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# Manitoba Humanist

Published by and  
for the  
Humanist  
Association of  
Manitoba

President: Barrie  
Webster

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***Editor: Catherine Ousey***

## **Upcoming events**

Humanist Association of Manitoba

### **Monthly Meeting February 10, 2007**

Viscount Gort Hotel 1670 Portage Ave. at Route 90

Meet and Greet 5:30

Dinner (may be ordered from coffee shop menu) 6:30

Meeting 7:30

Discussion Topics:

Winnipeg Harvest,

Religion in the Schools,

HAM's affiliation with the Humanist Association of Canada

### **March 10 Meeting**

Talk by students from Students Without Borders

Afrique 2007 Project

### **April 14 Meeting**

Speaker: Chris Tait

Lawyer and originator of the challenge  
to the Lord's Prayer in his high school

**All are welcome**

**HAM members hold AGM**

On Saturday, January 13, the Humanist Association of Manitoba held the Annual General Meeting.

Reports were presented from the executive. The meeting discussed new ways to raise funds, as the financial report indicates a net loss in 2006.

Membership has now risen to 47. New members Sophie Shulman, Donna Harris and Grant Rogerson were welcomed. The Outreach Committee reported a successful informational tabling at the University of Manitoba. Members were encouraged to check out the updated HAM website at <http://mb.humanists.ca/> Rob Muir has been working on the website.

Other Reports included the library, the newsletter and affiliation with HAC.

President, Barrie Webster gave a few details of the issue with a promise of more time at subsequent meetings for discussion.

Because of ongoing concern about HAC, the membership is urged to forward their HAM membership renewals directly to Treasurer Helen Friesen. The address is: 7 Pinehurst Lane, Mitchell, MB, R5G 2J3

If you need more information, Helen's email address is: [hfriesen@mb.humanists.ca](mailto:hfriesen@mb.humanists.ca) and her phone number is: 204 -326-8181.

A motion was passed to ratify the change of the name of the HAM Bylaws to HAM Constitution and to add a clause officially making HAM a non-profit organization to facilitate our charitable status with Taxation Canada.

Results of Election: Continuing as

President: Barrie Webster, Vice-President: Barry Hammond, Treasurer and Membership: Helen Friesen.

Continuing Executive Members: Miep Van Raalte, Catherine Ousey, Stefan Bourrier. New Executive Members: Heather McDonnell as Secretary, Sophie Shulman, Jeff Olssen, and Jason Van Raalte.

Members discussed topics and speakers for the year 2007.

Wendy Gerome, a humanist and Unitarian minister, will be in town for a speaking engagement on February 18<sup>th</sup> on Humanism and prayer. The suggestion was made to offer to take her out for dinner on behalf of HAM on February the 17<sup>th</sup>, and this would be open to members.

The meeting adjourned at 5:40 pm.

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## Letters to the Editor

**One family's fight**

Dear Editor,

My husband and I were very interested in your article concerning religious exercises in public schools. We have a personal interest in this issue as we have spent years challenging our children's administrators, superintendent and school board to make the necessary ethical and legal changes on that front.

While we have seen some positive results in some schools in our division, we are still battling the issue in our daughter's elementary school where the administration and staff insist on delivering their exercises in the classrooms at a time when all students are to be there. This has resulted in the exclusion of non-participants because they are told to go stand in the hall, which is psychologically damaging.

Alternatively, our school now gives non-participants the option of sitting at their desks during religious exercises which makes them appear defiant and immoral to their participating classmates which amounts to coercion and institutional bullying.

Our child is only one out of a handful of yearly non-participants which makes the issue of division along sectarian/non-sectarian lines all the more prominent and potentially damaging. She has also been the target of incessant psychological bullying and social exclusion by the majority of her classmates who, among other things, have told her she will go to hell if she does not believe in god.

Yet, the school often ignores or bends the rules and guidelines of the Manitoba School Act in order to cater to the wishes of the sectarian majority in the town. For

example, they still use ballots to collect the signatures and names of students who wish to participate even though the guidelines clearly state that schools must not be involved in any way in the process, not even out of convenience.

By ignoring these guidelines they are insidiously recruiting participants and pressuring parents, who might otherwise choose to opt out which would naturally balance out the numbers of participants to non-participants. It seems the school would rather create a climate of sectarianism over diversity, which has indirectly created an attitude of social intolerance. We have been following many court cases, some resolved, some in progress, which support our conclusions about the exclusionary and discriminatory way in which exercises are still being held in (continued next page)

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public schools today even though the law prohibits it. We have been looking for a provincial or national support network in which to tackle this monstrous injustice and are keen on getting involved

somehow. We reside in a rural area of Manitoba. Any advice or direction that you can give us would be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time and help,

Christine Matejka  
Minitonas, MB

## **Manitoba school trustee favours tolerance**

On December 12, 2006, I voted against a motion to allow for the provision of religious exercise in two schools within the Seine River School Division. It was the same way I have voted on “Petitions for Prayer” motions brought to the School Board on which I serve since the Province introduced the legislation in 1992. As a result of recent media coverage on this issue I have received many inquiries about the issue of prayer in the classroom and why I opposed this motion. The following is what I have been generally providing in response to those inquiries.

