

## THE FOUR OACS BOOKS

Review Notes by Dr. Adrian Guldemond

Library Paper #2, 6 pages, 9 minute read

The Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools (OACS) published two books in 1990 explaining its political and educational philosophy. One was "*Progress in the Courts*," and the other was "*Hallmarks of Christian Education*." In 2013 and in 2021, Monarch Educare Solutions (Monarch) published two books describing the work of the OACS in transforming the basics of a sound Dutch Reformed Tradition (DRT) into a working school system. This hybrid or independent system, situated between private and public, became a third way of doing schooling in Canada after 1960.

This Third-Way Vision was a specific way of evoking God's Kingdom while working within the institutional norms of Western society. It included a robust view of civic pluralism (sphere sovereignty), a grass roots view of community (voluntarism), and confidence in the perspicacity of Calvinism (worldviews). Major debates about the validity of these premises for North America occurred during the 1965-1975 period.

Given this triple foundation, the Ontario Alliance Christian Schools (OACS) produced a great variety of resources for independent Christian schools. Most of the materials were designed to speak to school boards about the local school's organizational context: management, human resources, promotion, facilities, finances and curriculum. Some of the materials were designed to address the big political policy questions circulating in Ontario. The four main issues were published in book form: justice, identity, social change, and professional quality. Here follows a short summary of the contents of each book.

**PROGRESS IN THE COURTS:** *Religion in the Public Schools of Ontario*. Hamilton; Guardian Press, 1990. Editor: Adrian Guldemond

The first book dealt with the issue of justice: are faith-based schools entitled to public resources? The Ontario Government answer was, "Yes, if you are Roman Catholic, and No, if you are Jewish or Calvinist." This book describes the consequences of two key Ontario Court of Appeal decisions - *Zylberberg* in 1988 and *Elgin County* in 1989. These court cases effectively removed religion (i.e., Christianity) from the public schools. Promoting one religion over others was now judged to be contrary to the Charter of Rights. Although the Ministry of Education issued guidelines for "approved" prayers from many other religions, the real message was that "religion" was irrelevant for educational purposes. Since the decisions were not appealed to the Supreme Court of

Canada by the Ontario Government, everyone concluded that that was the end of the Judeo-Christian (Eurocentric) view of Canada. The founding religion was about to be evicted from the public square. Implication: Public means secular, so no funding for faith-based schools.

In private, many educators did wonder why the Separate Catholic schools could continue to teach Catholic doctrines while being fully funded by the Government. Others wondered whether a completely secular school system would destroy society. The issue created dissension within the Reformed Communities as well, thus the OACS decided to address the issue in detail in this book.

The book includes five essays by other educators. It begins with a Chapter on the relationship between State and Church in Canada by yours truly. Next, Jack Zondag describes the history of religious education in Ontario. Then, I give a detailed outline of the legal reasoning of the judges in the Court of Appeal decisions. Next, Prof. John Vriend of Redeemer University explains which view of "religion" was actually being promoted in the public schools. Prof. Mark Holmes of OISE, (Un. of Toronto), ties the whole perspective together by explaining the double orthodoxy doctrine of educational policy in Ontario.

The Court decisions were a major blow to the Evangelical churches in Ontario. Many pastors had hoped that "religion" would survive in a little lunch time niche so they could continue their mission to proselytize young people in High School Bible Clubs. The essay by Reinder Klein explains the OACS position on this dated approach to missions. This bold position did not earn the OACS any brownie points in certain progressive reformed circles either. The outline of the debate is included in Chapter 7.

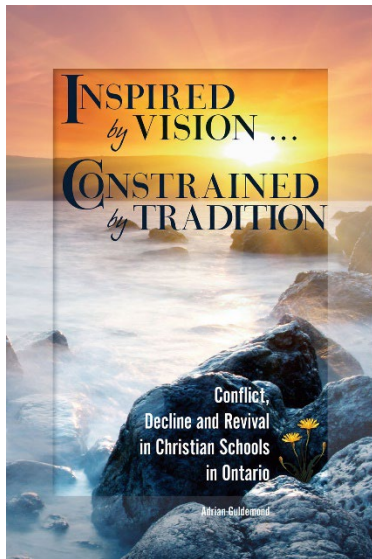
The book ends with a spirited defence of Christian organizations by Christian Labor Association of Canada's (CLAC's) Executive Director, Ed Vanderkloet. Finally, I conclude the discussion with some observations on the big question - *Can we be good without God?* This was the major issue in the moral education debates in the 1980s. How could educators select the proper virtues for character development if the traditional Judeo-Christian virtues were now legally suspect? How could these be taught and caught if they had to be mentioned along with all sorts of other "secular values"? Indeed, how?

