Actively Engaging New Members and Homebound Members

Actively Engage Members Working Group

GOAL: Through outreach and service, members of The Catholic Women's League of Canada foster a culture where all life is valued with dignity and respect.

STRATEGY: Increase participation of diverse cultural and generational groups.

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Introduction

This toolkit offers programming ideas and suggestions that are flexible and adaptable. It will appeal to the diversity found in councils across Canada and be helpful for those that have experienced challenges with combining councils. Additionally, this toolkit will engage and support new and homebound members in councils, help them develop a sense of belonging and encourage their involvement in the parishes.

Building Engagement

Psychologist William Kahn, an early expert in this field, has written much about employee engagement. Kahn says that the three main factors that affect engagement are:

- meaningfulness of the work
- emotional and physical safety
- the capacity to complete the tasks

Meaningful work: Council activities should have clear goals and outcomes. The interest of members and their concerns should be taken into consideration when planning activities. The contribution of every member should be valued and acknowledged—every effort is important.

Emotional and physical safety: Members should feel welcome and valued. The environment should encourage risk-taking, meaning members would feel comfortable taking on new roles and responsibilities. "Stepping out of the box" will foster growth and self-esteem among members. New ideas and a unique vision will create vitality within the council.

Capacity to complete the task: Consider the length of time and resources needed. Make sure members have the necessary resources and the specific skills required to complete the task.

Keep these ideas in mind when planning projects or activities for your council. Every project should be purposeful and consider members' interests and concerns. Members should be comfortable expressing ideas in a safe and supportive environment, and new ideas must be welcomed and respected. When considering a project, organizers need to think about the outcome and the time, resources and skills available.

The article "A Gift of Inspiration," written by Keith Ready, shares ideas about leadership skills. Skills that increase engagement are building trust, mentoring, inclusion, alignment and team development. These elements are building blocks that are dependent on each other and often demand a change in thinking. The best leaders learn and practice these skills.

- If you want to *build trust*, get to know your team. Give team members responsibilities and allow them opportunities to show their skills. Recognize and acknowledge members' skills and call on them to use their knowledge and talents. Provide praise where appropriate.

- A *mentoring* relationship gives feedback and builds positive relationships among team members. Encourage the sharing of knowledge and ideas—it will build bonds of respect and help discover the potential in the council.

- *Inclusion* provides opportunities for sharing ideas and learning from each other. Individuals with specific skills and strengths are called upon to use them. Ensure no member is left behind—by including everyone's ideas, you can get the best out of each member. It recognizes new ideas and supports the work of all.

- *Alignment* keeps projects within the organization's goals, vision and purpose. Keep the shared purpose, values and vision of the project at the forefront. Work meaningfully, purposefully and based on agreed-upon goals. Doing so will engage members and the project will be more successful.

- *Team development* will make the group more efficient and will inspire everyone. Know the team's strengths and shortcomings. Work toward improving together. Look for opportunities to develop the team and build on the skills and strengths of members. Identify gaps in a council and addresses these through methods such as in-person workshops, skill development, peer mentoring and webinars. Gaps and deficits provide opportunities for council growth. Recognize and honour the team's achievements.

Using these skills will help make your council more cohesive and connected. Leaders who use these principles of engagement will be able to actively engage members and build a strong parish council.

The First Stage of Engagement – Welcoming

Ensure your council is welcoming to all members and visitors. Let people know you are happy to see them and make a personal connection. Call people by name, establish eye contact and be prepared to focus on members as they arrive. A positive atmosphere must start with leadership, but it is everyone's work. People will want to return when they feel welcomed, valued and important. Councils that create this atmosphere will be more likely to have new members coming back.

1. Pray for Unity

Often a council can inadvertently create a situation where a member may feel isolated or unwelcome. Be aware of this possibility and address it regularly in prayer. Reach out in hospitality to greet and get to know new members or unfamiliar faces at a meeting. Offer a prayer like this one to alert members to this concern and give a positive message to all. Negative attitudes and isolation often go unnoticed, but they do have an effect. Hurt feelings are often hidden and can be hard to repair. Be attentive and proactive to avoid this problem.

A CWL Prayer for Unity

Our Lady of Good Counsel, our Mother and patroness,
we come to you for guidance and wisdom.

Teach us your ways as we strive to make our
CWL council a welcoming and non-judgmental place,
where women will come and find friendship, support and acceptance.

Make us a community that cares for each other.
Open our hearts and let them guide our work and actions
so that everyone we encounter feels the love that your Son has called us to.

Remove all jealousy, mean thoughts and anger from our midst.
Help us to see the good in all, to hear their thoughts, embrace their ideas,
and find ways of including them in our plans and projects.

Make us ever watchful, guide our words and actions
so that we do not unintentionally or otherwise, be hurtful or judgmental.

Help us to always consider the needs of our homebound members
and find opportunities to stay in touch, include them in our work,
and address their needs.

