

The Alberta Home Education Association
Some History, Its Mystery and Destiny
By Léo Gaumont

(Much has been written and said about this organization. For an excellent and thorough coverage of its history, see Dr. Michael Wagner's booklet, available through AHEA. Also, it may be instructive to review the three related articles entitled "How Did This Happen", "What Has AHEA Become" and "What About the Home Educators?" at <https://leogaumont.com/index.php/articles/> before proceeding with this article.)

I want to begin by clearly stating that even though I have personally had a long and rather tumultuous relationship with leading members of the Alberta Home Education Association (AHEA), almost since its inception, I do not want to disparage the individuals who have contributed so much to this provincial representative agency of the home education community. However, it is fair to say that in an imperfect world, things happen, some of which do not contribute positively towards stated objectives.

I truly believe that past decisions made by the AHEA leadership have mostly been made with the best of intentions. This is not to say that bad decisions were not made, but that sometimes well-meaning people simply don't know or understand all the pertinent facts before making important decisions. Sometimes it is difficult to see the potential long term effect of decisions. And, sometimes decisions can actually be influenced by outside sources to benefit themselves. Regardless, the problem is that it may take a long time for the consequences of decisions to manifest themselves. By the time they do, most of those who made the decisions are long gone, leaving behind others who may not be cognizant of how things came to be, nor aware of how to fix the problems.

Any organization which has existed more than one generation can find itself losing sight of the original reason for having been created, unless there is a consistent vigilant reminder of its purpose. If an organization successfully achieves the goal for which it was originally created, it either needs to disband, or find a new mission, or it will meander into purposelessness. This latter "mission creep" usually ends with a confused leadership trying to determine the function and purpose of an organization that has lost its identity. At this point, the temptation is to delay or to deny that anything is amiss, especially when overwhelmed by inside and/or outside factions.

An agency that has reached this point of "existence at any cost" is very difficult to redeem. Unless the observant can convince the rest of the need for redemption, it continues to exist without meaning and without purpose. Once here, there is but one alternative other than simply closing shop, and that is the replacement of the impotent leadership with another one which is clearer about its objectives and mission. This may have happened at the 2019 AHEA Annual General Meeting in April.

The purpose of this essay is to attempt to clarify AHEA's *raison d'être* with the sincere hope that it can be redeemed and to articulate why this is needed.

A Brief History

We should all be cognizant of the fact that we cannot plan ahead without knowing precisely where we are, which has been determined by past decisions and directives. Hence, there is a need to know what has transpired to get us to where we are today.

The Alberta Home Education Association (AHEA) was created by dedicated home educating pioneers of the home education movement in 1986. It was a time of uncertainty and conflict, some of which was more perceived than real. Two years later the new School Act addressed home education for the first time. This event greatly affected the AHEA mandate which was to lobby on behalf of home educators. When the existing mandate was fulfilled, and kudos are needed here, AHEA's focus changed.

To understand this, it is important to know that prior to the proclamation of the new School Act in 1988, students had to be registered in their local jurisdiction involving full funding. Most school boards simply shrugged their shoulders when informed of parental intentions to home educate and cashed the students in by including them in their student list with very few providing any assistance. Some administrators harboured serious ideological opposition to educating children at home, thus creating very difficult environments for some of the early home educators in this province.

AHEA was essentially created to protect these folks and to lobby for better conditions. Indeed, the new School Act made it possible to escape antagonistic school boards and to register to educate children at home through any willing non-resident board. Whether AHEA was directly responsible for this new provision, is today only assumed. Whatever the case, AHEA's primary reason for existence was fulfilled and a new mission was needed.

A New Mission

Once home educators were given the ability to escape unsupportive school boards, AHEA took on the new mission of finding a friendly school board that was willing to accept students from other jurisdictions. This was not an easy task as school boards generally did not understand the implications of this new law or saw home educators as a potential source of problems. However, by demonstrating the potential for serious increases in funding, AHEA eventually came to convince a struggling Catholic school system in Oyen, Alberta to become one of the first willing non-resident home education boards in the province.

