



A NOVEL APPROACH AND AN INSPIRATIONAL *Model*

To counter the erosion of the French language, the Société de la francophonie manitobaine adopted a strategy in 2001 to address this concern.

BY CAMILLE HARPER

Daniel Boucher, Executive Director of the Société de la francophonie manitobaine (SFM) today as in 2001, remembers very well the discussions that led to the adoption of the *Toile de fond commune 2001-2050 : Agrandir l'espace francophone au Manitoba (Shared Framework 2001-2050: Expanding Francophone Space in Manitoba)*.

“It was time for a new strategic plan for the community and we hired consultant Ronald Bisson. He had done some research to gauge the pulse of the community and the numbers he had found revealed that the time had come to propose new approaches to address the challenges of a changing community. Strategies had to be implemented in a context where, for example, about 70% of the children in our schools were from exogamous marriages. (1) This was the new reality and we needed to find

proactive and positive solutions to ensure the progression of our language.”

The SFM board of directors (2) then took an approach that was new in the community: that of openness rather than withdrawal. Daniel Boucher: “We changed the discourse by bringing in the notion of expanding the Francophone space. Faced with a changing community, we decided that we had to adapt and open the doors to Francophone newcomers and Francophiles in immersion, give them more opportunities to speak French and make allies out of them.

“It was a real change in mentality. Before 2001, Francophones were still talking and organizing among themselves.”

While the SFM provided the impetus, the change in direction was achieved in agreement with the community. Marianne Rivoalen was Chair of the SFM board of directors at the time, until 2003: “We brought the community

together to decide how to increase our numbers. On September 29, 2001, we organized a day of reflection in Saint-Norbert.”

At this meeting, the *Shared Framework* was presented to the community. There were 150 people in attendance. While some people expressed concerns, the SFM assured everyone that the objective was to strengthen Manitoba's Francophonie and not to dilute it. Daniel Boucher: “There were a lot of questions, but the atmosphere was very positive. The *Shared Framework* was adopted. It was a historic meeting.”

An Innovative Approach

Manitoba's Francophone community was the first in Canada outside of Quebec to implement a concrete strategy that focused on Francophiles and Francophones from elsewhere, thereby responding to the priority established by the

DANIEL BOUCHER

On September 29, 2001, the Executive Director of the SFM, Daniel Boucher, presented the community with a historic and innovative strategy to increase the number of Francophones.



photo: Courtesy of Société historique de Saint-Boniface

Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada (FCFA) to focus on immigration. Its model was adopted a year later by the FCFA as a national strategy, and also by the Minister responsible for Official Languages, Stéphane Dion, in his Federal Action Plan.

Marianne Rivoalen confirms: "It was a truly innovative approach to the French fact in Manitoba, so everything had to be thought out. It was a challenge. But it was our reality. Even on our board, many of us were married to Anglophones, or had good friends who were newcomers or immersion students. It made sense to open our minds and hearts to that world."

Each organization and sector of the community has embarked on the project and has reviewed its own programming and service offerings to better reflect the *Shared Framework*. "Everyone made this growth strategy happen," notes Marianne Rivoalen.

The almost immediate success of the Shared Framework was also seen when Ibrahima Diallo, an immigrant from Africa, was elected in 2006 to represent Manitoba's Francophone community, and the election drew a standing ovation from the crowd.

Ibrahima Diallo was involved in the idea of expanding the Francophone space even before it was conceptualized: "When I was on the SFM board in 1988-1989, I was already talking about immigration and plural Francophonie. It wasn't a priority at the time, but I sowed the seed that gave us the *Framework*! It was a great decision, a healthy decision for the community. Without it, we would certainly have lost schools, such as the one in St. Léon, which closed in 2005 due to lack of enrollment."

For Daniel Boucher, "the election of Ibrahima Diallo demonstrated a recognition of newcomers as full-fledged assets of the community."

In fact, Marianne Rivoalen concluded by recalling that "as early as 2001, we told ourselves that the term 'Franco-Manitoban' would one day have to change to be more inclusive."

(1) An exogamous family is composed of two parents who have a different mother tongue.

(2) In 2001, the SFM board of directors consisted of: Marianne Rivoalen (Chair), Paul Léveillé (Vice-Chair), Aimé Gauthier (Secretary-Treasurer), Henri Bisson (Councillor, Eastern Region), Réal Déquier (Councillor, Rural/Urban Region), Guy Gagnon (Southern Region), Mona Lemoine (Urban Region) and Marina Caillier (Western Region). ▀



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photo: Archives La Liberté

SOCIÉTÉ FRANCO-MANITOBAINE

Une nouvelle orientation

La Société franco-manitobaine lance le défi aux institutions francophones d'assurer l'épanouissement de la communauté en tenant compte des nouvelles réalités sociales comme l'immigration, les mariages exogames et l'érosion linguistique.

The President of the Amicale de la francophonie multiculturelle du Manitoba, Tayeb Meridji, spoke to those gathered at Noël-Ritchot School about the positive impact of welcoming immigrants on the Franco-Manitoban community.