

DEVELOPING MEMBERS AND INCREASING MEMBERSHIP

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St. Margaret Mary Parish Council, Hamilton, Ontario



St. Margaret Mary Parish is a dynamic community of approximately 3,000 families, which makes it one of the largest parishes in the Diocese of Hamilton. Over the years and still today, we have been fortunate to have had inspiring leadership from our parish pastors, and many of our parishioners have found the time to share their energy and experience in developing and sustaining a large number of parish activities. From the children's liturgy and the youth ministry to the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Women's League, there is something for everyone to be involved in. Recently, our parish celebrated its 40th anniversary and our council had the opportunity to host a brunch where we were proud to recognize seven past presidents including our founding charter president, Helen Felker.

On February 13, 2006, Agnes Bedard, then national president and Mary Carlin, diocesan president, attended one of our regularly scheduled general meetings and Agnes presented us with an award in recognition of our significant increase in membership over the previous year. Since that time, many people have asked how we were able to increase our membership from 216 to 267, an increase of almost 20 per cent in just one year. The answer very simply is **personal and telephone contact**. A few months ago we received a request to write an article for *The Canadian League* describing our experience. This is our story.

Barbara Messner was our council president from 2002 to 2005. Barbara's experience in assuming the role of president is probably one with which many can relate. When she first took on this new responsibility, she did not feel comfortable addressing large groups of people. Barbara speaks with wry humour about the creative brainstorming that she did to come up with ideas to avoid public speaking and still meet her responsibilities as president. One of those ideas was to follow up on an offer by the diocesan executive to meet with other councils. It was there that the idea for the parishes' first "Membership and Coffee Sunday" was formed. Pat Crawford, the diocesan president at that time and Georgina Burke, then diocesan 1st president, addressed each of the masses on that day and the parish women were invited to meet with

them following mass. Applications for membership were at the ready.

Barbara and her executive also sought to increase membership by trying to make the meetings more interesting. A revised questionnaire was circulated to members asking for volunteers for identified activities, as well as suggestions for discussion topics and activities that might interest the membership. The executive also re-instituted a telephone tree. This activity is recognized as an essential component of our success and Betty Ann Simon has been instrumental in coordinating and supporting this work. She has developed and maintains a list of current members and has assigned volunteers to contact groups of members with reminders of meetings and planned activities. This telephone support is also used to generate volunteers to support events that we host. Betty Ann always provides the core "phoners" with detailed information, which helps to eliminate miscommunication. She, and we, agree that the personal touch of a telephone call goes a long way in helping to connect with the women of our parish.

Telephone contact, word of mouth and advertising of meetings/speakers/activities in the bulletin and by posters helped to promote not only membership but attendance at our general meetings ensuring an average of at least 30 to 35 people in attendance at most monthly meetings. Our current executive is working on ways to continue to increase membership and we would like to try to connect more with the young women of our parish. We are currently working on the final touches for a new member's handbook and are trying to find creative ways to increase our profile.

Whenever anyone expresses an interest in membership, we are sure to follow up and invite them to a meeting. We make every effort to make new members feel welcome and a part of something that is special and important. As Catholic women, we have found shared commitment to the teachings of the church through involvement in the League to be spiritually fulfilling and personally rewarding and we hope that others will continue to join. †