



CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

TE RŌPŪ WĀHINE KATORIKA O AOTEAROA.

President's Report July 2018 – July 2021

We live in extraordinary times. 2020 and Covid 19 will be remembered in history as one of those moments where times and events are remembered and measured from, as being before, after or during.

The National Board began 2020 looking forward to the membership gathering in Rotorua for a great National Conference and The International Secretary was preparing with others to attend WUCWO Asia Pacific Conference in Sydney.

The Board had put together an exciting National Conference programme to launch our new theme: *Kia Kaha – Courage Take Heart*. We did not imagine in January how apt this theme would be as 2020 unfolded.

The Board was also excited to be launching Te Puawaitanga with lots of ideas and plans to support branches and bring about the changes we knew were needed.

We were overtaken by Covid 19, The Lockdown and Alert Level Restrictions.

I was extremely disappointed to be forced first to cancel my visits to four of the diocesan conferences and then for the Board to cancel the national conference when restrictions put an end to travel and meetings. The Asia Pacific WUCWO conference was at first postponed then cancelled. There has been no indication of when this may be held in the future.

We can all be proud of the way we and our fellow members of the Team of Five Million took up the challenge to eliminate the virus from our community. However, there remains the ongoing threat of more lockdowns if Covid is to be kept from our community.

Impact of Covid 19

The Board decided to launch the new theme early to coincide with the beginning of the lockdown. We all were forced to live without the eucharist and the fellowship of meeting our community. We worked together to keep the communication going, helping each other and our community to meet physical and wellbeing needs. We were very aware of how loneliness and isolation could affect any of us. Branches and the Board used online platforms to stay in touch.

Branches were unable to meet in person, the situation being more difficult in Auckland. Diocese that were unable to hold their conferences and AGMs before the lockdown came up with innovative ways to meet the reporting requirements including holding online meetings.

As we came out of Alert Level Three and then Level One, it was clear there had been many positives for us not the least being the opportunity to slow down and recharge for a few weeks. There was a sense of heightened community. It is hoped this will continue as we all face the serious negative economic effects of the lockdown and the virus across the world.

THE Future for CWLANZ

When I took up the role of national president CWLANZ launched the theme, "Women Welcoming Change." This theme had been chosen by the previous national board to give impetus and encouragement to the CWL members. It was recognized that to survive and prosper in twenty first century New Zealand, CWLANZ needed to change. We needed to find new ways of operating and to refocus aims and goals.

I inherited an organisation in crisis. We have made strides in raising our profile and trying new initiatives, but despite all our combined efforts, three years later CWLANZ continues to lose branches. Tellingly we now have a Diocesan Council in recess. We struggle to fill leadership positions across all levels of CWL. This

board began its term with two vacant special officer positions. At the core of this issue is our aging membership and crucially, we do not seem able to convince other Catholic women that CWLANZ is relevant in today's context. The disappointment and sense of frustration is not new or unique to me. For many years successive national presidents and boards have grappled with these challenges.

Meeting The Challenge

This board determined it was time for action. We have put much time and energy into identifying the problems and working on solutions. We looked at discovering what made CWL successful in the past and tried to work out strategies to build on these activities. We asked ourselves what has changed since the halcyon days of the 1960s – 1980s.

The role of women within society changed dramatically during the second half of the twentieth century. A relatively small 2019 survey of Catholic non-members found women of all ages, have numerous options and no longer need groups such as the league for their social and support networks. Even where there is interest, very few are free during the week for meetings and activities. Recruitment of new members must also have been adversely affected by declining church attendance and engagement.

What we did discover was that women are interested in CWL but not prepared or able to commit full time.

A Plan to Grow CWLANZ

In January 2019, the Board held a workshop to come up with a plan to reverse the fortunes of CWLANZ. This workshop has been the framework for much of the board work during 2019 and 2020.

1) **Diocesan councils needed to give more support to the branches** to reverse or slow the loss of branches

- There was seen to be a need for councils to work with branches to help resolve their challenges. A procedure for branches that found themselves under stress and struggling to ask for help was written and added to the handbook. This procedure is hoped to also prevent the practice of branches closing without reference to the diocesan president or council.
- Branches needed ideas and resources.

The Board produced a booklet, *Te Puawaitanga, The Blossoming*, during 2019. The working title was a rejuvenating kit. This was compiled by Colleen McMurchy from ideas and material submitted by Board members. This booklet contains lots of advice and ideas to refresh and rejuvenate branches. *Te Puawaitanga* was approved for printing in January 2020 with a launch planned to happen at the National Conference in July. Unfortunately, Covid19 Lockdown meant a delay. All branches should now have at least two copies of this resource.

