



THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF CANADA
Ottawa Diocesan Council
Organization Standing Committee



Inspired by the Spirit, Women Respond to God's Call

COMMUNIQUE #2

SEPTEMBER 2017

TO: Parish Organization Standing Committee Chairpersons
From: Lynn Lavictoire, Diocesan Organization Chairperson

***The League, like the church, must become like a “building under construction,”
a welcoming home which is being called to “open its doors wider.”***
National Spiritual Advisor Bishop William McGrattan

The subject of membership has become an important issue in the CWL as declining numbers have raised the question of the viability of the League moving into the future. These concerns motivated the national executive to begin a process of strategic planning, or as National President Margaret Ann Jacobs put it, “planning strategically.” This included a presentation by Dr. Reginald Bibby and a town hall session at the 97th Annual National Convention in August 2017. Both these events provided important insights into the issue of declining membership.

Dr. Bibby is one of Canada’s leading experts on social and religious trends in Canada. He reflected on the secularization of Canadian society which has seen a substantial drop in weekly church attendance (60% in 1945, 39% in 1975, 25% in 2005, and even lower today). Until recently, this trend led sociologists to believe Christianity in Canada was dying; yet, nothing could be further from the truth.

Worldwide, Christianity is on its biggest roll in history. Between the years 1950 and 2000, Roman Catholicism grew from one-half billion to one billion people (200 million in China) and it is projected that by the year 2050, Christianity will top three billion people! In Canada, immigration added 500,000 new Catholics to the population between 2001 and 2011 with 25% coming from Europe and the rest coming from areas such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia. By 2050, population growth in Canada will be completely sustained by immigration. The good news is the Catholic Church is growing, not shrinking.

Another piece of good news is that the Catholic immigrants who have become active in our parishes are typically younger than the host population. As well as growing, we can also expect the Catholic Church in Canada to be infused with a greater vitality and new life.

The CWL has not benefited from the positive impact of immigration. Since 1985, the membership of the CWL has dropped from a high of 130,000 to 83,000 today. This is reflected in the fact that 2.8% of all Catholic women were part of the CWL in 1962 while only 1.2% are involved today.

A contributing factor is change in society. There are currently three times as many women working outside the home as there were in 1930. Taking on more responsibility, women have become more pragmatic about how they invest their time and money. They remain open to greater involvement in church activities as long as they feel it is worthwhile.

The town hall, which followed Dr. Bibby’s presentation, was an interactive session involving members at the convention as well as members all across Canada. A series of six questions was asked focusing on League strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. A preliminary summary of the responses for three of the questions was presented the following day. One question was, “Considering all the League’s programs and work, of what are you most proud?” The most common responses centered on social outreach (charity, social justice and service), belonging and spirituality. Another question was, “What is the one thing you would like to see the League stop doing?” The most common responses included inflexibility (rigid, resistance and living in the past) and unfairness (agendas, excuses, cliques, and bullying). And a third question was, “What does the League of the future look like to you?” The most common responses were innovative, presence, structure, focused and relevance.

Dr. Bibby's presentation and the town hall provided strong indication of the direction the League needs to go in order to reach out to new members. Based on the preliminary results of the town hall, members have a lot to be proud of and a lot of optimism for the future of the League. However, in a recent survey involving 1,500 participants carried out by Dr. Bibby, two-thirds of Catholics are not familiar with the CWL. Canada-wide, that equates to four million Catholic women who need to be informed. The *Leading the League* manual (go to www.cwl.ca and follow the "Resources" + "Manuals" links) provides good advice on doing this including prayers, speeches, bulletin board and parish bulletin announcements, and more. Even if only 1% of the women eventually joined the CWL, that would be 40,000 new members!

There is also the influx of Catholic immigrants who would benefit from membership in the League if we were to reach out in a culturally sensitive way and address their interests and needs. During the national convention, one immigrant member commented that she saw few other immigrant members when she looked around the meeting room. In other words, there is an opportunity to welcome immigrant Catholic women by proactively identifying newly arriving families, helping them make the adjustment to Canadian life, introducing them to the church community, and embracing them with our CWL love. If the women were to join the League, they would inject youthfulness and vitality as well as make wonderful ambassadors for other immigrant families arriving in Canada.

Dr. Bibby pointed out that recruitment is of little benefit unless League participation is seen as worthwhile. This has to be a concern given the perception of inflexibility and unfairness identified during the town hall. New members are unlikely to remain if there is no room for them to grow and contribute. It suggests we need to recapture the pioneering mentality of the women who founded the CWL and worked together to achieve a common vision. Their success was fueled by an all hands on deck no help refused mentality focused on mission. Of course, as the League grew, it was necessary to develop an organizational structure as well as regulations and guidelines to support and sustain the mission. However, when the focus on structure and ingrained patterns of doing things takes precedence over mission it opens the door to inflexibility, entitlement, internal politics, and favouritism.

The CWL is too large to return to its formative period but it is possible to recapture the flexibility and excitement of that early experience. The main resource of the League is its people and taking care of those people is of paramount importance. Reaching out to members undergoing difficult times, especially those who are not well known and may rarely attend meetings, can have a very lasting and positive impact on their future engagement in the League.

Recapturing our mission focus and making the CWL an organization that is worthwhile for all Catholic women starts with us. It means being there to help and nourish the growth of our sisters and being flexible enough to allow them to grow through their own mistakes. We need to open things up and engage as many members as possible in their ideas and their participation. Growth, not perfection or privilege, needs to be the goal.

With the strategic planning initiative now underway, the national executive has opened up the windows to breathe new life into the CWL. It is an exciting opportunity in which we can be the change by allowing the Lord to create new hearts in us. If we do that, new members will come! ☩