

ARTICLES

TOWARD THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF CATHOLIC HIGH SCHOOL RELIGION TEACHERS: AN ASSESSMENT OF RELIGION TEACHING AS A PROFESSION

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This article assesses religion teaching as a profession in terms of selected characteristics that scholars agree are common to all professions. The characteristics that are addressed include essential service, call to serve, special knowledge and skills, specialized and advanced university training, public trust and status, code of ethics and performance standards, and professional organization. The research suggests that religion teaching satisfies two of the seven selected characteristics, namely essential service and call to serve, but does not fully satisfy the other five. The main conclusion drawn is that steps must be taken to professionalize religion teaching. To that end, recommendations include the further development of a professional association for religion teachers, credentialing standards, and a certification/licensing scheme.

INTRODUCTION

Teacher shortages are impacting American schools. Because the nation focuses on shortages in subjects that affect all public and private schools such as science, math, and Spanish, it is easy to overlook the shortage of religion teachers that is affecting Catholic high schools (Cook & Fraynd, 1999). One might say that the dearth of qualified religion teachers is an invisible shortage.

How severe is the religion teacher shortage? Shortages have emerged as a result of the dramatic decline of vowed religious and clergy serving as Catholic high school religion teachers. Since 1985 their numbers have been roughly halved, dropping from 42% (Yeager, Benson, Guerra, & Manno, 1985) to 24% (Guerra, 1998). This turn of events has increased the demand

for lay religion teachers. As a result of a recent national survey of Catholic high school administrators and religion teachers, Cook (2001b) concludes that the current shortage of qualified religion teachers is critical and will not turn around soon. In that survey, an overwhelming 86% of administrators responded that there are too few qualified religion teacher candidates in their geographical area. As for the future, 40% of the religion teachers indicated that they plan to cease teaching religion within 5 years.

Why is the shortage of qualified religion teachers a concern? The religion program is central to the educational mission of Catholic schools: "The special character of the Catholic school and the underlying reason for its existence, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the overall education of the students" (John Paul II, as cited in Congregation for Catholic Education [CCE], 1988, §66). A shortage of qualified religion teachers threatens the quality of the religion program and cuts to the heart of the Catholic school's very reason for existing.

The changing composition of religion faculties coupled with the resulting teacher shortage serve as compelling reasons to examine the current situation and make recommendations for the future. Cook (2001b, 2003) recommends that to improve recruitment, preparation, and retention of religion teachers, we must professionalize religion teaching. Educational research strongly suggests that enhancing professional stature and raising professional standards are keys to recruiting and retaining quality teachers and alleviating teacher shortages (Boe & Gilford, 1992; Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; O'Keefe, 2001).

Building on the recommendation to professionalize religion teaching, the purpose of this article is to assess religion teaching as a profession in terms of selected characteristics that scholars agree are common to all professions. The article concludes with a discussion of the status of religion teaching as a profession that includes recommendations for the further professionalization of religion teachers. At the outset, it is important to note that although religion teaching is a ministry, in addition to being a profession, the focus of this article is on the professional aspects of this ministry.

TEACHING RELIGION AS PROFESSION AND MINISTRY

Teaching religion is arguably both a ministry and a profession. Exploring both claims is central to this research. Thus, two sections follow. First, religion teaching as a ministry within the Church; second, the professional aspects of this ministry in relation to the teaching profession in general with a focus on the teaching profession's drive toward professionalization. This

section ends with a treatment of selected characteristics of a profession that will be used in the assessment of religion teaching as a profession.

Before exploring the contours of religion teaching as a profession, it is first necessary to situate the discussion within the context of ministry. This approach becomes especially important when one juxtaposes the dramatic growth in the percentage of lay religion teachers with the relative newness and evolving nature of the Church's modern understanding of lay ministry. According to Scripture, each Christian has a vocation or mission in life to follow Jesus (Eph. 4: 7-16). Yet, for centuries, terms such as "ministry," "vocation," and "apostolate" were synonymous with priesthood and religious life (Osborne, 1993). Vatican II (1962-1965) broadened the discussion once again to include the laity. This discussion has continued since then (John Paul II, 1988). The vocabulary used in Vatican II documents bespeaks this turning point in the theology of lay ministry. In its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*), for example, the Council's use of the phrase People of God as a definition of the Church signifies a non-hierarchical and inclusive representation of the Church (Vatican Council II, 1996c). *Christifidelis* (Christian faithful) is another term the Vatican II documents use to convey the call to discipleship for all of the baptized, not just the ordained.

Osborne (1993) contends that although Vatican II promulgated equal discipleship of all baptized, this belief has not yet become reality. Osborne observes:

Nonetheless, such a view regarding Christian equality has neither totally nor overwhelmingly been accepted by the Roman Catholic world today, not because certain people deliberately disagree either with the New Testament or with Vatican II or with the code of canon law [sic], but because such a view of common and equal discipleship does not, in their approach, clearly do justice to the theology of ordained priesthood and hierarchy which they have previously heard and which they have previously accepted. (p. 543)

While Osborne's quote centers on the ordained versus the non-ordained, this is just one example of inequality that he mentions. For instance, Osborne suggests the dichotomy of men versus women as another example of church ministry inequality. If some vocations and ministries are better than others as Osborne suggests, then we must wonder how high school religion teaching rates as a ministry in the eyes of the Church. How religion teaching is viewed as a vocation and ministry will most likely impact teacher recruitment and retention.