2) **Improve and modernise communication with members.**

- The president was to work with the publicity officer to produce a magazine style newsletter that concentrated on current news and activities. They had to work within the constraints of financial and technological resources. The most recent newsletters have been well received but there has been criticism of length and the resulting printing costs. The president has produced several, "President's Newsletters." These were one or double-sided personal messages to members. The aim was to share key messages such as the At Home Appeal and bridge the gap between national newsletters. Unfortunately, the Board has been unable to find a National Publicity Officer.

- Look to use social media

The president and Sylvia Mellish, Christchurch Diocesan President, set up a Facebook group, CWL NZ. First as a trial in Mid Canterbury and then shared across NZ. The aim of the group is to build connections among Catholic women, both members and non-members. Currently there are over 170 members. We acknowledge that not everyone is a Facebook user, but this is a platform that we can use to share activities, opinions, and generally spread the word about CWLANZ. I have asked each branch to have at least one member join this group. It would be good if each branch could also join up at least one non-member from their parish.

The success of a Facebook group can be measured by the number of engagements, comments rather than views or likes and best of all shares and posts. The majority of our group members view

and several regularly like our posts. At this stage there are only a small number who post but this is growing.

- Develop a new website that promotes CWLANZ and has easy links for queries around how to join. A new website is being developed. It will function like an online brochure full of information about CWLANZ and inspiring stories of our activities. It will also have links to how to join.

3) Develop and use fresh, engaging, modern, professional looking promotional material

- Hamilton Diocese shared banners and brochures that they had produced to use along with a membership recruitment road show presentation around the parishes of the Hamilton diocese. These materials included a new look logo. This led to membership wide discussion and consultation on a new membership badge and logo to be used by all levels of CWL. The Board will retain a slightly different badge to denote national board membership.
- The president produced a sample postcard which was used by many branches. Councils have been encouraged to develop their own promotional materials or use those from Hamilton.
- New Plymouth branch has designed and purchased a large street flag/banner to use whenever they have an activity. It is blue with the logo and the words, "Faith and Action." There has been some comment that we should be changing the word service in our moto as it has old fashioned connotations. The Board is interested in the members view on this.
- The image from the Hamilton brochure has been used on a poster to promote the new 2020 – 2022 theme.

4) Develop ways to use the charism of the founder of the CWL movement, Margaret Fletcher, to promote CWLANZ

- Members were asked to submit ideas and suitable images. The only response was from Kathy Bell who worked with the graphic artist who had designed the Hamilton promotional material and Susan Dickson who had an artist friend work on using computer software to come up with a stylized image of Margaret. Neither option gained support.
- An approach was made to England and Wales CWL asking for information and images that we could use. Our main resource is Margaret's autobiography, "Oh Call Back Yesterday." We were sent copies of a booklet that had recently been produced. This contained some of Margaret's writings from the "Crucible," some information about her relationship with the priests who supported her and a couple of photographs that we had not seen before. However, Margaret was known for resisting having her photograph taken and these are not suitable for use on promotional material.

5) Work harder at letting others know what we are about

- We have had several articles stories in diocesan and national Catholic media. Well done to all who continue to work hard at raising our profile and telling the story of a relevant organisation.
- Increased efforts at a local level to inform and encourage others to join us.
- Some branches are inviting and involving non-members in their projects and activities. This will make connections and increase the likelihood of joining.

6) Discover why women are not joining CWLANZ

- Ask. Conduct a survey of non-members. A relatively small 2019 survey of Catholic non-members found women have numerous options and no longer need groups such as the league for their social and support networks. Even where there is interest, very few are free during the week for meetings and activities. Most are very happy to support us as one-off specific actions.

Despite all this hard work CWLANZ is struggling to gain traction.

Mission into the Pacific

In July 2019, Julianne Hickey from Caritas NZ, joined us to help us work through an extended workshop on our mission activities in the Pacific. Essentially, we wanted to know: What we are doing? Are our activities appropriate? How effective are they? Why are we doing it? Are there better ways of doing mission in the Pacific? Should we even be working in this field?

The discussion was immensely valuable. Support of mission communities in the Pacific had been a strength of CWL in the past, popular with members, and could once again be used to build the organisation. Much of the discussion was philosophical. It was clear that the board needed more information. The financial statements told only part of the story. The other main source of information was anecdotal. The board felt support should be for specific programmes or needs with an emphasis on women, children, and capacity building rather than bricks and mortar.

It was decided to conduct a survey of all branches. This was written and carried out by the Mission Secretary with computer support from the president. We thank all branches for their support of this initiative.

Key findings included: (This summary is included in the National Mission Report as well.)

