

The History of Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination (CCWO) and the Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE): The First Twenty Years 1981-2001

THE CCWO YEARS: 1981-1987

In January 1981, four women theology students, Ellen Leonard CSJ, Alexina Murphy, Bernadette McMahon (all of Toronto) and Judy Maier (Ottawa) sent a letter to contacts across Canada, sharing their plan to start a Canadian organization to work for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church. They announced their intent to hold an organizational meeting in Toronto in July of the same year and responses to this letter were received from across the country. Regular meetings of interested women began almost immediately in Toronto and the first meeting of a group of Ottawa women was held in May 1981. Other women across Canada were also communicating and connecting. The story had begun!

THE FOUNDING CONFERENCE

On the weekend of July 3-5 1981, thirty women from across Canada gathered in Toronto for an organizational meeting. Prayer and ritual, serious deliberation and joyful celebration marked this weekend and twenty-two pages of carefully recorded minutes reflected the vision of these women for a renewed Catholic Church. The final statement issued by the group reads as follows:

We, the Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination affirm women's personhood in Christ's church. We recognize our equality in Christ. We desire that all have the opportunity to participate in the life of the Church. We maintain that this participation requires the ordination of women to Sacramental Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. We witness to the presence of priestly ministry. We therefore, ask our sisters and brothers: Will you publicly support the ordination of women to Sacramental Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church? Will you work towards the ordination of women in our Church?

The press release that accompanied this statement was entitled, "Ordain Women or Stop Baptizing Them".

DEVELOPING THE MOVEMENT

The period following this Toronto meeting was characterized by tremendous energy as an increasing number of committed women worked together to build the organization. Faced with the difficulty of building an organization in a country which is geographically large yet relatively small in population, one can only be impressed by the commitment of these women pioneers. Over the next years CCWO received significant coverage in the Catholic and mainstream press. Contacts were established with women's ordination movements in the United States and Europe. Small local groups were started in a number of communities across Canada. Committees were formed and the practical tasks of running a national organization were addressed. A meeting was arranged with Cardinal Carter to share CCWO's vision of Church with him.

CCWO members reached out to Canadian Catholic women through letters, presentations and a regularly published newsletter. Many members regularly replaced their Sunday offering (or at least part of their offering) with CCWO 'dollars' that spoke to

the reasons for women's ordination. By using this 'currency' women were able to communicate their vision of a renewed Church as well as their unwillingness to financially support an institution that refused to recognize women as fully baptized members, some of whom felt called to ordination.

PUBLIC ACTION

In 1985, CCWO women in Toronto made their first courageous public action in support of the aims of CCWO. When Cardinal Ratzinger was invited to Toronto to launch the annual St. Michael's College President's lecture series, the necessity of a public response was clear. (The choice of Cardinal Ratzinger as guest speaker was viewed by some to be an attempt by the Toronto Church hierarchy to publicly chastise theologians and others who were giving renewed interpretations to our faith tradition). A demonstration outside the arena where Cardinal Ratzinger was speaking saw CCWO women articulating their vision publicly in the face of considerable verbal abuse from those attending the event. The media coverage resulted in CCWO's message getting out across the country.

COMMUNICATION WITH THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCH

From the beginning, CCWO kept the institutional church informed of the development of the movement, the issues of concern and the vision of Church shared by those who had joined the movement. Over the next three years there was regular communication between (or sometimes simply to) the Canadian bishops and CCWO. CCWO also acted as an advocate for women attending schools of theology since part-time students were facing difficulties with the requirements of full-time studies and family responsibilities. In 1987, as part of its development plan, CCWO placed an advertisement in the Vocation Supplement of *Catholic New Times*, an independent Catholic newspaper with a strong social justice focus. CCWO arranged conferences that brought women together from across the country and press releases spoke to the quality of these gatherings.

“WRITE DOWN THE VISION”

It was at the 1987 conference, “Write Down the Vision” hosted by the Ottawa group that a wider image of the organization began to emerge. A mission statement and aims were adopted that reflected a broader awareness of the interconnectedness of various issues related to women both in the institutional church and in society as a whole and these have remained our guiding principles..

For the first time, there was conflict among members at this conference - but as one member noted, good things came out of the turmoil. It was at this conference that the national character of the organization really took shape as individuals and groups across the county volunteered to take on tasks which until this time had for the most part been centered in Toronto. A group from Nova Scotia volunteered to act as an interim core group, the newsletter was to be published in Prince George BC, the Ottawa Group volunteered to develop a proposal for the structure of the organization (and to seek input from the membership) and the Vancouver Group took on the responsibility for working with the membership to develop a new name for the organization, reflecting the broader aims of the movement. The Toronto Group agreed to host the 1988 conference that would focus mainly on changing the name of the organization. It was

encouraging to see how members spread out over a huge geographic area, and without the support of electronic messaging, were able to invite all the membership to participate in the discernment around these issues and to get responses from a good majority.

DESIGNING AN ORGANIZATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The Ottawa Group developed a number of models for organization. Input received from members indicated that a federated model with a national coordinating committee was preferred. The local group was seen to be the life of the organization. Aware of Canada's geographic expanse, however, individuals would be well connected to the movement by means of the newsletter and regular communications. Many who could not be actively involved in the movement were clear that their membership provided financial support to allow CCWO to work on behalf of women in the Church.

