



Contemplative Outreach

Emergence through Storytelling: How is CO evolving?

Introduction

As you may recall, an invitation was sent out earlier this year for Centering Prayer groups and communities to convene a conversation about how the pandemic is influencing the ways we interact and how we are doing with the task of expanding Fr. Thomas's vision and legacy in the world. A [Conversation Guide](#) was offered based on the reflective action cycle **What** (event & activities are occurring)? **So What** (Differences & Transformation have been observed)? **Now What** (What to continue, What to let go of, Emerging vision, Support needed)? The invitation was sent out globally in April requesting that conversation summaries be submitted by mid-July 2021.

Who responded?

As of August 15, responses were received from individual prayer groups, newly-formed online groups, clusters of groups (often by language or culture), service teams, chapters and countries. Nearly 90 source documents were received from all five continents, 26 countries; and all were in English, although many groups spoke other languages. This included Extensión Contemplativa Internacional (ECI) throughout North, Central and South America; and the Armenian Community in Canada. Although the sampling was relatively small, the responses came from all over the globe, from Korea through to Hawaii.

How were the responses summarized?

Material from individual stories was compiled into a spreadsheet according to the question answered from the conversation guide. Contemplative Outreach (CO) staff plus a small group of volunteers then reviewed the responses in each of these categories using a lectio style of 'listening with the heart' to the themes that seemed to be emerging. We reviewed these together as a group and then Brian Aldworth from South Africa took a lead on writing this report. We recognize it is only a snapshot of the depth of material we received but we hope that it inspires you to continue to tell your stories and to meet with us at the [September conference](#) to continue to discuss these themes.

Themes Identified with relative strength (S=Strong; M=Moderate; W=Weak)

What? What events or activities are currently happening in our Centering Prayer communities around the world?

Not surprisingly, *virtual meetings and events* became commonplace in many CP communities over this past year. Of these virtual activities, *Centering Prayer meetings* were most commonly reported, followed by *online retreats*, *CP introductory workshops* and related teaching and formation events. *International events* were also a strong theme for respondents—for example United in Prayer day and

the global conference with Cynthia Bourgeault in May 2020. Respondents also noted the occurrence of multi-lingual meetings and the tendency for some to attend more than one group remotely.

Mentioned less often but still of significance were *facilitator training* events; *11th Step training*; and *communication in the form of newsletters and emails*. Activities mentioned by only a few respondents included *book studies* and *Living Flame presentations*.

In this pandemic what I feel is gratefulness, because we have a place where we can meet freely, obeying the protocols, but still being able to be together in this frequency that keeps us united to God and among ourselves, in silence.

Also not surprisingly, *in-person meetings* were sporadic or non-existent, due to Covid restrictions and safety measures, although there have been some group activities, including restricted-number retreats; outdoor contemplative walks; book days & sales; and an 11th Step bring-and-share fest (Seattle).

So What? What difference are these activities making in the development of contemplative practice and the process of transformation in our communities?

In answering this question, respondents demonstrated a sense of *evolving contemplative practice*, for example: in-person became online; local became global; low numbers became higher online, generally; people joining prayer groups any day/time/place. Less frequently reported were shifts in practice such as: Outdoors and/or in person meetings; groups growing smaller or not meeting at all due to lack of technology or in-person meetings. An important shift also noted by some groups was

Stronger connections made between Latin American countries and with Spanish & Portuguese speakers through zoom or WhatsApp.
A more open and compassionate listening to what is shared, especially more communion in pain, anguish, uncertainties and suffering.
Silence is easier together and helps daily personal practice as well. (Italy)
Technology offers intimacy and deep sharing. Unitive consciousness of deepened contemplative practice. An emergence of false-self issues (Trinidad/Tobago);
An expanded view of God (Western Cape);
My personal challenge now is to stretch myself out of my comfort zone and try different groups that may challenge my thinking and by doing so, offer me more growth (Ireland).

the rotated leadership of meetings versus having only one individual lead as was more common before the pandemic.