Two things need to be explained respecting the educational environment of this era. The agreement with Oyen preceded the amalgamation of school boards which saw this school system later become a part of Christ the Redeemer Catholic School Division, headquartered in Okotoks, Alberta, the present day authority for the Centre for Learning at Home. It also predates the reduction of home education funding from full to 25% of base funding along with the mandate to make half of that available to help parents with expenses. Private school authority to register for home education had not yet been granted. Regardless of these coming changes, AHEA had once again successfully fulfilled its mission. A third reason for existence was needed.

AHEA's Third Mission

Although a private third party contractor offering home education expertise already existed when private schools were given permission to register for home education, the fact that most parents were looking for Christian sponsors created the opportunity for the establishment of many more. These contractors came to advance themselves as *de facto* home education authorities creating a competitive market for home educators and transforming the home education community from a single somewhat unified one into sectarian groupings determined largely by whom the parents were registered with. This division of the home education community necessitated a unifying solution. The promotion of a centralized gathering was now AHEA's main objective and the Alberta Home Education Association Convention became the major focus of its third mission.

It is important to understand that even though AHEA presumed to represent all home educators of the province, only some were actually members. In an attempt to represent everyone, almost any organization was allowed to exhibit at this convention. With an increasing number of home education providers vying for a limited number of home educators, the competition led to questionable marketing tactics. The most concerning of these was the coercing of parents to see home education as merely an extension of school rather than an alternative to it. This development was driven by the fact that more money was available for school based public programming, and so the lines between home education and home schooling began to blur with the introduction of blended and aligned programming as well as the normalization of government "standards" and high school accreditation.

AHEA found itself being manipulated by schools and agencies to draw families away from parent-directed home education to a more school based approach, thus creating a need to revisit its purpose and rethink who it was representing. AHEA then determined to represent and serve what became known as traditional home educators. Unfortunately, no real attempt was made to define what was meant by the term "traditional", opening the door to the future hybridization of home-school offerings.

At this juncture, blended and fully aligned providers (mostly Catholic schools) were dis-invited from the AHEA Convention. Only third party contractors and private schools providing for traditional home education (essentially, non-blended providers) continued to have access to the exhibit hall. In spite of the fact that AHEA had declared traditional home education to be its constituency, some "traditional" providers began to offer variations of government programming in addition to traditional home education. Most of this was in the form of offering to fulfill high school requirements for credits. Even though this was in clear violation of the rules for entry, AHEA seemed to turn a blind eye to this compromise.

Hence, variations of public programming crept back into the convention through third party agencies who, while ostensibly there to advance traditional programming within a Christian worldview, had discovered that they could benefit financially by taking advantage of parental fears and ignorance respecting government expectations and high school accreditation.

AHEA Relinquishes Control

Every grouping has its winners, losers and survivors and the home education industry is no different. One particular home education provider outgrew all the others, eventually representing a significant percentage of the home education community. Since a large plurality of the province's home educators came to be associated with Wisdom Home Schooling (WHS), it naturally came to dominate things related to home education in the province, including the activities of the Alberta Home Education Association where its influence resulted in nearly every official and volunteer of the AHEA organization to be either registered with, employed by, or advisory to WHS.

In time, the preponderance of Wisdom Home Schooling associated AHEA members came to exercise an unhealthy amount of influence over the AHEA leadership and functions. The direction taken by the provincial organization increasingly reflected the wishes of WHS and what would benefit its long term growth and survival. Annual General Meetings became more coerced and manipulated and the exhibit hall came to demonstrate the overt preponderance of the presence and influence of WHS.

When Wisdom Home Schooling and its associate Trinity Christian School were shut down by the NDP government following alleged improprieties in October of 2016, AHEA directed its members to defend and support WHS, unrealistically equating WHS's survival with that of home education in this province. No doubt, there were a large number of very nervous parents who would have been negatively affected by this government action. However, other past events involving other providers that negatively affected large numbers of parents had also occurred, yet without AHEA intervention. One should consider that a majority of AHEA decision makers at that time were set to lose their jobs, positions and affiliations with WHS, had this third party contractor been terminated.

Two years later, when private schools were being threatened with loss of funding and accreditation for refusing to comply with the NDP Minister of Education's mandate for GSAs, AHEA again demonstrated its affinity for the industry, presuming to stand with the private schools, ostensibly in defence of Christian home education in Alberta. However, AHEA's concerns diminished when WHS's Trinity Christian School capitulated to the Minister's demands respecting the directives of the anti-parent Bill 24. AHEA's making no effort to inform the home educating community of the inherent dangers of these developments and how individual schools had responded further indicated its loss of original direction, purpose and focus.