- Almost half the branches do not know or are unsure of how their donations are spent.
- Similarly, many were unsure if their efforts made a difference.
- Several branches experience problems with maintaining good communication with their mission communities.
- Several branches have reduced the level of support or ceased altogether. Most of these cited difficulties with communications and lack of feedback as reasons.
- The nature of many of the mission communities have changed over the years. For example, those run in the past by religious orders may now have different leadership, structures, and purposes. Branches are not always clear what the recipients of their money actually do.
- The most positive responses were from branches who had contributed to some programme or specific need
- Most branches wanted to continue Mission in the Pacific and are open to doing this in different ways.

The board is presenting a Mission in the Pacific Policy at this 2021 conference. This has been written in response to the consultation process.

Mission At Home Appeal

Important business at the first meeting of each year is to choose the recipients of the special appeals and choose the *Mission At Home* for the coming year. The choosing of Tourette's Association NZ for 2019 *Mission At Home* proved a very popular choice. We had the opportunity to learn about and to promote an important but little-known charity, and to work with some truly inspirational people. They have been very appreciative of our support which will go a long way to ensuring a 2020 Twitch Camp can go ahead. Unfortunately, the lockdown prevented us from making our donation in person at the conference as planned.

It was hoped that the lockdown would not adversely affect the 2020 At Home Appeal, Days for Girls. Our total was down on recent years but was still a significant amount to be proud of. It is especially pleasing to see how some Councils and branches have continued an association with Days for Girls. This organisation fits into both WUCWO Resolution 2 and 3.

Standing-up and Speaking-out

I wish to acknowledge the work done by our League members across the country to support the campaigns opposing the End-of-Life Choice Bill and abortion law reform.

Despite the campaigns, New Zealand now has some of the most liberal abortion legislation in the world. Abortion has been removed completely from the legal system. CWLANZ lobbied for abortion to be both a health and legal issue rather than purely a health issue.

The Abortion Legislation Act 2020 amends the law to decriminalise abortion. Under the act, abortion is available without restrictions to any woman who is not more than 20 weeks pregnant. Abortion up to full term is now allowed in certain circumstances.

The End of Life Choice Bill went to referendum at the general election. This legislation has changed the moral compass of NZ. This Act does not adequately protect vulnerable citizens.

We strive to raise awareness and support other organisations whose campaigns fit with our core values. Including human trafficking and employment exploitation, child poverty, care of mothers and new babies, and climate change.

In March I signed on behalf of CWLANZ a memorandum of Cooperation with Talitha Kum NZ. Talitha Kum is an international organisation consisting of mainly Catholic Religious Orders who together fight human trafficking and exploitation around the world. This is a simple agreement to support the work of Talitha Kum in whatever way we can. The agreement is a natural progression as CWLANZ and WUCWO have for many years been active in this field.

CWLANZ values its affiliations to National Council of Women and PPSEAWA (Pan Pacific and Southeast Asia Women's Association) and thanks those members who represent us within these groups.

Vibrant Branches

During lockdown I challenged councils and branches to write an action plan for promotion's month. Some of the suggestions included getting a news story in the parish or diocesan news media, starting up groups, developing new promotional aids and materials, and having at least one member from each branch join the CWL NZ Facebook group.

Congratulations, those who have been able to meet this challenge are showing small but positive growth. It seems to me that the branches that have a high profile in their parishes and an easily identifiable project are the most successful at attracting and retaining new members.

Story telling is the key. Tell the story of those you are trying to help. Share the experiences of your members.

The need to keep the work of CWL in front of our public is an ongoing challenge.

An understanding that we can find different ways to operate, signing members up, not insisting they attend meetings, but being sure to give them authentic roles and jobs that they can be a part of. Make them feel valued.

During the heyday of CWL each branch had several "circles" which were very popular. Mission, sewing, young mothers and many others. What does the modern equivalent look like?

I travel around the country. At each Sunday Mass I look for evidence of CWL. Even in parishes with a strong branch the League is invisible. This must change. Also, why are we not visible in those parishes where there are no CWL branches?

I know in many parishes there are problems and resistance to pushing the League. Why should we let this stop us? We believe in CWLANZ. Let our actions speak. Get a promotional flag and display it regularly outside Mass. Have a project on the go that you can encourage any enquirers to join. Accept graciously one-off offers of help, who knows where this may lead. Be ready to speak confidently telling the story of what your branch is up to.

Conclusion

I wish to thank all the members of the Board for their dedication to CWLANZ. This report is mostly of the governance activities of the National Board during the first three years of this board. It must be read along with the reports from each of the Diocesan Presidents and Special Officers to get a true picture of the tremendous work being done across CWLANZ. It is inspiring to discover all the many ways everyday our members are living our moto, of Faith and Service.

Kia kaha Courage – Take Heart

Susan Dickson
National President