Responses also reflected the sense of real *spiritual growth and transformation* for many during the pandemic. For example, *personal practice seems to have strengthened* and people are experiencing a *different type of community life and connection*. The following quotes illustrate these themes:

Now What?

What's working well that we would like to continue?

Virtual/online meetings:

- Meditation Chapel open to all (S). Regional zoom/WhatsApp prayer sessions (S). Chapter, community meetings, online trainings & formation, retreats of various lengths and formats, days of recollection or mornings of enrichment (S). More ecumenical nature (W).
- Format used in most group prayer: a period of Centering and/or followed by Lectio or a teaching (S). Some beginner and other groups started with a reminder of the method of Centering Prayer and how to share in Lectio Divina or sacred conversation (M).
- International conferences and prayer days (S).
- Due to advances in technology, many more people were able to access online resources and digital

“Perfect unity in differences”; “Online groups have less external noises and facilitate deeper silence”; “...wished Father Keating had lived to see these kinds of connections - he would have been dancing!” “Online meetings feel more focused and we are able to meet people better online.” “I have been able to share in real emotion, sometimes poetic responses and always an honesty which takes my breath away. The Chapels have opened me up to the basic human need of community, and love.” (Ireland).

- newsletters (S). Trainings and presentations could be recorded and viewed later (M).
- Some groups were bilingual (S).
- Many members expressed a desire to be of more service (S).
- There are many advantages to virtual meetings, including cost, accessibility, easier for elderly and disabled members, etc (S).
- Some source documents indicated a growth in younger and more tech-savvy members (W).

In-person meetings, retreats and formation worked well in certain areas at certain times (W).

What's not working well that we would like to let go of?

In-person and/or virtual meetings

- Not being able to meet in person (S).
- Missing informal chats and connections (M).
- Lack of new relationships (M).
- Lack of face to face makes it harder to protect integrity of the Method and being faithful to what has been transmitted to us (W).
- Resistance to using the internet for spiritual life (W).

Technology

- Many seem to lack technical skills (S).
- Cost of resources outside North America can be high due to exchange rates (S).
- Zoom fatigue (M).
- High cost, in some areas, of having access to electronic meetings (M); or lack of internet connectivity (M).
- Zoom only meetings excludes some people (M).
- Technical issues take time to resolve (M).
- Overdependence on people with technical skills (M).
- Challenge of accommodating different time zones (M).
- People can drop off Zoom meeting if they don't understand (W).
- Challenge to bring on board new prayer groups that are forming on Zoom (W).
- Hybrid groups can be awkward (W).
- Power cuts can affect scheduling (W).

“We miss coming together for retreats.” “We have all missed the human connection and sitting in silence to pray in a circle together.” “Technology could be a double-edged sword: more people joining, yet others finding technology difficult or not working for them.”

Emerging Vision (what next?)

Individual and collective opportunities for growth

- Individuals & groups experience spiritual growth and wish to continue growing (S).
- Groups want to have hybrid forms of prayer meetings, retreats, teachings, etc – via technology (zoom, WhatsApp, YouTube, etc), and in-person as there is a need and opportunity for both forms; as well as a combination of both, for example, an introductory workshop could include in-person and virtual attendees. Setting up such a system will require some technical expertise (S).
- Virtual meetings will continue due to fairly ease of access (S):
- Sense of belonging to global community and to continue this development (S).
- Due to sharing in groups, awareness of suffering of many people, and having a deepening compassion and empathy outside our immediate circles (S).
- Need for more retreats, days of recollection and mornings of enrichment, etc – virtual and in-person (S).
- More exploration of inter- faith dialogue; inter-denominational and more inter-racial presence, as well as meeting with non-religious contemplatives (M).
- Local leadership should discern how to adapt to the changing nature of praying communities, and be more agile and responsive to individual and group needs (M).

Multilingual resources:

- More virtual bilingual chapels creating unity (S); Translating CO works into other languages (S).

Continued Role of technology:

- Use of technology has: a) Expanded groups beyond expectation (S); b) Membership across geographical borders (S); c) Better possibilities of bringing contemplative prayer to more people (S); d) Communication outreach improved (M); e) Continuing access to CO material (YouTube & eBooks) (S).