In commemoration of the 15th anniversary of the Vatican II (1996b) document devoted to the mission of the laity – Decree on the Apostolate of the

Laity (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*) – the U.S. bishops affirmed each lay person’s call to ministry: “Baptism and confirmation empower all believers to share in some form of ministry” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops [NCCB], 1980a, p. 3). In this document, the bishops also distinguish between “ministry in the world” and “ministry in the Church.” Ministry in the world refers to Christian witness and Christian service involved in spreading the Gospel and advancing the cause of social justice. With regard to ministry in the Church, the bishops acknowledge that Vatican II opened up new opportunities for lay persons. What begins to take shape in the evolution of lay ministry after Vatican II is the concept of “professional ministry” within the Church (NCCB, 1980a, p. 4). Professional ministries are ecclesial ministries open to lay persons which require professional preparation and formation. In another document issued in 1980, the U.S. bishops specifically identify teaching in a Catholic school as a professional ministry (NCCB, 1980b).

If teaching a secular subject in a Catholic school is a professional ministry, then teaching religion in a Catholic high school is certainly one. What does the term “ministry” in the phrase “professional ministry” mean for religion teachers? Where the vocation and ministry of the catechist is concerned, Church documents and religious education scholars focus on personal qualities (Au, 1999; CCE, 1982, 1988; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples [CEP], 2000; Department of Religious Education, 1983; Ferder, 1999; Groome, 1991; NCCB, 1979; Regan, 2000). According to Ferder (1999), some examples of desirable catechist qualities include prayerfulness, respect, compassion, genuineness, and a commitment to justice.

The *General Directory for Catechesis* maintains that a catechist’s person is inextricably linked to the catechist’s content and method: “The charism given to him [*sic*] by the Spirit, a solid spirituality and transparent witness of life, constitutes the soul of every method” (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, §156). With direct reference to religion teachers, the CCE (1988) stresses, “the effectiveness of religious instruction is closely tied to the personal witness given by the teacher; this witness is what brings the content of the lesson to life” (§96). In sum, religion teaching is a ministry and not merely a job because the personal qualities and professional activity of the religion teacher are intertwined and “rooted in God and relationship with Jesus” (Ferder, 1999, p. 163).

The ministerial and vocational dimensions of the professional ministry of religion teachers are important. After all, “ministry” is the noun in the phrase “professional ministry.” Yet, a comprehensive examination of religion teaching cannot end here because the adjective “professional” begs examina-

tion. A review of Church documents and scholarly writing reveals a large gap in the literature in this regard. The literature that refers to catechists in general is not helpful because high school religion teachers are a distinctive subset of catechists. Unlike other catechists, Catholic high school religion teachers live out their ministry in a setting that has broader academic goals than religious ones. In a sense, high school religion teachers have one foot in ecclesial ministry and one foot in the world of academia. It is inevitable that religion teachers will be compared to their teaching colleagues in terms of teacher professionalism. It is important, therefore, to examine the professional ministry of religion teaching in its own context. The question becomes, then, what does “professional” in “professional ministry” mean when applied to religion teachers in a Catholic high school? It seems that the professional characteristics of the religion teaching profession should be equivalent to those of the broader teaching profession. Church documents support this viewpoint insofar as they allude to equivalence with regard to teacher credentials and instructional rigor (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; CEP, 2000; NCCB, 1979).

Questions about the professional characteristics of religion teaching and the status of religion teaching as a profession are similar to those which the entire teaching profession has been grappling with for a long time (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1992). Professions are defined as “occupations requiring a high degree of knowledge and skill to perform social functions that are most central to the well-being of society” (Hoyle, 1995, p. 12). Sociologists cite medicine, law, engineering, dentistry, architecture, ministry, and accounting as examples of professions (Hoyle, 1995; Lortie, 1975; Rowan, 1994). Historically, some theorists have classified teaching, social work, and nursing as semi-professions based on various sets of professional criteria (Etzioni, 1969). Some scholars prefer to call teaching an emerging profession because teaching has taken steps to meet professional criteria more fully through a process commonly referred to as professionalization (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1992; Howsam, Corrigan, Denmark, & Nash, 1976; Hoyle, 1995).

The professionalization of teaching gained momentum in the 1980s as a result of increased and broad-based dissatisfaction with schooling outcomes among educators, policymakers, and citizens in light of new societal and workforce needs. In 1986, two widely publicized reports were published that specifically called for the professionalization of teaching. A group of prominent education deans issued *Tomorrow's Teachers* (Holmes Group, 1986), and the Carnegie Forum (1986) published *A Nation Prepared*.

In their efforts to professionalize teaching, scholars and policymakers compare teaching with other professions using criteria or characteristics that

sociologists and other researchers believe all professions share. Various sets of criteria and characteristics have been generated including those offered by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (Howsam et al., 1976), Hoyle (1995), National Center for Education Statistics (1997), National Labor Relations Act (Webb, Metha, & Jordan, 2003), Newman (1998), Segall and Wilson (1998), and Travers and Rebores (2000). Ironically, although these and other sets of criteria share common elements, no two lists are identical, a fact which critics readily point out (Hoyle, 1995).

Seven characteristics of a profession have been identified as the framework for this assessment of religion teaching: essential service to society, motivated by a call to serve, special knowledge and skills, specialized and advanced university training, public trust and status, code of ethics and performance standards, and professional organization. The rationale for this selection is twofold. First, these characteristics appear on several lists generated by educational scholars, which indicates broad-based support for using them as criteria for teacher professionalization. Second, these are characteristics for which ample pertinent evidence existed to assess religion teaching in terms of them. What follows is a brief critique of how teaching measures up in terms of each of these seven professional characteristics, which will lay the groundwork for an assessment of religion teaching according to the same characteristics.

