Prather](#), Catholic journalist Glen Argan and [Douglas Roche](#), the former senator and disarmament ambassador.