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Serving the Caribbean

09.06.2011 | Catholic The University of Dayton has one more graduation ceremony for the 2010-11 school year, awarding diplomas to Catholic educators in the Caribbean as part of a program that is evolving into the region's first Catholic university.

Seventeen students in Trinidad and Tobago will receive degrees Sept. 9 after completing the University's online master of arts in Catholic school leadership. The teachers and school administrators are the first graduates of the Catholic Religious Education Development Institute (CREDI), which combines online distance learning with on-site instruction by local facilitators.

"We are very proud of our successful collaboration with CREDI and excited about the prospect of continuing our work together to improve the quality of learning for children in Trinidad's Catholic schools," said Kevin Kelly, dean of the University of Dayton School of Education and Allied Professions. "We have learned important lessons in collaborating with our colleagues in Trinidad and look forward to using online learning to support the professional development of Catholic school educators throughout the world."

The Archdiocese of Port-of-Spain established CREDI in 2007 with the cooperation of the Trinidad and Tobago government, the University of Dayton and several local organizations. The master's in Catholic school leadership was the institute's first program and now has more than 70 students enrolled.

"This degree program is getting our country's Catholics up to what is required for education in the 21st century," said Monsignor Jason Gordon, former chairperson of CREDI and bishop-elect of the dioceses of Bridgetown and Kingstown. "Without the help of the University of Dayton offering this first degree program, it would have taken two or three years longer to get the institute started."

In January 2009, CREDI again partnered with the University of Dayton to establish an online master's degree in theology program. Today, the institute offers undergraduate and master's level programs in communication, music, counseling, business and professional development, theology and teacher and school leadership.

"We have an entire group of people we can serve, just to the south of us," said Sister Angela Ann Zukowski, M.H.S.H., director of the Institute for Pastoral Initiatives at the University of Dayton. "We have a moral responsibility as members of an international faith community to support our Caribbean neighbors, to support them by enhancing the best education opportunities available to them."

Zukowski is a course instructor at CREDI and has served as a partner with the Caribbean archdiocese for more than 18 years. In 1995, she helped create the Caribbean School for Catholic Communications, a three-year program conducted for one week each year that trains Catholic media professionals in the region.

The success of the communications program — along with the vision of the archdiocese — led to the creation of CREDI, which Zukowski said is leading to a diversity of quality Catholic higher education opportunities for Catholics in the region.

"My hope is the University of Dayton can demonstrate a great partnership with the Catholic Church to serve the whole Caribbean," she said. "Ultimately, I'd like to see the initiatives of CREDI become an outstanding Catholic University of the West Indies."

The institute crossed a significant hurdle in the pursuit of university status last year when the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago (ACTT) approved the institute's ability to develop its own courses and approved four bachelor of education programs. After starting with two full-time personnel, the institute now has about 60 faculty, 18 administrators and 600 students. Gordon said plans are underway to build an administrative home for CREDI this year, however, distance learning will remain a key feature.

"The idea is not to build a campus, where students come and sit in a classroom, but to focus on technology and deliver an

education in a cost-effective, efficient way, dispersed through Trinidad," he said. "We could never have done this 20 years ago."

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