ESSENTIAL SERVICE TO SOCIETY

The status of a profession is determined by how central the profession's unique service is to the well-being of society. Some argue that the most mature professions are those that deal with matters of life and death and that teaching is a semi-profession because it does not meet this ultimate standard. Educational scholars question this interpretation of life and death, contending that teachers play a large role in determining the quality of human existence:

Proper professional decisions enhance learning and life; improper decisions send the learner toward incremental death in openness to experience and in ability to learn and contribute. Doctors and lawyers probably have neither more nor less to do with life, death, and freedom than do teachers. (Howsam et al., 1976, p. 15)

Aside from the life and death debate, educators argue that education plays a major role in all societies by socializing young citizens. Education is the bedrock of all free societies in which citizens think for and govern themselves. Hoyle (1995) believes that the teaching profession does not need to

prove itself in terms of societal value. “The importance of education, and hence teaching, to the well-being of society as a whole is sufficiently self-evident” (p. 13).

MOTIVATED BY CALL TO SERVE

Individual professionals possess a strong commitment to service (Howsam et al., 1976). Lortie (1975) calls teaching essentially altruistic. Few enter teaching with hopes of making a significant amount of money. Rather, “career satisfaction for teachers hinges on the ability to pursue the personal values and beliefs that lead them into teaching – to be of service and to make valued contributions to young students” (McLaughlin & Mei-ling Yee, 1988, p. 39). In recent years, there has been increased interest in exploring teaching as a vocation or calling. Hansen (1995) describes vocation as “work that has social value and that provides enduring personal meaning” (p. 9). Palmer (1998) maintains that teaching is a vocation when a teacher teaches from the heart. For our purposes, it is worth noting that Hansen and Palmer convey a secular interpretation of vocation. Their primary focus is a person’s inner calling as opposed to a calling from God. Nevertheless, the popularity of their writing demonstrates a hunger among educators to think about their occupation in a deeply personal, meaningful, and altruistic way. It seems that there is a natural tension between the intrinsic motivation we speak of here and extrinsic motivation like higher standards, higher salaries, and improved status that are also characteristic of professionalization.

SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Esoteric knowledge and skills are primary among criteria that distinguish a profession from other occupations (Howsam et al., 1976; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). “An occupation becomes a profession when it assumes responsibility for developing a shared knowledge base for all of its members and for transmitting that knowledge through professional education, licensing, and ongoing peer review” (Darling-Hammond, 1997, p. 298). In an effort to determine a knowledge and skill base for the teaching profession, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC; 1993) enumerated 10 performance-based standards or principles that represent what experts believe professional teachers should know, be able to do, and be like.

There is little dispute that teachers need a knowledge base to be effective teachers. The sustained debate among scholars and policymakers revolves around questions about how much subject knowledge is needed, how much

educational theory is necessary for teachers to be effective, and how should the two be balanced. Educators and non-educators alike have been especially skeptical of educational theory as a knowledge base. Some criticize it for having little practical value (Hoyle, 1995). Certain researchers argue that the knowledge base in education should be interpreted to include craft or practitioner knowledge (Hiebert, Gallimore, & Stigler, 2002). No doubt the mandate in *No Child Left Behind* (2001) for highly qualified teachers in every classroom will continue to fuel the debate, for there is still considerable disagreement among scholars and policymakers about how to define "highly qualified" in terms of knowledge and preparation. In the final analysis, it seems that the knowledge base and skill set for the teaching profession will be settled best through continued research that studies the impact of teacher qualifications on student learning outcomes (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002).

SPECIALIZED, ADVANCED UNIVERSITY TRAINING

Sociologists and other theorists observe that the esoteric knowledge base and skill set that are characteristic of professions require specialized, protracted education and training. Theorists place heavy emphasis on the role of higher education in transforming an occupation into a profession (Collins, 1979).

The key to successful professionalization of any practice is to convince the client and the public that members of a profession, as a result of education and practical experience, possess unique knowledge and skills that can be employed to solve the particular problems of practice and thus serve client needs. (Yinger & Hendricks-Lee, 2000, pp. 94-95)

Once again, *No Child Left Behind* has brought to a head the debate about what educational background and training is necessary to be a highly qualified teacher candidate. Where academic preparation is concerned, some believe the equivalent of a college major makes a high school teacher qualified to teach a certain subject; others claim that only a college minor is necessary (Ingersoll, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Where pedagogical training is concerned, one camp endorses university-based preparation whereas another camp supports streamlined and/or alternative routes for earning teacher credentials (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Monk, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). In short, it is fair to say that this debate is far from over, yet the debate will ultimately strengthen teaching as a profession.

CODE OF ETHICS AND PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Codes of ethics and performance standards have become a familiar part of the rhetoric of professional self-regulation and professional control. Yinger and Hendricks-Lee (2000), drawing on Abbott's (1988) sociological analysis of the professionalization process, have argued that educational standards are one of the most powerful tools available for professionalizing teaching. Regarding codes of ethics, Sockett (1993) comments: "From the Hippocratic oath to the code of ethics of the National Automobile Dealers Association, a declaration of commitment to ideal behavior has provided a source of unity for members of an occupation" (p. 119). By its very nature, teaching is a moral enterprise. Sockett declares, "Teaching in an educational context is strongly connected to the betterment of individuals. It is therefore impossible to talk extensively about teaching/teachers without the language of morality" (p. 13). Codes of ethics like the one produced by the National Education Association (NEA) exist. However, several scholars believe that the profession does not yet have an ethical code to which its members subscribe (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Hoyle, 1995; Travers & Rebore, 2000). Darling-Hammond (1997) observes, "Teachers as a group do not share a common set of ethical commitments and knowledge for teaching because preparation is uneven and frequently waived altogether....Socialization is weak" (p. 300).

