

Local principal found fulfillment outside of first calling

By Brock Weir

Growing up almost in the middle of the pack with multiple older and younger siblings, Paul Devlin was a pretty ordinary kid.

He played football and hockey, he roughhoused, and attended Catholic Church with his family, but what might have set him apart for the others was his devout interest in everything that unfolded during and beyond the Sunday service.



Paul Devlin

It got to the point where he would sit his younger siblings around the dining room table, grab a loaf of Wonder bread, and a bottle cap to help carve out communion hosts from the loaf, and said his own little mass for them.

It shouldn't have come as any surprise, therefore, that Mr. Devlin thought his calling was to be a priest. Growing up with a great amount of respect for his church leaders and the missionary work one priest in particular – his uncle – carried out at the local and international level, he wanted to follow their example.

But as the Aurora resident went through his education, through undergrad studies at St. Michael's College and a Masters of Arts in Moral Theology from the Toronto School of Theology, he began to think his true calling lay elsewhere. Mildly disillusioned with some aspects of church hierarchy, he realised his energies would be best served as an educator after a chance meeting with an alumnus at a University of Toronto function.

“When I studied moral theology, it said to me the priesthood wasn't for me,” he says. “I couldn't make that type of commitment. There were issues I had certainly from an academic perspective. Not at any time did I question my faith, but I did question the dictates I don't think are particularly based in Jesus.”

When discussing his faith, there are several issues that could be considered to set him apart from what many view as the pillars of the faith. In order for the church's survival, there have been several key points that the Catholic faith has had to adapt to ensure its survival, he says. These include setting up a church hierarchy not dissimilar to the Roman senate of the fourth century, to what he suspects are present day church leaders trying to slow the reforms brought about in the 1960s through Vatican II in the fear of moving too fast in society.

He is also open to the concept of a changing clergy, including women who have genuinely had the calling to be priests, but have had to look to outside the Catholic faith for the opportunities to find their fulfilment.

When the chance encounter showed him that his talents might be put to better use elsewhere, it started on a long road which recently brought him significant recognition.

“One fall, I was involved with a touch football game with some alumni and at the end of one of these Saturday afternoons over some beer and hot dogs we got to talking and [the alumnus] told me he taught religion,” he recalls. “He had a great sense of humour and he invited me to come to high school and see what it was like. I went and was mesmerized by this gentleman and the way he

interacted with the young guys in his class. He touched something in me. I was interested in justice issues and he was preaching a social gospel in the classroom and I loved it.?

From there, he pursued his new goal, obtaining a Masters of Education degree and eventually put this education into action as a teacher, a vice principal, and then for several years as a principal. He recently retired as principal of St. Luke's Catholic Learning Centre, an organization under the umbrella of the York Catholic District School Board in Woodbridge. For his work, he was recently recognised with the Distinguished Service Award from the Catholic Principals' Council of Ontario.

When he received the award, Mr. Devlin says he was 'shocked' to receive the honour from his peers at the provincial level.

Through the last five years of his career with St. Luke's, he worked with troubled youth and those who were not otherwise finding his place in 'regular' school. Some of them had dropped out of school, some of them had brushes with the law, and he found himself in a very supportive environment and very fulfilling role.

'I really felt I was back to my roots of service,' he says. 'You go to court with kids because there is no adult to go with them. You be with the kids and when the judge asks, 'is there anyone here with you?' the kid can say, 'Yes, my principal is here with me.' That helps and it shows the support of the kids.'

Support was also shown through other ways including helping them make the connection with groups such as Addiction Services of York Region, morning food programs for those who might not have eaten anything since the day before, finding co-op placements which could parlay into further work opportunities, all the while maintaining an environment in which the kids are not judged.

'It brought me back to my roots in justice working with kids because the structures of society keep teenagers who are troubled [pushed] to the side and I just thought this was real advocacy work, and a real base, community kind of work.'

In his retirement, Mr. Devlin is helping pick up the slack at Cardinal Carter Catholic High School while a friend, a vice principal at the school, recovers from illness.