Reciting “The Lord’s Prayer” in public schools no longer exists in most jurisdictions in Canada. Most Provinces have recognized that the practice is discriminatory and not in compliance with

our rights under Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

I strongly believe that a person’s religious belief and/or their belief in a Greater Power are fundamental rights of everyone and that those beliefs need to be respected and tolerated by all.

However this is not an issue of religion, but of basic human rights and how we as a society respect the diversity of beliefs that exists in today’s society. Canada is a multicultural society that prides itself on how, amongst other things, we are respectful of the diversity of the religions that are practiced by the citizens of our communities.

I believe reciting “The Lord’s Prayer” in a classroom of children is

being disrespectful to the 19% of Canadians who do not believe in any God. It is also being disrespectful to the vast population of Canadian’s who’s religious beliefs are outside of Christianity, such a Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs and Native American Spiritualists to name but a few. People of those faiths make up as much as 16% of Canada’s population according to a recent survey commissioned by the Winnipeg Sun and reported in the January 18, 2007 Winnipeg Sun. That same survey indicates 21% of the Canadian population consider themselves atheists. There are also many Christian faiths that do not use the Lord’s Prayer as their prayer, or believe that prayer should be a personal matter. We have families from all of those communities in our schools. I do not believe a

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*“...21% of the Canadian population consider themselves atheists.”*

school should participate in or be the tool used to indoctrinate children into a religious belief that they may not subscribe to or understand. That is not the school's role and if we do that, we are being disrespectful and intolerant of their faith and beliefs. A tolerant and respectful society should not attempt to impose the religious beliefs of the majority on the minority.

The present Manitoba Public Schools Act directs that if a School Board receives a petition requesting religious exercise from parents of at least sixty children, or seventy-five percent of the school's student population in schools with a student population of less than eighty; that the School Board shall pass a motion to approve the religious exercises during school year for the children whose parents have petitioned. What some, but not all, schools in Seine River School Division had been doing when those petitions were received and approved by the Board, was to broadcast "The Lord's Prayer" over the PA. Unfortunately, in so doing, the school was also providing the "religious exercise" to all of its students including those children whose parents did not request "The Lords Prayer". That was neither

in compliance with the Act nor in compliance with the motion that the Board passed on the matter. As a result of recent dialogue within the Division that practice has stopped

The only real way for a school to comply with the Act, and the practice of most schools when they receive a petition, is also problematic. That is to segregate the children by either removing those children whose parents petitioned for prayer from the class; or to remove the children who were not named in the petition from the class. I am sure you can understand the problems that can occur when children are singled out; bullying, teasing and ridicule often are the result.

Consider if this situation were reversed and children of Christian parents had to participate in the recitation of a Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Muslim prayer in our Public Schools, or in the alternative, be removed from the classroom while that occurred. I believe most Christian parents would concerned about that, and rightly so. People's views on an issue can differ greatly when the issue does not impact on them negatively.

In summation, I opposed the motion passed by the Board on December 12, 2006, to allow religious exercise in two of its schools for the following reasons:

- I believe Prayer in school is contrary to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.
- Public Schools should be secular; they are not churches and should not promote any religion, let alone one over all others. Children as young as four years old attend our schools; they are extremely impressionable. I find it hard to believe that any parent would entrust something as important as the instilling of religious beliefs into their young child by individuals or institutions that may have beliefs which could be inconsistent with, or contrary to, their own religious beliefs.
- A parent who wishes to instill religious beliefs within their children should do so in their home and/or through their place of worship and/or through a private religious school. Currently only 21% of Canadians regularly attend a place of worship. It would appear that many parents are seeking the Public School system to provide the religious instruction for their children rather than taking them to a place of worship

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## Humanist Assoc. of Manitoba

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on a regular basis themselves. It's not the school's job, nor its role to be the spiritual leader of your children.

- The current legislation in Manitoba attempts to still provide the opportunity for religious instruction in school if parents want it. At the same time the legislation recognizes that not all parents have the same religious beliefs or wish their children to participate in prayer at school. Unfortunately it cannot be applied in schools without creating discriminatory and/or damaging results for some of the children in our schools by singling them out and removing them from the classroom. Teachers and school administration are faced with the unenviable task of trying to make a flawed process work without harm to their students or disruption to the school.

- I believe respecting the beliefs of a local people or group is important. However, in so doing we must ensure that we are not being disrespectful to, or trampling on the rights and beliefs of, others. We live in a pluralist

society where many beliefs exist with regard to the matter of religion. Schools cannot be the vehicle to impose the beliefs of a larger group onto the children of families who do not hold those beliefs. That is contrary to what I believe in, the values of Seine River School Division and inconsistent with the respectful kind of climate this Division has strived to create, and that I support.

Thank you for all of those who took the time to correspond with me and for sharing their views on this issue. I hope my rather lengthy dissertation can encourage more healthy debate and understanding on this issue.

Yours truly,

Gary Nelson  
Trustee,  
Seine River School Division

The Humanist Association of Manitoba  
Is seeking

### A Newsletter Editor

Duties Include:

- Receiving and proofreading articles, book reviews and letters to the editor
- Writing news articles and announcements
- Publishing a newsletter at the beginning of each month
- Sending the newsletter by email and Canada Post
- Attending Executive meetings once a month

If you enjoy writing and possess good proofreading skills please consider volunteering for this job

The current editor has samples, templates (for Microsoft Word), and address lists to pass on.

If interested please contact Barrie Webster 475-1266