Not everyone agrees with Darling-Hammond's assessment where performance standards are concerned. It can be argued that the standards promulgated by the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) now serve as a widely accepted set of performance standards for beginning teachers. Some would say that the standards developed by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) are designed to serve the same purpose for experienced teachers (National Commission on Teaching & America's Future, 1996; Webb et al., 2003).

PUBLIC TRUST AND STATUS

Howsam et al. (1976) list "lower in occupational status" (p. 8) first in their listing of characteristics of a semi-profession, which is a classification sometimes used to describe teaching. Without question, teaching has an image problem. As Darling-Hammond (1997) notes, "teaching is evolving from an occupation that the public has historically considered routine 'women's work' requiring little skill to a profession that enables its members to become as capable as the real demands of the work require" (p. 294).

Rowan (1994) submits that the perceived lack of complexity involved in teaching contributes to the profession's lower status. Hoyle (2001) argues that in order to recruit and retain teachers, as well as improve sagging teacher morale, increased attention must be paid to enhancing the professional status of teaching. There seems to be an inherent paradox in achieving professional status, however. Is status a reward for being a profession or a prerequisite? In concrete terms, do indicators of status such as better working conditions, higher salaries, public trust, autonomy, and prestige precede professional status or are they byproducts? This paradox proves problematic as the teaching profession strives to professionalize itself because teaching needs professional status, or elements thereof, to improve its professional status.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION

Professional organizations have several objectives that include shaping licensing procedures, influencing credentialing and educational requirements, and enhancing the public image of the occupation (Weeden, 2002). They also have a unique way of affecting the social status of the profession. Professional organizations contribute to the creation of a "cultural currency" (Collins, 1979).

Several professional organizations connected to the teaching profession have been created over time. Founded in 1870 as a result of a merger, the National Education Association (NEA) is the oldest education-related professional organization that exists in the United States today. The organization's Preamble to the Constitution states that among other things, the NEA is to "serve as the national voice for education" (Howsam et al., 1976, p. 68). Within the teaching profession, associations for teachers of various subjects have sprung up. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) serve as two examples. These associations provide a forum for subject teachers to discuss common issues, monitor agreed upon standards, and serve as a collective voice to advance the cause of their profession.

Professional organizations in education have made great strides in giving teachers a collective voice in shaping education policy at the district, state, and national levels. They do not yet exercise the type of self-governance of the teaching profession that occurs in other professions. For example, over time medicine became a self-regulating profession with the American Medical Association (AMA) serving as the major gatekeeper (Newman, 1998). Greater self-regulation is unlikely to occur in the teaching profession until teaching is considered a complex activity and until there is greater public trust in the profession's ability to regulate itself (Darling-

Hammond & Wise, 1992).

To conclude this theoretical reflection, although teaching may not yet be a profession in the fullest sense, it can easily be classified as an emerging profession. The evidence clearly indicates that teaching has done much to professionalize itself in recent decades. As the research shows, it is customary for educationists to assess teaching in terms of common professional benchmarks in the drive toward professionalization. Seeing that religion teaching is a professional ministry in the Church that is uniquely situated in the world of academia, the criteria used to assess the status of religion teaching as a profession should be equivalent to those used to assess the broad field of teaching.

FINDINGS

To what extent is religion teaching a profession? In an effort to address this overarching research question, religion teachers were assessed according to seven selected characteristics. Although evidence is taken from several sources, two wellsprings, in particular, receive focused attention. First, Church documents are examined to ascertain how religion teaching is regarded by the Church conceptually. Second, data from *The Next Generation: A Study of Catholic High School Religion Teachers* is reviewed to determine how religion teaching is regarded operationally. *The Next Generation* survey project involved a national representative sample of approximately 1,000 religion teachers in 200 American Catholic high schools (Cook, 2001b).

ESSENTIAL SERVICE TO SOCIETY

Official Church documents speak of the special contributions that Catholic schools make for the betterment of society and for advancing the educational mission of the Catholic Church. In its latest statement about Catholic schools, the Congregation for Catholic Education (1998) verifies how Catholic schools fulfill a public purpose for society:

Catholic schools have always promoted civil progress and human development without discrimination of any kind. Catholic schools, moreover, like state schools, fulfill a public role, for their presence guarantees cultural and educational pluralism and, above all, the freedom and right of families to see that their children receive the sort of education they wish for them. (§16)

Documents issued by the Vatican and United States bishops speak uniformly of the special role that Catholic schools play in the educational and religious mission of the Catholic Church. The CCE (1998) states unabashed-

ly that Catholic schools “perform an essential and unique service for the Church herself” (§15). Twenty years later, the Congregation affirms: “Thus it follows that the work of the [Catholic] school is irreplaceable” (§21). In the American context, the United States bishops have consistently referred to Catholic schools as the best means available for achieving the purpose of Christian education for the Church’s youth (NCCB, 1972, 1976). More recently the bishops affirmed, “It is our deep conviction that Catholic schools must exist for the good of the Church” (NCCB, 1990, p. 2)

At the heart of the Catholic school’s mission is its “fundamental duty to evangelize” (CCE, 1998, §3). Catholic schools should help students grow in knowledge and belief of faith in general and the Catholic faith in particular (CCE, 1982; NCCB, 1979). This occurs through the complementary methods of faith formation and religious instruction (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997).

Catholic Church leadership recognizes the essential role that teachers play in determining whether Catholic schools fulfill their educational and religious mission. “Teachers must remember that it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose” (CCE, 1998, §19; Vatican Council II, 1996a, §8). Among teachers, Church documents point to the central role that religion teachers play in the evangelizing mission of Catholic schools, calling their role one “of first importance” (CCE, 1982, §59). In *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, the CCE (1988) states unequivocally, “The religion teacher is the key, the vital component, if the educational goals of the school are to be achieved” (§96).