Teaching and serving others:

- Spread this form of prayer through: a) assisting people with technology to connect remotely; b) Presenting Introductory sessions to the different prayer forms online and in-person. (S)
- Serving others: a) regionally and between countries (M); b) by volunteering to support growth of CO (M); c) strengthening the supportive spiritual network (S).
- Maintain integrity of Thomas Keating’s works (S).

- Through technology many have accessed past mystics as well as current teachers (W).

Support Needed

Training and technical assistance

- Facilitator and/or coordinator in supporting commitment to prayer (S);
- Skills training for facilitators (S);
- Assistance with giving online retreats, introductory workshops (S);
- Support needed for bilingual translations (S);
- Translating English material into other languages (S);
- Technical training (M);
- Technology access (M);
- How to go about restarting in-person gatherings or developing a hybrid model (M);
- Make COL web page “getting started” available in other languages, also add even more preliminary information—like what is a “sacred word.” (M);
- Encouraging contemplative spiritual direction individually or in groups (W);
- Help with hybrid Zoom/in-person model (W).
- Inviting key individuals to participate in special projects: a) revision of presenter handbook; keeping ideas fresh and relevant; integrating more diverse voices and other Christian traditions; sharing in leadership in an ongoing process (W).

Financial

- Financial support for retreats (scholarships), training materials and resources (M);
- Connecting with other countries who are not represented on our Global team (M).
- Community can keep a local supply of books and other materials (W);

“We suggest differential pricing to make it easier for people from poorer regions of the world to get access to these resources.”

Summary and Next Steps

In conclusion, the analysis team felt there was an overwhelming sense of positivity coming from the

“I wish more people were aware of Centering Prayer and understood the joy and peace that comes from a closer relation with God.” (Alberta, Canada). “Always ask for volunteers—often inviting people one on one. ‘This is what we’re looking for, what are the gifts you can share?’”

stories that were submitted for this project. Many individuals (according to quotes received), and groups, expressed gratitude that they could continue meeting even though virtually; many people experienced a deeper call to prayer; a re-awakening to a simpler lifestyle; a new ‘abandonment to Divine Providence’; a call to a deeper compassion for the global community; and experiencing the

loving presence of people even though geographically not present. Reviewing this material affirmed the following:

- *Group prayer meetings sustain and support individual prayer.* Many people joined prayer groups in their regions or joined Meditation Chapel.
- *Virtual group meetings have expanded membership:* Most source documents indicated an increase in membership.
- *Virtual prayer groups being generally open to all have increased diversity and unity.* Before the pandemic most prayer groups were community-based, drawing local members. With virtual groups there has been an increase in diversity – from regional, inter-state and international members being present. Many expressed joy in ‘meeting’ different people, listening to different perspectives in the sacred sharing or social component of each meeting.
- *The world will never go back to ‘business as usual’.* Many core activities and the way we relate to each other will never be the same again. This was reflected in every single report we received. Many groups and individuals are adapting to new and different ways of connecting, as well as using technology to facilitate better services.
- *Our survival as a species cannot be taken for granted. This in itself seems to have provoked a deeper spirituality in many, many people.* Stories expressed a growing awareness that we are all One and that everything we do or think affects everyone else.

While we celebrate the important lessons we have learned thus far, we know there are many questions yet to be answered and many more stories to be told! As part of an ongoing initiative, CO staff and the Chapter Support Service Team will use this report as well as input they receive at the upcoming conference to inform their priorities for 2022 and beyond. Your input is always welcome!

From the Philippines

From Contemplation to Action:

- **Margarita Tambunting, Billie Trinidad, Chickie Ferraren, Chita Castillo** are involved in feeding programs and community pantries in Tondo and Malibay

It seems it was only yesterday that we opened the Marie Eugenie Communitymmunity Pantry. Thank you for being part of our 43rd day in serving the needy.

[Community Conversation - STREAMING VIDEO FINAL.mp4 - All Documents \(sharepoint.com\)](#)