

Enhancing the League Presentation
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As Catholics and Christians it is our mission to live our baptismal promise to spread the Light of Christ by ministering to the needs of others. We are called to joyfully use our God-given gifts for the common good of society. Have you ever viewed your membership in the League as a ministry? As members of the Catholic Women's League, we work for "God and Canada". Our mission statement says "The Catholic Women's League of Canada calls its members to grow in faith and to witness to the love of God through ministry and service."

In the Bible, Romans 12, it states:

"For as one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another."

Several years ago a one-day mission was held at my parish. The clergy hosting the mission requested that a meal be provided for the participants. My husband and I gathered a team together and prepared and served a roast beef dinner. During the meal I was speaking to one of the mission leaders and expressed my regret in not being able to participate in the spiritual program. He asked me how much time I spent in preparing the meal. He said when you work at serving others, it is the equivalent of time spent in prayer. His words gave me a whole new outlook about service, prayer and ministry.

Let's now look at various aspects of the League and explore ways that we can enhance our experience.

Standing Committees

At present the League has many standing committees and is recommending that they be reduced to only three committees, faith, service and social justice.

The faith ministry may involve organizing Bible study, offering support to the clergy, presenting Bibles or rosaries to youth, praying the rosary and arranging prayer services or retreats.

Service ministry may involve outreach to various groups in need, such as hosting parish receptions, offering breakfast programs for youth or cleaning up public places.

Social justice ministry is all about the well-being of society and about advocacy. Social justice addresses the structural causes of injustice that violate God's laws, such as defending human rights, human dignity, the environment, and access to life's essentials like food, shelter, education and

employment. We are called to be the voice of the poor, the marginalized and vulnerable. Councils may choose to provide and serve meals at homeless shelter, host letter-writing campaigns and may even identify an issue and write a resolution.

League Gatherings

All League gathering should be pleasant experiences, positive and friendly. I heard it takes fewer muscles to smile rather than to frown. A smile expresses happiness and joy while a frown indicates sadness or worry. Our League experiences should be expressed in joyful service.

Pope Francis emphasized the importance of being joyful and described joy as "a gift from God". The pope said, and I quote, "*Sometimes melancholic Christians' faces have more in common with pickled peppers than the joy of having a beautiful life. If we keep this joy to ourselves... our hearts will grow old and wrinkled and our faces will no longer transmit great joy.*"

As we carry out our League works, we need to show great joy in our hearts and on our faces. No one finds joy when they hear criticism, negative comments or seeing faces that look like, as Francis said, "pickled peppers". Everyone has off days, but we can CHOOSE to be pleasant, positive and inviting.

Meeting Schedules

When does your council hold its meetings? Many senior members are reluctant to go out in the evenings. Have you considered having your meeting right after Sunday Mass? One council, I know, has their meetings immediately following Sunday Mass and serves a soup-and-sandwich lunch. Members who are already at the church for mass may be more likely to stay and attend the meeting, even if a lunch is not offered.

When I was first on my parish executive. The diocesan council held their meetings and conventions on weekdays. This excluded all the working women, me included. When my diocese changed their convention to a weekend the attendance numbers doubled.

Meeting Groups

Did you ever notice at meetings, the same people always sit together and maybe in the same place? Get people to switch groups. One meeting I attended the leader, took cartoons, cut them into a few pieces, like a puzzle. When participants entered, they were handed a puzzle piece. When everyone had arrived, the attendees had to find people with the same cartoon and put the picture back together. The ones with the same picture became a group for that meeting and had ice-breaker games to get to know more about each other. It is especially important to do these kinds of activities when there are new-comers.

Know Your Members

A little over a year ago, the Welcome Program was introduced from National to give parishes ideas on how to make members feel more welcome. It also provides strategies to help councils learn about their members, their

interests, how the members' talents can be best utilized and how much of a time commitment are they willing to make. Has your council downloaded the program from the National website? When the parish council knows their members, they can be asked to serve in the most effective way.

Women have different reasons for joining the League. Members get engaged according to their comfort level. However, they choose to serve, they need to feel a sense of calling, a purpose and a feeling of belonging. They want to use their talents to enrich projects and contribute to the success of the council's activities.

Women's lives are different than they were in the past. Just because a member does not attend a meeting, she may still want to participate in council projects. There needs to be flexible options for participation. Some people prefer to work individually or in small groups. Consider forming committees on a short-term basis to complete projects, like for fund-raising, hospitality, letter-writing, mentorship, reception, social-media and communications.

Communication

Communicating with members is important. We found out just how important this is over the last few years, haven't we. When a message is sent to members, is it going to each and every member? Many councils have been relying on the computer for email messages and Zoom calls. How do you send the information to those who are not online? Using various modes of communication must be considered. I know of one council who published a newsletter and sent it to members by email. The members who were not online, had the newsletters hand-delivered by students looking for volunteer hours. Even if the newsletter had to be sent by mail, the numbers may not be terribly excessive.

I know of several parish council presidents who called every one of their members, just to keep in touch. I also know of a priest who telephoned every one of his parishioners when churches were closed.