MOTIVATED BY A CALL TO SERVE

The Catholic Church regards teaching in a Catholic school to be a God-inspired vocation or calling (CCE, 1982, 1998; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; NCCB, 1979; Vatican Council II, 1996a). The CCE (1998) states, “we must remember that teachers and educators fulfill a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church” (§19).

The sense of vocation and service is even more pronounced when documents speak about catechists, which include religion teachers. The NCCB (1979) identifies “response to a call” as an essential quality that all catechists must possess:

As important as it is that a catechist have a clear understanding of the teaching of Christ and His Church, this is not enough. He or she must also receive and respond to a ministerial call, which comes from the Lord and is articulated in the local Church by the bishop. (§206)

The previous *National Catechetical Directory for the United States* lists “servant of the community” as another ideal quality of the catechist (NCCB, 1979, §210). For the catechist, the commitment to serve others should flow naturally and authentically from experiencing Christian community.

The Next Generation survey data indicate that faith and other intrinsic values do indeed serve as the primary motivators for teaching religion (Cook, 2001b). When asked to prioritize their top three reasons for choosing to teach religion, 75% of the 959 teachers surveyed marked “I realize the difference I can make in the faith life of my students.” The other two responses most often included in the top three reasons were “I enjoy teaching religion” (74%) and “I consider teaching religion an integral part of my personal faith journey” (60%). Echoing the sense of calling, a religion teacher remarks, “Teaching religious studies is truly a vocation. It satisfies a desire for a divine purpose, as we are an integrated part of our students’ faith life. It allows meaning and ministry to emerge beyond the profession.”

SPECIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Regrettably, a list of special knowledge and skills that religion teachers should possess does not exist. In the most general sense, since INTASC standards represent a common core of teaching knowledge, skills, and disposition for all beginning teachers, then one could argue that these principles apply to religion teachers as well. Although INTASC is currently translating these standards into discipline-specific ones, this will not happen for religion since religion is not taught in American public schools.

Catholic Church documents provide little guidance for identifying and/or fully describing a knowledge and skill set for religion teachers. For example, in their list of ideal catechist qualities, the NCCB (1979) devotes one paragraph to knowledge and skills. “They must have a solid grasp of Catholic doctrine and worship; familiarity with scripture; communication skills; the ability to use various methodologies; understanding of how people grow and mature and of how persons of different ages and circumstances learn” (§211). In the *General Directory for Catechesis*, the Congregation for the Clergy (1997) only alludes to knowledge and skills in the chapter about norms and criteria for catechesis. Galetto (1996) contends that little is written about catechists in general, let alone religion teachers in particular. Stated bluntly, “an obvious lacuna is present” (p. 2). When searching for a set of catechist qualifications or determinants of effectiveness, which would include knowledge and skills, Galetto (1996) concludes, “the hunt for descriptors yields a broad, confused, and inconsistent list of terms” (p. 2).

Research suggests that religion teachers probably lack consensus about

the specific knowledge and skills they believe they need to be effective. It appears that religion teachers cannot even agree on what the goals of the Catholic high school religion program should be, especially as they relate to school goals. Lund (1997) discusses the continuing debate about whether religion teachers should emphasize the cognitive or affective dimension of religion. Survey data bear out this philosophical difference among religion teachers. When asked if they thought the primary role of the religion teacher is religious instruction (i.e., academic study) or catechesis (i.e., faith formation), respondents were almost evenly split. Of the 959 religion teachers surveyed in *The Next Generation* study (Cook, 2001b), 45% selected religious instruction as their primary role and 55% chose catechesis. Among subsets, vowed women and men religious were more likely to view their role as that of catechist. Religion teachers younger than 40 years of age were evenly divided.

Another indicator that there is a lack of consensus about religion program goals, and therefore requisite knowledge and skills of religion teachers, lies in the different names that schools attach to the department whose responsibility is religious education. Hudson (2002) reports that although the majority of high schools (58%) have a religion department, almost half (42%) use other titles. Over one-third (34%) have a theology department. The remaining schools (8%) use names like religious studies, faith formation, and spiritual formation. Because the language and word choice that Catholic schools use reflect their core values (Cook, 2001a), even the terminology that is used for department titles is significant. In short, terminology reflects goals. According to O'Malley (1990), theology deals with knowledge and religion deals with practice. One could conclude from this distinction that a department whose title is theology signifies a more academic approach to the subject.

SPECIALIZED, ADVANCED UNIVERSITY TRAINING

Church documents recognize the need for specialized training for religion teachers, in addition to their personal spiritual formation, and speak of it in terms of the pedagogical, theological, and professional dimensions (CCE, 1982, 1988; Congregation for the Clergy, 1997; CEP, 2000). Reinforcing the importance of specialized training for religion teachers, the CCE (1988) asserts, "In this area, especially, an unprepared teacher can do a great deal of harm. Everything possible must be done to ensure that Catholic schools have adequately trained religion teachers; it is a vital necessity and a legitimate expectation" (§97).

Although Church documents discuss university-based preparation, they are not very specific in this regard.

We need to look to the future and promote the establishment of formation centers for these teachers; ecclesiastical universities and faculties should do what they can to develop appropriate programs so that the teachers of tomorrow will be able to carry out their task with the competence and efficacy that is expected of them. (CCE, 1988, §97)

There is almost no mention of university degrees in Church documents, let alone advanced degrees, in relation to religion teachers. The following quote captures the essence, and level of specificity, of what Church documents state about religion teacher preparation. “With appropriate degrees, and with an adequate preparation in religious pedagogy, they will have the basic training needed for the teaching of religion” (CCE, 1982, §66).