We pray for unity and fellowship in our work.
We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

2. Building Listening Skills

Unity occurs when there is sincere listening. New and homebound members will likely be more engaged if others listen to them. Know council members' interests and concerns. Actively listen; focus on the speaker and remove distractions. Demonstrate listening with a nod or a smile at an appropriate time. Paraphrase to check for accuracy and avoid interrupting. Keep an open mind and thank the speaker for her input. Ask if there is anything else she wishes to add.

3. **Welcome Program** (#621 on cwl.ca)

The *Welcome Program* contains invaluable ideas to foster engagement at the local level. Parish councils are vital in creating a welcoming space for new members. This program has many great ideas.

- The "Membership Information Form" is an important tool for getting to know new members. Use the form to learn about their interests and strengths. Then, use these skills and talents to direct members to specific initiatives and projects. Recognize contributions to affirm members and their value to the League.
- A "Welcome Kit" is a valuable gift for new members. It introduces them to the League and creates an unforgettable first impression.
- The "Companionship Program" explains how to set up such a program in a local parish council. Members will find a place in the League and feel a sense of value and connection when using this program.
- The "Validation Program" provides ideas on how to recognize members. It acknowledges contributions to the League, church and community. It will increase the member's sense of belonging and connectedness.

4. Meeting Access

Many homebound members live in an assisted living facility or nursing home. They might be unable to attend or participate in parish council activities. Have a monthly meeting or a special event in their facility to include them in the League community and show them that they are cared for and valuable council members. If you cannot have a meeting in the facility, organize a carpool to bring members to the meetings.

The Second Stage of Engagement – Building Sisterhood

A sisterhood is supportive, caring and kind. Sisters need each other and are ready to offer a helping hand. Friendship with other women is one of the most cherished gifts the League offers. League friendships help expand members' horizons and make new connections. They get members through tough times and last a lifetime. Councils provide opportunities to get to know each other at meetings and develop projects that help build friendships. The following suggestions develop sisterhood.

1. Prayer Partners

Many councils use prayer partners to build a sense of sisterhood and connection. Pick prayer partners at a regular meeting or as part of a dinner, special lunch or breakfast meeting.

- Each participant places her name in a container. At some point in the schedule, each member slips her hand into the container and draws out a name.
- Sing a hymn while members pick the name of their prayer partner. For example, use "Companions on the Journey" (Glory & Praise 3rd edition #545) or another similar hymn.
- Involve interested non-attending/homebound members by adding their names to the container. The facilitator picks names for those participants and lets them know who they are to pray for.
- Keep the prayer partner for the year (or another determined length of time). This process creates a strong support system throughout the council.

2. Anniversary Celebrations

Members like to come together to celebrate anniversary events in their councils. Present pins for years of service as an occasion to celebrate League sisters. It gives members a physical reminder of their service in the League. It also allows the entire council to celebrate and give thanks for the gifts shared.

3. Building Buddy Systems

Parish councils can create a buddy system for both homebound and new members.

New Member Buddy System:

A buddy is a friendly guide to help a new member feel welcome in her parish council. She can have things explained in a non-threatening way.

The buddy meets the new member at the meeting room door when she first arrives. The buddy can call her new partner ahead of time to introduce herself and arrange a meeting place and time so that everything is straightforward and stress-free.

The buddy introduces her to other members before the meeting starts. She can help the new member sign in, get a copy of the agenda and other documents and find a spot to sit together. The experienced buddy should make a follow-up call after the meeting to answer questions. The buddy should stay connected for at least a year, or longer if the relationship seems helpful.

Homebound Buddy System:

A buddy for a homebound member can be long-term. The buddy is the connection between the homebound member and the League community.

This buddy visits or calls before each meeting to check-in. She can ask if the homebound member has any wants or needs that her League sisters could help with. She can call or visit a few days after the meeting to catch her up on what occurred. Together, they can review the agenda, share reports and pray. The buddy can also share the spiritual program with the homebound member.

Homebound members still have many things that they can contribute to a council. The buddy can be the go-between for any activities or projects that the homebound member might help with. It is only through a personal connection that members stay engaged.

4. Telephone Tree

An essential tool in maintaining connections with members is personal contact. Some members may be able to text or email, but the simplest method is often reaching out by telephone. Use a telephone tree to engage members. The tree can be used to give and receive information. Members can provide meeting information, share about their day and have an opportunity to develop a relationship with other members. For example, a younger member might call a more senior council member. Members might offer rides to those in need. To end the conversation, one could lead with a prayer of thanksgiving in their shared time.

The Third Stage of Engagement – Growing and Maintaining Engagement

Research shows that personal contact is critical to engaging members. Have a clear idea of the goal and a shared vision to keep members engaged.