Council's Activities

Each council is different in choosing their League activities, to find what works for them. They need to determine what was done in the past, what projects should they continue to do, what activities should be discontinued and what new activities should be tried. As times change and people age, councils may not be able to do some of the activities that involve a great deal of energy and time. The annual reports indicated that very few councils have new members under the age of 40. Maybe the League will be able to attract younger members, but, realistically, we have to look at today's membership. A council has to choose what the council can and cannot do.

It may opt to only focus on one or two activities such as gathering to pray the Rosary, hosting a workshop, supporting a foster child or presenting sacramental gifts.

Consider connecting with members outside of meetings. Perhaps the council could hold a coffee break or fellowship evening, where members gather just to socialize. Members may be interested in forming a book club, attending a prayer meeting or spiritual retreat.

New Members

Attracting new members is important for the League's existence. New members bring fresh ideas, different perspectives to the League and expands the opportunities to serve the church and community.

It is not easy to attract new members but councils must find ways to boost their membership and make the council more vibrant. Every member should be on the lookout for new members and consider herself part of the membership committee!

Programs

It is important for councils to offer interesting meetings, programs and speakers that will make members want to come back. One of the most successful meetings I ever attended was when a council hosted a presentation about detecting breast cancer. Speakers from the breast screening program discussed and demonstrated early detection. I think every woman from the parish was there and even some non-Catholics. The hall was packed. What topics are of interest to your members? Are they interested in health or social justice issues? Would they like to learn a craft like cake decorating?

Invite guests and prospective members to meetings or special events. Once you succeed in bringing guests in, make sure they like what you do, feel welcomed and had a good time. It's a sure bet that some of those guests will want to come back and join.

Leadership

New leaders are essential for councils to move forward. Do you know of councils where the same people have served as president or on the executive for ten or twenty years? I am sad to say, that I do. Some councils are growing stale because of this. For new people to step forward, the old-timers need to step back to give fresh faces a chance to volunteer. It may be difficult to get new people to volunteer, but they might if the old guard gives them the chance. Educate and mentor the new executive members so they feel comfortable in their role.

When looking for people to lead a project it may be necessary for two people work together. Some people feel more comfortable having someone else to share the responsibility. Although it is frowned on, if a council cannot find a president, some have chosen to be co-presidents to share the workload.

However, only one name can appear as president, officially. Some co-presidents choose to switch roles after their two-year term ends.

Advertise the League

Put your council on display. Make some business cards or brochures about your council with the name of the council, the website, if you have one, and the contact person's name, phone number and e-mail address. You might include the location, time and dates of your regular meetings with the phrase "All are Welcome." Encourage members to give these out along with a personal invitation to your meetings.

Consider having a few members attending Sunday Mass or other parish activities handing out brochures and other information about the League and the council's activities. Set up a display table with the council photo albums to start the conversation. Print out a calendar of events to distribute and invite parishioners to attend. Encourage parish ladies to stop by a meeting and see what's happening. You never know when you might strike a responsive chord with someone who is just looking to get involved.

Make the Most of Your Service Projects

Every time you do a service project, promote your council. When you donate to a charity, inform the staff about what the CWL is about and ask them to join. Wear your League insignia, such as pins, scarves and sashes, when presenting cheques or making presentations to charities. Send pictures to the local newspapers with an explanation about the event. Promote these events in your parish bulletin.

Member Recognition

Councils should recognize members in various ways. Following an event, either publicly or privately, thank the people who participated. Keep a number of small gifts on hand, such as items with the CWL logo like rosaries, pens and notepads or even homemade gifts.

Present service pins annually to members. The service pins are available from the national office in 5-year increments and councils should plan to hold a special event to present the awards. Certificates can also be given to recognized contributions made by individual members.

Educate Your Members

The more members know about the CWL and its history, the better they can educate prospective new members about our wonderful organization. There are many resources available on the CWL websites at all levels to with information and workshops. Play quiz games at meetings or ask Life Members or members of the diocesan council to make presentations to your council.

Have Fun

Does your council ever hold fun events? Organize a party and invite members and prospective members to attend. While having a good time is the main objective of the get together, you can also work in some

information about the League and even a soft sell in joining. Some suggestions could be:

- With this being the 70th Anniversary of Queen Elizabeth's reign, hold a "high tea", where everyone wears their fancy dresses, hats and jewels, brings their own china cup and saucer and serve little sandwiches and cakes.
- Have a Hawaiian or Caribbean party, wear bright colours, grass skirts, leis, serve punch and learn how to hula dance.
- Have a catered dinner inviting spouses for special times like around Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter or St. Patrick's Day
- One year at a Christmas party, gag gifts were given with joke certificates, a bandana for someone with a colourful personality; a light bulb for one who brightens everyone's day. I was given a wooden spoon because I like to stir things up.

A small council may want to invite a nearby council to work together on an event. Whether it is a social event or a fund-raiser, it may be easier with more people working together.

During this period of COVID, councils have faced quite a few challenges. Collecting annual membership dues and the regular membership drives have been difficult. Keeping the council's outlook positive has been a challenge, as well. How has your council coped?

In conclusion, I ask that you keep the Mission Statement as a focal point of all your League work, as it shows what our organization is about. Prayer is the binding force of the League!

Also think of the words of St. Teresa of Calcutta

"You can do what I cannot do.

I can do what you cannot do.

Together we can do great things."