Although “appropriate degrees” and “adequate preparation...in pedagogy” is subject to interpretation, Church documents infer that religion teachers should attain credentials that are in keeping with the standards for their country (CEP, 2000; NCCB, 1979). No Child Left Behind (2001) offers useful benchmarks for the American context. This federal law defines highly qualified teachers as those who have earned an undergraduate or graduate major in their field, as well as state certification. Using this definition, how do religion teachers measure up? According to *The Next Generation* data (Cook, 2001b), 57.1% of religion teachers completed an undergraduate or graduate major in theology, religious studies, or religious education. In other words, slightly more than half of American Catholic high school religion teachers are considered highly qualified in terms of degrees according to No Child Left Behind. Using state certification as the pedagogical benchmark is more problematic because Nebraska is the only state that certifies teachers in theology, religious studies, or religious education. (Wisconsin also certified religion teachers until very recently.) Nevertheless it is still instructive to note that less than half (46.7%) of religion teachers are certified in any subject (Cook, 2003). This percentage falls well below the 67% of Catholic high school teachers overall who hold certification in some subject (Schaub, 2000).

Where advanced degrees are concerned, only 4 out of 10 full-time religion teachers report having a master’s or doctorate in the field (i.e., theology, religious studies, or religious education). From a longitudinal point of view, the situation has actually deteriorated in the last 2 decades. Since 1985, the percentage of full-time religion teachers who hold advanced degrees has fallen from 57% to 41%. This trend is especially alarming in view of the fact that 96% of religion teachers with advanced degrees in the subject affirm that the degree has positively impacted their effectiveness as religion teachers (Cook, 2002, 2003). Ironically, this last finding supports religion teaching’s potential as a profession.

Cook (2003) sums up the current state of Catholic high school religion teacher qualifications this way:

The research findings suggest two major conclusions. First, Catholic high school religion teachers are less qualified than other public and private school teachers in terms of academic preparation, pedagogical training, and teaching experience. Second, new religion teachers are even less qualified overall than other religion teachers. (p. 140)

CODE OF ETHICS AND PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

A code of ethics for religion teachers in Catholic schools does not exist. In part, this is due to the decentralization of the Catholic school system. In particular, Catholic secondary schools are often independent even within the diocesan structure. As a result, there is very little consistency from school to school and from diocese to diocese. Historically, the Department of Education at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the National Catholic Educational Association have not developed overarching requirements for certification, licensing, or performance standards, out of respect for the autonomy of diocesan bishops.

The closest reference to performance standards in Church documents deals with catechists in general. "As catechists, they will meet standards equivalent to those for other disciplines" (NCCB, 1979, §232). Operationally, performance standards most probably exist at the school level and perhaps at the diocesan level. Many schools have professional expectations that are included in faculty handbooks and are referenced in employee contracts. These expectations run the gamut from general performance to moral codes of behavior. However, a specific code for religion teachers that provides assurance of quality performance or functions as parameters or guidelines for professional work has yet to be developed, even though it clearly impacts the professionalism of occupations.

PUBLIC TRUST AND STATUS

The Christian faith tradition has held teachers in high esteem since biblical times. The New Testament lists teaching as a charism, or gift of the Holy Spirit, that is used to build the Kingdom of God on earth (Eph. 4: 7-16). Catholic Church documents elevate teaching to the status of vocation, stating that it is "not simply" a profession (CCE, 1982, §37). Among vocations within the Church, teaching seems to be held in high regard. For instance, Vatican Council II (1996a) speaks of the "excellence of the teaching vocation" (§12). With specific regard to the teaching of religion, the CCE (1982) declares, "The teaching of religion is, along with catechesis, 'an eminent

form of the lay apostolate” (§57). Among teachers, religion teachers appear to hold a special place insofar as the CCE refers to them as being “of special importance” (1982, §59) and as being “the key, the vital component” (1988, §96).

Church documents also address the status of the religion curriculum within the Catholic school’s overall educational program. “The quality of the catechetical experience in the school and the importance attached to religious instruction, including that amount of time spent on it, can influence students to perceive religion as either highly important or of little importance” (NCCB, 1979, §232). Time allotted for religion class and academic rigor contribute to and reflect curricular status. A comparable amount of time should be set aside each week for religious instruction as is for other subjects (CCE, 1988). With regard to rigor, the *General Directory for Catechesis* sums it up this way:

It is necessary, therefore, that religious instruction in schools appear as a scholastic discipline with the same systematic demands and the same rigor as other disciplines. It must present the Christian message and the Christian event with the same seriousness and the same depth with which other disciplines present their knowledge. It should not be an accessory alongside of these disciplines. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, §73)

Is the status of religion teachers as high as Church documents say it should be? Qualitative data from *The Next Generation* (Cook, 2001b) respondents suggest that a number of religion teachers perceive religion teaching to be undervalued both as a vocation and as a profession. One teacher writes, “I think Church leadership still thinks of vocation only in terms of vowed religious life. You never see religion teachers represented at vocation fairs nor does the priest ever include religion teaching as an option in homilies about vocations.” Many respondent comments reflected a perception that colleagues and administrators often do not consider religion teachers professionals. In the words of one respondent, “As a religion teacher, I feel like a second class citizen among the faculty.” Teachers often remarked about the need for more respect, support, affirmation, and appreciation for the work that they do.

According to respondents, there seems to be a pervasive perception that anyone can teach religion, which impacts the profession’s credibility and morale. One religion teacher states fervently, “I am really tired of the attitude that anyone can teach religion. I once lost a possible position because school trustees decided that an English teacher could teach Scripture.” Another teacher adds, “Would you hire someone to teach math that had never had math training at the university level? Why is this done with the-

ology?" Yet another teacher concludes, "The myth that anyone can teach religion is ultimately hurting the students." One teacher's remark suggests that lack of status is related in part to lack of professional credentials. "Recognize religion teachers as professionals. Provide them with a means for certification, recognized by the state that will help them be more credible as professionals."

