

**For immediate release**

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## **Public schools are no place for proselytization, says Interfaith Grand River**

Interfaith Grand River, bringing together Waterloo Region's diverse faith communities and spiritual traditions, is deeply concerned about the Waterloo Region District School Board's recent decision to allow the distribution of Bibles by Gideons International through the public school system, about some of the media coverage of events surrounding this decision, and about expressions of intolerance in the community that have arisen as a result.

In our view, distribution of material by an organization whose members "share a desire to see the lost come to Christ" is an inappropriate activity in a public, secular school system. It is especially so in a religiously diverse community in which many of the students taking home the note about the Bibles would not be Christian.

The board's decision also appears to violate its own policy which requires that religious materials be for purposes of information and not proselytization. Its process lacked the necessary openness and consultation, and adherence to past practice appears to have prevailed over thoughtful decision-making.

In defence of the decision, it has been argued that it is non-discriminatory since any religious group would be allowed to distribute its own materials. In addition, the argument goes, parents are given the choice of refusing the Bibles by not signing the note that is sent home.

We believe that both these arguments miss the essential point that no religious materials, of any religious tradition or denomination, should be distributed in a public school for purposes of proselytization. The Bible, along with the sacred texts of all major religions, should be available to students in school libraries.

These arguments also ignore the seriousness with which many parents, especially new Canadians, view materials that come home from the school. Many parents may not consider it an option to refuse materials that come with the school's implicit approval.

Interfaith Grand River is not opposed to — and in fact strongly advocates — spiritual and ethical education in public schools, as well as education about the world's religions. However, this education needs to be carried out in a spirit of increasing knowledge, which is essential for living in harmony in a religiously diverse community, and not of promoting a particular religious belief.

Much of the media coverage surrounding the board's decision distorted the issues involved and served to exacerbate rather than heal divisions in the community. We understand the value of the personal element in the media's coverage, and appreciate that describing how individuals are affected by particular decisions and developments helps make what could otherwise be abstract issues more approachable for their audience.

However, responsible journalism requires taking into account the wider impact of a story, and much of the coverage of the Gideon Bibles issue failed this test. By focusing on an opinion expressed by a Muslim parent (who is a member of the steering committee of Interfaith Grand River) in response to a question from a reporter, instead of examining the circumstances of the board's decision, media helped turn the issue from a question involving the role of a public school system into one of Islam versus Christianity and placed the parent involved in a very vulnerable position.

Waterloo Region was a much more homogeneous community 30 years ago than it is today, religiously and otherwise. While younger people appear to have adjusted well to the new environment, many people who grew up in an earlier time have experienced a painful transition. In our view, some of the more extreme and hurtful opinions that have come out in response to the Gideon Bible controversy, on radio talk shows and in letters to the editor, are expressions of that pain.

But while we can acknowledge and understand the circumstances that lead people to express such views, we cannot simply stop there. Both the school board and the media occupy positions of community leadership, and we see it as their responsibility to help this community adjust to its new reality so that diversity becomes a source of enrichment rather than conflict.

In its editorial of November 18, the *Waterloo Region Record* suggested that "the board should talk with representatives of Interfaith Grand River, a group that includes members of this area's diverse faith communities." We endorse the *Record's* call for dialogue between the board and IGR, and we emphasize our willingness to act as a resource for the board and other concerned members of the community on this and other potentially divisive issues.

While the board's decision has already been implemented for this year, we ask the trustees to establish a more transparent and accountable process, take into account the diversity of the community, consult a wider range of community voices and reflect on the meaning of their role as trustees of a public school system before taking any such decisions in the future.

Founded in 2001, Interfaith Grand River (IGR) acts as a forum for dialogue among religious traditions and a community resource on multifaith issues. Its objectives include "to promote dialogue among our different traditions, leading to understanding and respect" and "to challenge expressions of religious and other intolerance in the community." It has met with Waterloo Region District School Board representatives on other issues in the past, as well as with other community institutions such as Grand River Hospital and the police.

IGR's active members come from numerous Christian denominations and the Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Neopagan, Sikh and Unitarian traditions. Since January 2009, Interfaith Grand River has operated as a program of Across Boundaries Multifaith Institute, a Canada-wide multifaith organization. More information about IGR can be obtained at <http://www.interfaithgrandriver.org>

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