

Initiating *Catholic Christian Outreach* in Small Groups

The experience of **Mary, Mother of the Church** over the last 8 years:

1. How did you begin using Catholic Christian Outreach in the parish, and what was the specific goal for the first year?

Our initial year of Catholic Christian Outreach (CCO) was quite small. We started with two groups, a women's group and a men's group. A married couple's group was offered but did not fill. Our pastor, **Fr. Konopa**, took the initiative to identify the first facilitators. These individuals already had a personal relationship with Jesus and were eager to deepen that relationship and walk with others as they encountered Christ. The pastor and facilitators worked together to personally invite potential participants.

Goals during the first year were to evaluate the experience and to form intentional disciples who are eager to take up Christ's mission and spread the Gospel.

2. What have you done to encourage people to be part of a small CCO group?

After the initial year of CCO, we began to offer this journey to the parish family. Our current approach includes:

- During the CCO recruitment phase, our pastor focuses his homilies on building a relationship with Jesus and how CCO participation is one way to help on that journey.
- A past participant shares his/her personal testimony (vetted) at one set of weekend Masses a few weeks before starting new CCO groups.
- For a few weekends before starting new CCO groups, past participants are stationed at the entrances of the Church with sample CCO materials and sign-up sheets, ready to answer questions and share their own journey with those who stop by to ask questions.
- For 5-6 weekends before starting new CCO groups, bulletin articles provide a summary of CCO materials, including compelling personal witness statements from those who have completed CCO.
- Each CCO graduate is asked to reach out to 3 people, share their journey, and invite them to join a group. Those names are shared with the facilitators, who then follow up with another personal invitation.
- We are working to provide CCO opportunities that coincide with the ending of other basic formational efforts.

In all of these efforts, we have learned that a ***personal invitation*** is the MOST effective way to bring others to the CCO experience.

3. What have been the fruits?

In 8 years, we have had over 150 individuals participate in CCO small, faith-sharing groups. We have witnessed our brothers and sisters deepen their personal commitment

to Jesus Christ through daily prayer, reading of Scripture, a renewed participation in the Sacraments, service to the Church, and the joyful experience of fellowship.

As facilitators, we witness the joy, peace, and freedom that participants experience as they choose to place Jesus at the center of their lives. Additionally, as they learn to trust the Holy Spirit and rely on God's grace, they are strengthened and nourished to lead the life of a faithful Catholic. In the end, Jesus and the Holy Spirit reveal the Father's great love for us and help us deepen our relationship with Him.

4. Any further thoughts on the importance of small group Faith study, specifically, CCO?

CCO is not simply another program or Bible study. It is a journey on which we accompany one another – in a safe, trusting environment of Christian fellowship – to a deeper friendship with Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit.

As we seek input from participants about their faith journey through CCO, they agree that the material is excellent! However, they are equally confident that their fellow group members who walked with them over the course of the 36 weeks made the journey even more beautiful and fruitful.

Ongoing pastoral support and input has been critical to the success of CCO.

We have learned that the optimal group size is 8-12 individuals. We recommend no fewer than 6 per group, including the facilitator.

The 36-week commitment can seem daunting and difficult for some potential group members. In 2022, as a trial, we offered the CCO series with a 14-week commitment during the Lent and Easter Seasons. Interestingly, all groups opted to finish the remaining 22 weeks. Therefore, we have shifted to this model. However, facilitators are asked to make the commitment to 36 weeks, so they are prepared and praying for their participants to continue the journey.

For additional questions about the experience of Mary, Mother of the Church, contact Susan Halter (skhalter@gmail.com), or Linda Schwartz (alrzschwartz@gmail.com).

Priests are encouraged to contact **Fr. Konopa at frkonopa@mmoclacrosse.org**.

Contact **Ann Lankford** in the Office for Catechesis and Evangelization to look over the **Catholic Christian Outreach materials**.

Information about this compelling resource for parish small groups is available through cco.ca/parish and is sold for reduced prices in the United States through Cedar House cedarhouse.co/brands/catholic-christian-outreach.

Facilitator Training:

Those who would like to facilitate a group, some experience with an understanding of the Faith and leading small groups is important. A **1 ½ hour training for facilitators** will be provided online by two people who have experience using these resources. Email Ann Lankford to express interest in this training at alankford@diolc.org.