Is the status of the religion curriculum and program as high as Church documents say it should be? Two data sets offer perceptions about the rigor of religion courses in relation to other subject courses. *The Next Generation* data (Cook, 2001b) reveal that approximately 4 out of 10 religion teachers (39.3%) consider religion courses to be less rigorous than other courses at their school. Interestingly, in a survey of chief administrators of Catholic high schools, only 9% believe their religion teachers think religion courses are less rigorous than others. In essence, chief administrators perceive religion teachers to think their religion courses are more rigorous than in reality they do. In the same survey, nearly one-third (31%) of the chief administrators believe that faculty outside the religion department perceive religion courses to be less rigorous than other courses (Hudson, 2002). The latter result raises the question of whether the chief administrators overestimated the perception of religion course rigor among other faculty as they did with religion faculty.

Religion teacher comments on *The Next Generation* survey (Cook, 2001b) provide qualitative data about the status of the religion program in relation to other subjects and the overall school program. Most comments were expressions of concern about the religion program's lack of stature. One teacher laments, "In many high schools, religion is less valued than athletics and other academic areas; it becomes 'expendable.' It should not become the class from which students are automatically pulled as the need arises." Another teacher urges, "The religion program must be taken seriously. Religion teachers should not have to defend demanding assignments or fight for funding in a Catholic school. Religion should be central, not a peripheral course that shouldn't interfere with students' 'real' studies." In sum, it would appear that religion teachers do not enjoy the status that Church documents promulgate. Instead of being at the center of the Catholic school enterprise, some religion teachers feel they and their programs have become marginalized.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION

In *Lighting New Fires: Catholic Secondary Schools for the 21st Century* (National Catholic Educational Association [NCEA], n.d.), the 5-year strategic plan of the Secondary Schools Department at NCEA, particular empha-

sis is placed on supporting schools in the areas of Catholic identity and faith development. *Lighting New Fires* sets forth the goal of assisting “Catholic secondary schools in strengthening their unique Catholic identity by fostering faith development among administrators, faculty, staff, students, families and boards and by supporting the growth of secondary schools as faith communities” (p. 2). Other academic disciplines, such as math, science, and English, have professional organizations that promulgate ideas and assistance in their respective fields. This has not been the case for religion teachers. In advocating for the creation of a professional association for religion teachers, Cook (2001b) reasons:

Most teaching fields have a professional organization. These associations of teachers reduce teacher isolation and provide a forum where goals can be discussed, strategies shared and concerns aired. Associations for religion teachers would both strengthen the profession as well as broaden the web of support for teachers in the field. (pp. 555-556)

In an effort to address this need, the NCEA’s Secondary Schools Department is in the process of developing a professional association for religion teachers and campus ministers called the Emmaus Guild. Responding to both research on occupational professionalization and needs identified by religion teachers, the stated goals of the Emmaus Guild include the development of professional standards and a code of ethics. Other goals include improving the delivery of service, influencing religion teacher certification, preparation, and education, and attending to personal growth. The mission statement, objectives, strategies, and action steps of the Emmaus Guild were presented and approved at the NCEA Secondary Schools Department Executive Committee during their winter meeting in January 2003. The executive committee also recommended that a timeline for implementation be developed and that additional funding be sought to realize the strategic plan.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To what extent is religion teaching a profession? Of the seven selected characteristics of a profession that comprise our theoretical framework, it appears that religion teaching measures up to other professions on only two. Although religion teaching provides a valued service and religion teachers are intrinsically motivated, other essential elements that structure a profession are not fully developed or are not available for the religion teacher. There are no commonly agreed upon professional standards or system of credentialing that would establish minimum requirements for content knowl-

edge or pedagogy. The number of religion teachers with advanced university training has dropped to the point where these teachers are in the minority. Certification or licensing is non-existent among the 50 states save Nebraska. Although a national association was created in 2003, it exists in name only. Lastly, perceptions of religion as a profession and as a subject are demoralizing to members of the profession. In sum, these findings indicate that religion teaching is less professionalized than teaching in general, according to the selected criteria.

One limitation of this study is that it is confined to the seven professional characteristics we selected. To achieve the most thorough assessment of religion teaching as a profession, additional research needs to be done on other professional criteria mentioned in the literature, such as working conditions, decision-making authority, autonomy, and opportunities for advancement (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1992; Hoyle, 1995; National Center for Education Statistics, 1997; Newman, 1998; Webb et al., 2003).

Although these findings are disappointing, they are not startling. With respect to religion teacher qualifications, Cook (2003) concludes succinctly, "In short, the figures for religion teachers who would be considered by No Child Left Behind to be 'highly qualified' are embarrassingly low and the figures for religion teachers who are teaching 'out-of-field' are unacceptably high" (p. 142). Although narrower in focus, Cook's conclusions certainly draw attention to the questionable status of religion teaching as a profession. These findings appear to extend naturally from previous research results and build on them.

What are the implications of the finding that Catholic high school religion teachers are less professionalized than other teachers? Educational research tells us that the lower professionalization of religion teachers likely contributes to teacher shortages in the field (Boe & Gilford, 1992; Grissmer & Kirby, 1997; Ingersoll, 2001, 2002; O'Keefe, 2001). Often, shortages are conceived in terms of fewer people entering the profession, but there is strong evidence to suggest that teacher retention might be the more serious concern. Ingersoll (2002) stresses, "Popular education initiatives, such as teacher recruitment programs, will not solve schools' staffing problems if they do not also address the organizational sources of low teacher retention" (p. 16). The fact that 40% of religion teachers plan to leave the field within 5 years tells us that retention is a critical issue among religion teachers. Consequently, research is needed that investigates the relationship between the professional status of religion teaching and religion teacher retention.