**THE HALLMARKS OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLING** - Hamilton, Guardian Press, 1992, second printing 1993. Authors: John Stronks and Jim Vreugdenhil.

This book dealt with the second issue, the one of educational identity. Is there a professional level theory of Christian education? Or is it really just a glorified Sunday School? In 1990 the OACS Board committed to a major curriculum development goal and the membership approved an expanded budget for more staff. In 1991 John Stronks, the curriculum coordinator, left the OACS and moved to the Education Department at Redeemer University. Jim Vreugdenhill took over as the Director of Education at the OACS. The Board had already decided that we needed a coherent statement about the Christian School curriculum in order to implement our official Goal of Education. This goal had been debated and approved by the membership back in 1984. Fortunately, John and Jim agreed to embody the philosophy into a practical booklet that could be used by the OACS curriculum writing teams and by the teachers in the classroom. We agreed to call the philosophy the *Normative Christian Schooling* theory. Although the framework, *Ten Hallmarks*, were based on a formal Christian Philosophy, we did not want to call it that because many of the comments were based on real classroom experience, not abstract theories. We were not solving the world's education dilemmas. We were just writing a practical book for Christian educators in the several reformed traditions. By 1992 the 10 hallmarks were used as the standards for our comprehensive, annual *school evaluation* program. In a review of the 84-page book at the second printing, Prof. John Bolt of Calvin University writes:

*“What strikes the reader about the treatment of a wide variety of contentious educational issues in this volume is its careful balance. Not afraid to engage in critique, the authors avoid reactionary extremism, and their position is not susceptible to neat, simple categorization.”*

The OACS staff and committees made it clear that we were developing an alternative to the current paradigms (traditional, progressive and transformational) then jostling for supremacy in the North American school language/literature debates. That practical approach worked very well for two decades. The OACS produced many innovative and exciting curriculum resources that were used in many kinds of Christian Schools across the country.



**INSPIRED BY VISION...CONSTRAINED BY TRADITION;** Hamilton; Monarch Publishing; 2013

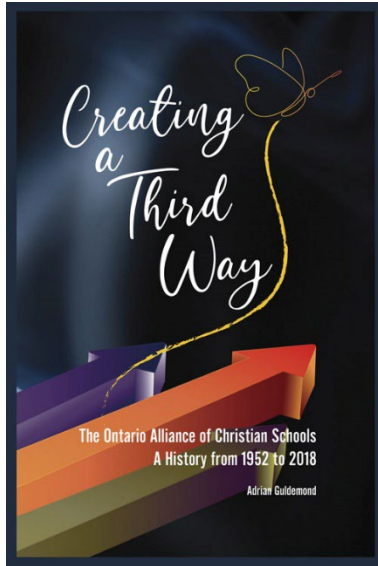
Edited by Adrian Guldemond

This book dealt with the matter of social change. After I retired from the OACS in 2010, many administrators thought that we needed to provide some detailed information about the struggles involved in the operation of community-based schools in Canada. There was almost no published information about the whole Christian school network available. On top of that, the period of 2007 to 2011 was not a good period for Christian Schools International (CSI) related schools in North America. There was a noticeable decline in enrollment in certain areas, especially on the East Coast. Many schools were closing. The book was written to take stock of what appeared to be a stagnating situation, the first in Christian schools since WWII.

The book contains four sections. First, a section on the background of the reformed tradition of separate Christian schools. Second, a long chapter with some basic statistics. This part needs more information and be updated beyond 2010, as there is still too little information about independent schools readily available in Canada.

