

Reflections on Reaching 50

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Let me make it clear right off the top that I am no expert on family. I have neither academic credentials nor a sociologist's understanding of social behaviour, development and organization. My background in family is based on being married for 42 years and being a father to three children, now in their 20s and 30s. Thus my modest expertise is more experiential than theoretical.

As someone with a journalistic background, however, who has been involved in various capacities with the Vanier Institute since 2001, I can see five key elements that would provide the backbone of any story one might tell about the organization's success. The Institute has built a stellar national and international reputation over its first 50 years, which explains the basis of the deep trust it has earned by all who know and use its work.

In what my print friends would call "the lede" is the Institute's leadership in creating and promoting a workable and realistic definition of family. Forty years ago, when a structural definition had long been the norm, the Institute was ahead of its time in saying that family should be defined not by how many individuals were in it – or who those individuals were – but rather by the relationships among those individuals. It was how those individuals related to and supported each other within the family that was important. Although this was new thinking when it was introduced, it has withstood the test of time.

The second element is that the Institute has always taken the long view of how families evolve over time. The seminal document by Dr. Frederick Elkin that laid the foundation for the creation of the Institute made the point that families are always changing and adjusting in response to developments within society. This ability to adapt to changes in social and economic factors was one of the remarkable characteristics that made families strong and resilient. It is a theme the

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Institute has always returned to whenever concerns have been raised about the family being "in trouble" just because it looks different from one generation to another.

Another reason for the Institute's success and longevity is that it has regularly performed the vital role of answering what Dr. Bob Glossop called the "So what?" question. Journalists are always looking for this insight, trying to understand the context of what has happened. As different societal forces appear, there is always a need for someone to take a step back and explain what it means in terms of the impact on family life. The Institute has established itself as *the* place to go to obtain that explanation, providing context and a framework for answering "So what does this mean?"

Furthermore, the Institute has been very astute in providing those answers in language that made the information accessible to a wide array of users. With its mixture of significant background papers, issues of *Transition* magazine, its series of *Profiling Canada's Families* reports and various fact sheets and data



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summaries, there was information available in different formats for everyone from high school students working on essays and practitioners of family services to those involved at every level of government in developing family policies. Add to that the outreach done by senior staff, in terms of speeches, presentations, participation in conferences and countless media interviews, all of which keeps the Institute very grounded in its relationship with the many publics it serves.

The final point to be made is that surviving 50 years does not come easy. The social policy landscape is littered with the remnants of organizations that, even though they provided important and relevant services, did not manage to survive cutbacks in government funding, declines in supporting membership or failure to adapt to the communication realities that emerged over time. The Vanier Institute of the Family was fortunate to have been blessed by the establishment of an endowment fund when it was created. Yet it has taken solid and diligent administration by successive boards of directors, dedicated staff and reliable financial experts to

ensure its continued stability, which, combined with prudent expenditure management, has provided the Institute with core funding that has sheltered it from the forces that have laid waste to many good non-profit organizations.

There are other achievements to celebrate as well. Over the past years, interviews with former board members have produced a number of other important accomplishments that the Institute should take note of during its 50th anniversary. The Institute should celebrate what it does best, which is partnerships. It has always had partnerships with many other NGOs, universities and different levels of government. It would also be a good time to call attention to the respect that governments, institutions, non-profits and Canadian society in general have held for the Institute in its role as a non-judgmental, non-aligned mentor for families. The Institute should celebrate its role as a strong voice for reason by providing and interpreting facts and research in an assertive manner about what makes families strong.

British philosopher Bertrand Russell wrote that “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” It should come as no surprise that within the Vanier Institute’s list of core values one finds this principle: *Love as the only genuine force that binds individuals together in pursuit of common purpose and meaningful lives lived with and for others.* A potent mix this, love and knowledge: it seems to have worked for the Institute for 50 years!♥

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