- Set goals each year. Adjust as necessary to keep up with changes in community needs and expectations. Review the goals to ensure they are still pertinent and meet the needs of a changing community.
- As a council, identify challenges and consider ways to overcome them. Be open to improvement and change, ask for feedback and act. Provide opportunities for self-reflection where members measure their progress toward personal goals.
- Recognize outstanding achievements and successful projects. Thank members at meetings for their efforts and the work they have done.
- Recognize the need to be flexible and open to change. Even though things have been done the same way for many years does not mean it is the best or only way.
- Be willing to try new things.
- Encourage and act on new ideas.
- Encourage leadership and develop it in small ways. Small steps will encourage and build confidence.
- Make suggestions to members to take on a leadership role and offer mentorship along the way. Short-term commitments work well for those who have limited time available to them. Working on a short-term project allows members to build up confidence. Short-term projects could include:
    - helping with an event
    - writing letters
    - working on a resolution
    - organizing or assisting with a collection drive for supplies for an organization such as a women's shelter
    - creating lap quilts for care centres.

Show appreciation for members and their efforts. Everyone responds well when they feel valued—it motivates and helps them stay engaged.

1. Keeping Members Informed

Councils have devised many creative ways to keep members informed, which is paramount. Telling members about council initiatives, activities and meetings is a basic start.

- New members do not yet have long-lasting connections to the League. Keep them informed of yearly activities and new initiatives. This will help form stronger bonds and allow for greater engagement.

- A higher percentage of homebound members need personal contact. Their life situations may increase the likelihood of isolation. Use creativity and adapt to these members' individual needs.
- The *Newsletter Template* is an excellent tool for creating a newsletter. Download the template (#145) and editing instructions (#145b) from cwl.ca.
- Newsletters can contain a variety of interesting information from all council levels and should include photographs of council activities. National, provincial or diocesan websites have many resources, videos and items of interest. Make members aware of the many resources available. Choose relevant information from the websites to relay to members. Introduce members in the newsletter to help others get to know them. Keep members informed of local and national prayer needs and intentions, as this allows all members to contribute to living out the League's mission. Email newsletters or print and mail them to those members who prefer a hard copy.
- Create a *council email account* for executive members to use. Email recipients can recognize incoming League information. In addition, some councils have their own *Facebook* page, which allows for interaction amongst members.
- *Personal contact* is the most essential factor in keeping members engaged. Keep members informed as a foundational step in building engagement and inclusion. Make telephone calls or deliver information to members who do not use email.
- Effective communication needs to go both ways to build engagement. Develop formal and informal methods to listen to and receive input and feedback from members.

2. Small group activities or projects

Larger councils can organize some activities or projects in smaller groups, allowing more flexibility for meeting times and meeting places. Transportation may be more available to those members who need it. If members live in assisted living or a personal care home, they could gather for a project or prayer. Greater connections between members are possible in smaller groups.

3. Prayer Shawls and Prayer Blankets

When members create prayer shawls/blankets, they pray as they knit, crochet or sew. After they are complete, a priest or deacon can bless them. The threads of the prayer shawls/blankets become interwoven with pleas for healing on behalf of the recipient. When individuals cover themselves with a prayer shawl/blanket, they are being held in prayer. The shawls/blankets become a symbol of prayer, covering the individuals who receive them.

A prayer for healing and comfort is included with each shawl/blanket.

Councils can give a prayer shawl/blanket to:

- hospital patients
- the sick at home
- cancer support groups
- people going through difficult situations

Pray while creating a prayer blanket:

Heavenly Father, be with me as I work on this prayer shawl.
Bless the work of my hands, which is also the work of my heart.

Let it carry in each of its stitches
a positive message of love and support to whomever receives it.

May the finished product bring Your gifts of comfort, peace and joy.
Fill the heart of the receiver with Your sustaining and all enduring love.

Amen

Prayer to include with the shawl/blanket:

Prayer For Comfort

May this prayer blanket console and heal you of your sorrows and pain
And give you the hope that the Father, Son and Spirit are
Ever by your side throughout your trials and will never leave you.
Of this, you may be certain.

This prayer shawl will provide a visual sign of God's love
And you therefore can wrap yourself in this love and
Be comforted with God's eternal comfort and His steadfastness.

Creator God, may the person who wraps themselves
In this prayer blanket/shawl, which was lovingly made,
Feel the compassion and love in which it was produced.

With love and blessings,

(Name of Council) Prayer Blanket Ministry

4. Engaging homebound members

"Just ask us. We want to be bothered."

All members have unique life situations, and homebound members are no different. Their ability to serve the League will depend on their particular situation. Invite them to stay involved in meaningful ways:

- Advocating for important League issues through letter writing or postcard campaigns.
- Researching, writing or being part of the discussion and planning stages of resolutions.
- Participating in fundraising projects.
- Calling to stay connected with or to inform members about upcoming events.
- Correspondence responsibilities—particularly get well, thank you and special occasion cards and notes.
- Participating through prayer by delivering prayers to their homes. Participating especially during special times of prayer such as:
    - Hospice and Palliative Care Week
    - The Feast of Our Lady of Good Counsel

Each council is unique and will find which approach is best for it. A vibrant council will include meaningful personal contact with all its members.

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