Third, the book contains a set of 11 specific school stories written by individual school administrators, like May Drost, John VanAsselt, George Hoytema, Linda Williams, Lorna Keith and Leonard Stob, et. al. who were present when their schools faced a local crisis. Some schools went under, other survived and grew. This section is the most informative for a detailed study of the nuts-and-bolts problems of operating a Christian School. This history shows that operating a flourishing school requires a lot more than articulating thrilling visions. It requires magnanimity, trust, credibility and money.

The last four chapters provide reflections about the old principles. Many administrators and some board members hoped to reform some misguided management practices in the schools. While the OACS had already rewritten the school administration manuals in the period between 2000 and 2009, many schools were still stuck in old autocratic models. The OACS wanted to make it clear that the only way to grow the schools was to reform the management model and practices. Sugar-coating the failures was not an option, given the economic pressures on the schools.



**CREATING A THIRD WAY: A History of the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools 1952-2018.** Hamilton, Monarch Publishing, 2022. Author- Adrian Guldemond

Fourth, the matter of professional grade quality needed attention. Back in 1990, I had written the following prediction in *Progress in the Courts*:

*“Unless the Reformed community begins to understand its own dynamics, the cause of Christian education will be mortally wounded. And that will jeopardize the only significant contribution that Calvinists are in a position to make to Canadian culture.” (p.167)*

The point made was simple. The viability of the third way vision depends on the reformed groups working together to create a school system that could actually have an impact on education in Ontario. If the four reformed factions split into individual autonomous schools, they would become irrelevant and leave the secular monopoly intact. Further, to have impact, OACS services would have to be professional and comprehensive in order to be a viable educational alternative to the other private models in Canada. For several decades, that ambition was the dynamic vision behind the OACS programs radiating the reformed worldview.

In short, having a viable third system would vindicate Abraham Kuyper’s famous triple claim. One, that all schools always contain a religious bias. Two, that a plurality of school systems is the best means of developing an open society (one that has the natural mechanisms to control the recurring totalitarian excesses of Church or State). Three, that creating the necessary institutional foundation for pluralism is the job of local community leaders.

These truths have been explained in many other books, so another philosophy book was not what was needed in ‘reformed’ Canada in the 2020s. The real problem was the implementation of the “Kuyperian” vision in new circumstances. We at Monarch thought a simple history of the organizational progress of Christian schools would be more informative. Education is a practical discipline, not a theoretic construct. It develops according to its own circumstances, like a tree. A history would also be more inspiring in the sense that it shows clearly that *faith and moxie* can in fact move mountains, in God’s good time.

Apart from the occasional miracle, mountains mostly get moved by the cooperative efforts of many groups working together on a common vision. The real heroes in this book are the OACS staff and Board members who managed to build bridges across the three mindset chasms that divide the reformed communities in North America. The reason the OACS kept growing for over 60 years was the presence of many dedicated persons at the provincial and the local board level, who were willing to listen to the other side. That dialogue worked because it was clear that the secondary compromises needed for progress and quality did not undermine the normative reformed foundations most were trying to maintain.

The book itself is a straight-forward history of education as follows:

1. Setting the Foundations: On Being Reformed in 1950
2. Building Together - the 1950s
3. Sharpening the Vision - the 1960s
4. Managing the Crisis - the 1970s
5. Setting the House in Order - the 1980s
6. Social Justice Activists - the 1990s
7. Justice Triumphs - 2000-2003
8. Consolidating the Framework - 2003-2012
9. Re-positioning the Setting - 2013-2018
10. OACS - A Retrospective in 2020

Finally, the book includes a middle section of historical photographs highlighting events, many of the pioneers, and an Index of Names. It ends with an Annotated Bibliography, a chronological list of schools and a very long list of persons on the OACS leadership teams.

The history of the OACS shows a certain spiritual magnanimity. We hope and pray it was maintained after 2015, when discussions about restructuring the organizations began. This new book brought the discussion up to 2015. Other historians can look at the next phase (2020 to 2045 and beyond). Perhaps they can also update the events in Western Canada. Perhaps legal scholars can finally make a compelling and successful case for educational pluralism in Eastern Canada using the Charter of Rights to critique the Court decisions for their conformism. As we Redeemer profs used to tell each other on the golf course after a tee shot: "We live in hope!"