AHEA's mission looked to have disintegrated into being the representative, supporter and defender of the associated industry particularly for one independent contracted home education specialist (ICHES). Unfortunately, while claiming that families and children were important, AHEA seemingly had lost its pre-eminent reason for existence. The domination of WHS within the Alberta home education movement eventually influenced AHEA to essentially become the voice of the largest home education provider rather than that of the greater home education community.

Most home educators did not see this gradual take over of the AHEA organization as most were either ignorant, disinterested or already associated in some way with the dominant provider. Whether this seeming loss of control to the dominant provider was by design or the natural outcome of a bigger pool of volunteers may never actually be established. Whatever the case, the 2019 annual general meeting appears to have been a good first step towards the reclamation of control by the general membership.

AHEA's Mystery

Exactly what is AHEA's *raison d'être*? Is it a lost cause or just simply lost? I would suggest the latter.

The Alberta Home Education Association was originally created by committed, mostly Christian individuals wanting to make the home education world a better place. It is safe to say that it has been successful in most of its missions, but it has recently become confused regarding its advocacy. It seems to have forgotten that it is here to serve and protect the home education community, families and students, not the industry that has grown as a result of the associated government funding. AHEA no longer seems to be listening to the voice of its constituents, but rather to a louder one of external and self-serving outside agencies. It appears to have confused its Christian base. It is apparently unsure about its message or it no longer has one. Has it allowed itself to be corrupted? It seems to no longer know what it is or what it should be doing. AHEA has become a mystery. It seems to have lost its vision, lost its identity, lost its way and confused its *raison d'être*, unless the recent changes in leadership redirects its way.

While the Alberta Home Education Association is not the only home education group in the province, it is the oldest and best positioned to represent all the province's home educators, whether they be active members or not, Christian or not, home schooling, home educating, unschooling or otherwise. There is a need for a collective and unified voice to represent, advance and defend the cause of all parents wanting to reclaim the authority and corresponding responsibility for the education of their children. This was why AHEA was created, but this no longer seems to be clear. What happened?

AHEA's Christian roots demands that it makes inclusion part of its mandate as this is what Christians have been instructed to do, yet without attempting to be all things to all men, the impossibility of which can only end in compromise and consequent loss of faith, while effectively pleasing no one. AHEA needs to be clear about being Christian without being sectarian. To lose this vision is to lose AHEA's original identity.

Now that the problem of lost identity, purpose and mission has been identified, there remains one thing left to do. However, solving the issue has been problematic. While most members were likely oblivious and/or disinterested in what AHEA had become, some have been demanding answers, particularly why AHEA seems to be lost.

Today, AHEA is mystifyingly disconnected from its original cause of freeing parents from having to submit to government and is unwittingly treating the province's home educators as subservient to directives of outside agencies. This was made abundantly

clear when it was willing to sacrifice parental authority on the Minister of Education's desk in 2016 (<https://www.educationunlimited.ca/ahea-campaign>), when AHEA offered Wisdom Home Schooling to pilot a program of evaluation for home educated students without having input from parents. AHEA had slowly drifted from being the defender of the home educating from the government to that of using parents to appease the government in order to ensure the survival of the industry. AHEA seemed confused.

Clarification of Purpose

It is true that every agency will eventually lose its way if its original mission is not constantly being reviewed and/or renewed. It is easy to default to becoming a bureaucracy whose primary objective becomes one of doing whatever is needed to survive. However, this is hardly a mission, as it lacks vision. Unless there is a clear reason for its existence, AHEA will continue to flounder, lose its purpose and position of importance as the true representative of all of the province's home educators and continue to be subject to being taken over by self-serving outside agencies. Something has to change.

AHEA has no business defending the province's private schools. There is already an agency that has that purpose and objective.

AHEA has no business defending the purpose and place of ICHESs or other third party agencies. These are businesses that should defend themselves. Even so, in this misdirected activity, AHEA has been very inconsistent in its application, seemingly favouring one ICHES while completely ignoring the antics or plights of others. AHEA should be protecting home educators from being exploited by these agencies.