DISCERNING A NAME CHANGE

During the same period the Vancouver Group sent out "Naming as a Prophetic Act" a communication to members across the country around the development of a new name. Criteria was included for the selection of a new name that stipulated that it literally and metaphorically reflect the purpose and character of the organization.

At the Toronto conference in June of 1988, a list of proposed names from across the country was presented to the membership. A facilitator led the group through a two-day process that finally saw participants choosing between the proposed new name "Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE)" and the original "Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination (CCWO)". "CNWE" was adopted and when the CCWO Core Group sent this name out to all members for ratification, the response was overwhelmingly positive. The acronym for our organization, CNWE (pronounced "can-we") became a powerful question to which we answer a resounding "Yes we can!"

THE CONSTITUTION

The next task was to develop a constitution that provided a framework for operation of the organization. It was to incorporate the work done previously around mission and aims and reflect the organic, non-hierarchical structure envisioned by the membership. Its purpose was to ensure that there was an agreed operating guideline, that the work of the organization would always be addressed and that the values of the movement would be reflected in the way that it functioned. Two members from a local group volunteered to take on the drafting of this constitution.

The constitution was presented to the membership at the 1989 conference in Montreal. Many hours were dedicated to refining the draft. The philosophical statement, "To operate from a principle of inclusivity and consensus," was included to ensure that for the most part a feminist model of discernment would be utilized--voting only being as outlined in the constitution. Further refinements were made to the draft over the following year, and the constitution was finally adopted in 1990. Over the next 20 years, minor amendments were made to the Constitution.

THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

The annual conference continues to be a much-anticipated event for CNWE members. It is hosted by a local group that agrees at a previous Annual General Meeting (AGM) to take on the commitment. The conference is a time to gather with CNWE members from across the country and to meet new members or others interested in the work of CNWE. Over these years conferences were held in Toronto, Ottawa, Kemptville, London, Port Burwell and Hamilton (Ontario), Montreal and Aylmer (Quebec), Halifax (Nova Scotia), South Rustico (Prince Edward Island), St. John's (Newfoundland), Edmonton (Alberta), and Saskatoon, (Saskatchewan).

Conference programs are always impressive and connect CNWE members with feminist theologians, scripture scholars and social scientists, while also providing an experience of prayer using inclusive language and celebration. There is a commitment to alternate a conference in Central Canada with one in another region. As local groups develop around the country, conferences reflect the interests and concerns of CNWE members in the various regions of Canada. The AGM held at the conference establishes the initiatives for the following year and local groups and/or individual members take on responsibility for implementing these initiatives.

LOCAL GROUPS

CNWE is a dynamic and organic organization. Local groups are seen as the lifeblood of the movement. Using a federated model, each local group is free to develop a character of its own that reflects the interests and concerns of its members as well as the resources available in each community. Feminist theology and spirituality, public actions related to the aims of CNWE, study groups and retreat days are some of the programs sponsored by local groups. In some areas, CNWE local groups co-sponsor events with other reform-minded organizations. When a local group is formed and notifies the National Work Group of its intent to operate as such, a portion of the annual membership fee for each member in this group is sent to the local group to assist with financing.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN CNWE

· CNWE NEWSLETTER

A committee publishes a CNWE newsletter for members three times a year. To spread the message of CNWE, members can also purchase gift subscription for friends and members of the clergy. The newsletter contains a wealth of material - articles on issues related to the aims of CNWE, reports from the National Work Group and local groups, and information of interest to CNWE members.

· CNWE EMAIL LIST

One of our newest initiatives is a group email list that brings CNWE members and other interested women and men for conversation. Theological reflections are shared, social justice issues are considered, events are announced and much more.

· TELEPHONE CONFERENCE CALL

Distance is no longer a barrier to our movement. Our National Work Group meets by telephone conference call. Members wishing to place an issue on the agenda and participate in these calls can also do so. Agendas are emailed to NWG members before meetings and minutes are published following the meetings.

OUR MEMBERSHIP AS GIFT

What is most impressive is the wealth of knowledge and expertise among our members. Also impressive is the energy contributed to CNWE. We have no paid staff and thus everything required to keep our organization alive is done by volunteers. This is the strength of our organization--this organic inclusivity that encourages members to contribute their gifts to nurture and empower the movement.

ONGOING CONVERSATIONS

Over the years CCWO/CNWE has been vigilant in communicating with the institutional church and with the general public through the media, raising issues that are of concern to reform-minded Catholic women and men. *Some* members of the Church hierarchy have been respectful in their willingness to respond or to dialogue with CNWE.

Recently a CNWE committee developed "The Conversations Kit: A Manual for Dialogue Among Women in the Catholic Church". CNWE women are uncomfortable with the duality that the institutional church creates between their perspectives and those of other women in the church and are committed to facilitating conversations between women with varying points of view to identify shared areas of concern. This kit is currently being piloted and a final version will be available to assist members who want to arrange a gathering in their area.

CNWE ARCHIVES

In 1998, a decision was made to develop an archival collection. We had been fortunate that materials that had been carefully stored in basements across the country now had a home in the national archives of Canada in Ottawa. The collection is dynamic and will continue to grow over the years. We see our archives as an important way to remember our story and a wonderful research tool for future scholars researching the contributions of Canadian women to the Catholic Church.

This is the story of the first twenty years of our movement. We invite you to join us as the story continues. For further information, please email CNWE at info@cnwe.org. Our archive collection also has public access in Library and Archives of Canada.