Another implication is that lower professionalization of religion teachers reduces religion teacher credibility. Realizing that religion teachers work in

an academic environment, their credibility with students, parents, and other teachers undoubtedly hinges on professional criteria used to assess the professionalism of all teachers. Church documents support this approach. "As catechists, they will meet standards equivalent to those for other disciplines" (NCCB, 1979, §232). If religion teachers want to be better regarded as professionals, they will need to play by professional rules and standards such as those related to academic background and formal teacher training, for instance.

The preeminent implication of these findings is that lower professionalization of religion teachers jeopardizes student learning and formation and ultimately the religious mission of Catholic high schools. Although there is continuing debate in the teaching profession about the ideal knowledge base and skill set, and about which teacher qualifications and credentials are ideal for maximizing student learning, there is little debate about the inherent need for these qualifications and credentials themselves (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Monk, 1994; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). What is the ideal knowledge and skill set for religion teachers? What is the ideal preparation and formation? Additional research will shed light on these questions. But it is important for research to consider these questions in relation to Catholic school goals and in terms of student learning and formation outcomes.

Faced with similar implications, the teaching profession as a whole embarked on a drive to professionalize itself. As reported, ample research evidence indicates that the profession has made great strides in this regard during the past 2 decades. Following the lead of the entire teaching profession, these findings strongly suggest the need to further professionalize religion teachers if they are to reach their full potential and help Catholic schools fulfill their educational mission.

The literature about the professionalization of teaching provides guidance and direction in this regard (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1992; Webb et al., 2003). In light of this study, the following three overarching recommendations would help advance the professionalization of religion teachers.

DEVELOP THE EMMAUS GUILD AS A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR RELIGION TEACHERS

Some researchers believe that having a professional organization is critically important for professionalization to occur (Segall & Wilson, 1998). Consequently, a well-developed and active professional association similar to those for teachers of English (NCTE) or mathematics (NCTM) is crucial for the professionalization of the Catholic high school religion teacher. The newly created Emmaus Guild needs to be active so that it becomes more

than a professional association in name only. An effective professional association could serve these purposes, among others: Promote religion teaching as a vocation and as a profession; strengthen support for the religion program as central to the school's overall mission; build consensus about the goals and outcomes for the religion classroom in light of total school religious mission; provide a forum for determining a knowledge base and skill set for the profession, code of ethics, entry and promotion standards for the profession, and curriculum standards; and sponsor a journal for research and best practices.

By establishing performance standards and a code of ethics, for example, the professional association influences the establishment of credentialing and minimum educational and pedagogical standards for hiring. Institutions that bear the public responsibility for ensuring quality of service – in this case schools, higher education, and dioceses – often look to professional associations in developing policies, requirements, and procedures. Associations also develop professional development opportunities and resources that raise the proficiency of their members.

ESTABLISH STANDARDS FOR CREDENTIALS

Credentials that are agreed upon requisites for entering the profession help ensure competence and quality (Darling-Hammond & Wise, 1992). With regard to religion teachers, credentialing has as its ultimate focus student learning goals and outcomes. Credentialing also influences how a profession is perceived. Lack of credentials has undoubtedly impacted the perception and credibility of religion teachers negatively. Religion teachers would be served by the development of an agreed upon system of educational and pedagogical standards necessary for teaching religion. For the integrity of the religion teacher, these standards must include core academic knowledge in the form of a degree that is conferred by formal educational institutions and pedagogical skills necessary to effectively engage students in the learning process. The establishment of norms for religion teacher education provides a common basis of judgment to determine the expertise of an individual.

IMPLEMENT A CERTIFICATION/LICENSING SCHEME

It seems unlikely that states would follow the lead of Nebraska in licensing religion teachers. In the absence of the state, it is only natural that the diocese step in and formulate a process of certification that is mandatory for every religion teacher in the diocese and require that schools hire only those individuals who possess this certification (Heft, 2001). In doing so, certifi-

education ensures that only qualified individuals teach religion and further supports the role of higher education in developing educational programs. In addition, a certification scheme will enhance the status of religion teachers as professionals because it creates a scheme that is equivalent to that used for all other teachers. Approximately three fourths (73%) of the high school administrators surveyed in *The Next Generation* study report that their diocese has a policy for the certification of religion teachers by the diocese (Cook, 2001b). Research that examines these policies would be very beneficial.

CONCLUSION

Religion teaching is best understood within the context of professional ministry. Is religion teaching a ministry that has professional dimensions or is it a profession that has ministerial dimensions? Based on the use of the phrase professional ministry in Church documents, religion teaching can be understood as a ministry with a professional dimension. Even though the focus of this article has been the professional dimension and not the ministerial dimension of religion teaching, it may not always be prudent to separate one from the other. In moving forward with the professionalization of religion teachers, perhaps what is needed is a broad discussion about what professionalism means with regard to religion teaching given the profession's unique blend of academic and faith formation objectives. For example, credentialing standards and certification schemes should be designed and implemented with the special character of religion teaching in mind.

Furthermore, in order to elevate the status of religion teachers as professionals, educational leaders must seek ways to elevate the status of religion teaching as a vocation within the Church. This study reinforces Osborne's (1993) belief that although Church documents treat all vocations as equally worthy, many perceive that they are not regarded equally in reality. The CCE describes religion teaching as "an eminent form of the lay apostolate" (1982, §57) and religion teachers as being "the key, the vital component" (1988, §96). Yet, it is clear that many Catholic high school religion teachers have not experienced the esteem that Church documents espouse.

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