AHEA has no business being an arm of one particular agency, no matter how big its representation. To do so is to make all parents who have chosen to notify through any other agency second class citizens of AHEA and by extension, of the home education community of this province.

AHEA was created by Christian folks wanting the freedom to train and teach their children as they saw fit. The majority of home educators still share this faith base and it is important for AHEA to conduct itself from this perspective, demonstrating the Christian command to love, by equally representing people of other faiths without compromising its own Christian foundation.

AHEA's Destiny

How can members direct the Alberta Home Education Association's future?

To start, there has to be clear checks and balances as to who is allowed to occupy positions of leadership within the AHEA organization. Although a reasonable argument can be made that the largest provider in the province has the greatest pool of volunteers, there still needs to be reasonable measures implemented to prevent AHEA from being unduly monopolized or influenced by a single agency. Individuals with conflicting loyalties should not be in decision making or advisory positions. Everyone directly connected with the administration of any home education provider should be

disqualified from being on the AHEA Board. Unless this is implemented, AHEA will continue to be potentially manipulated by the agency with the largest population and/or consequent influence. Being subverted to represent anyone other than the home education community should not be happening.

To further reduce the potential for corruption, ALL home education providers should be banned from actively participating in the convention. Even though many attendees enjoy meeting their associate providers at the convention, allowing these agencies, many of which “stretch” or “bend” the rules, into the exhibit hall is allowing them the opportunity to coerce home educators into supporting the industry. Since a majority of providers have clearly indicated their willingness to compromise the faith for funding (see <https://www.educationunlimited.ca/bill-24-and-the-alberta-home-educator>), AHEA should avoid providing the industry access to potential “clients”. One needs only observe how many of these third party organizations have violated Christian ethics or ask if they would be as keen to attend, if home education funding ceased, to see their true objectives. Industry insiders must be permanently barred from the AHEA Conference, the exhibit hall and the leadership! AHEA must stop confusing the industry with the ministry.

However, to completely ban key players of the home education industry from any participation within the organization is to disenfranchise those with valuable insights. To best continue accessing this wisdom without inviting corruption, it has wisely been suggested that AHEA should not just ban insiders from participating in decision making but that it should seek input from experienced and knowledgeable people through the creation of an advisory board. This does not preclude positive input as long as it is through proper channels, but this should discourage the advancement and protection of agencies who could harm home education in order to advance or protect themselves. To prevent a preponderance of any one group, AHEA should be careful of keeping a balanced representation of agencies on this board.

Publicizing all the names along with the home education affiliation of all who are directly involved with the administration of all AHEA's affairs and that of the advisory board should at least reduce the possibility of unwittingly being coerced into representing a single part of a large and diverse home educating community. Also, unless duly elected to the AHEA Board, or listed as being in an advisory capacity, precautions should be taken to avoid backroom power brokers from having illicit and/or undue influence in AHEA matters. Transparency will go a long way to ensuring a balanced representation.

To avoid any possibility of financial mismanagement, all books and records need to be audited annually by a reputable individual or firm and all year end reports must be fully disclosed on the web site. It is imperative that AHEA be transparent in all its financial activities as well, especially since this involves things that could easily take it down. Accountability is a very serious obligation, not an option.

One more thing. Doing nothing is not an option. Inaction will only see AHEA's decline into irrelevance and even oblivion. It is time for AHEA to reclaim its proper place within the home education community.

Conclusion

AHEA's *raison d'être* should never have changed. It may have lost its way, but it can be redeemed, if and only if, it restores its focus on advancing and defending Christian home education from all potential enemies as its single mission. Unless a sincere concerted effort is made to do so, it can only continue to disintegrate. The incredible outcome of the April 12, 2019 Annual General Meeting clearly showed that the home education community has not given up on AHEA while making it clear that it believes AHEA should be refocussed on its task from its Christian foundation. This event will likely prove to be a pivotal moment in AHEA's history.

AHEA needs to clearly comprehend that its existence is ultimately made necessary by parents wanting to freely educate their children. AHEA has to be every parent's voice in uncompromisingly defending and protecting them from both the potentially antagonistic government as well as from an increasingly mercenary home education industry. There is no other place for parents to go. AHEA is needed and it has to distinctly represent parents, no one else: and it must make a concerted effort to avoid being drawn away from this focus and reason for being.