



### ***Cooperating with Grace***

#### **Contemplative Outreach (Un)Limited, Highlight and Intentions, 2020-2021**

*We should begin a new world with one that actually exists.*

- Thomas Keating, 12 Oct. 2018

*You carry all the ingredients to turn your existence into joy, Mix them, mix Them!*

- Hafiz, 1300s

*Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known.*

1 John 3:2, written around 100 AD

#### **Introduction:**

I am pleased to offer you this report on the highlights and intentions of Contemplative Outreach (CO) Ltd. for the period January 2020 to June 2021. This period roughly coincides with the time I have been Administrator as well as the time during which pandemic restrictions have continued to re-shape our organism in profound and unforeseen ways. The report is structured around six themes: Trust & Accountability; Supporting Volunteers; Communications and Programming; Outreach to Diverse Populations; Global Initiatives; Dialogue and Partnering. These themes are based loosely on the intentions identified by the Governing Board in 2016 which continue to guide the work of the Board at least until the end of 2021. A full list of the intentions can be found here:

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/governing-board-intentions/>

The six intentions outlined here were identified early in 2020 as being a place to start to focus the work of our organism for the next 18 months, a period in which we have seen immense change and reorientation in part due to the worldwide Covid pandemic. These intentions are as follows:

- **Trust & Accountability:** Improve and cultivate trust and mutually transparent and collaborative relationships among paid staff and with the governing board. Cultivate a culture of self-correction and mutual accountability in a climate of respect for our common purpose among our staff, volunteers and contemplative community.
- **Support Volunteers:** Invite and encourage involvement of volunteers (and minimize the hiring of paid staff as much as possible and reasonable). Improve consultation, support, and appreciation of volunteers, since Contemplative Outreach is a global community served by and serving volunteers.
- **Communications and Programming:** Recognizing the high priority of communication in the vital functioning of Contemplative Outreach, commit to using all available communication channels.

- **Outreach:** Broaden outreach efforts to make practices more available to all, especially those with limited means; for example, veterans, prisoners, and youth.
- **Global initiatives:** Support international growth and development in a real and concrete way, including financial investment, recognizing that growth in Centering Prayer and contemplative practices in new locations is a genuine fruit of the divine economy.
- **Dialogue and Partnering:** Support reaching out to other contemplative groups for dialogue and potential partnering. Similarly, become aware of ways to participate in inter-spiritual dialogue. Seek out opportunities to sponsor or partner with inter-spiritual contemplative groups.

In retrospect, these intentions have been invaluable in supporting efforts of both staff and board members to “begin the new world” that we believe Fr. Thomas is calling us to, one that is based first and foremost in knowing we are beloved children of God. We hope that reading this report will affirm for you that Contemplative Outreach (CO) indeed has all the ingredients we need to turn our existence into joy. Let’s keep mixing!!!

### **Trust & Accountability**

*Leadership is a necessary function of the human condition and of society. Following Jesus’ example and teaching, we aspire to exercise leadership as a way of serving, of taking the lowest place, and of living ordinary life with extraordinary love. - CO Theological Principle #13*

A discussion of the health of the CO organism, first and foremost, must consider the health of the relationships amongst those who serve in every part of our organism. CO consists of thousands of practitioners from around the globe who have chosen to give of themselves in service. The role of the staff and governing board is to serve these efforts and this organism, stewarding the resources you provide and channeling prayerful support and financial generosity into programs and resources. Together we seek to “further the knowledge and experience of God’s love in the human family” (CO Theological Principle #1) through the practice and experience of Centering Prayer.

The past eighteen months have seen numerous changes for both board and staff members, including the hiring of Mary Jane Yates as Administrator in February, 2020; the retirement of Mary Anne Best in December, 2020; the hiring of Mark Dannenfelser as Program Coordinator in March of 2021; and the hiring of two part-time contractors, Emily Carroll and Matt Scrimgeour, to support our social media and technical support functions. 2020 also saw the departure of Nick Cole and Adal Henriquez from the Board after six and four years of service, respectively. Volunteers joining the Governing Board in 2020 included Carol Quest and Phil Jackson. Further information on current Board members can be found here: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/governing-board-of-contemplative-outreach/>

Underlying these changes has been a growing sense of unity amongst staff and board members as each has committed in a deeper way to interactive, interconnected and non-hierarchical ways of being ([See CO Guideline for Service #1](#)). One example of this shift was the start of joint board and staff visioning days, the first of which occurred in February 2021. Staff and board members continue to meet weekly for prayer and the addition of new staff members has opened opportunities for us to serve in new ways. The “forming, storming, and norming” phases of team-building haven’t always been easy but as one board member recently stated, “CO is more stable than we’ve been in years” – a remarkable statement given the personal challenges some of us faced this past year including the loss of a spouse for one and

life-threatening surgery for another. Because the Spirit has shown such grace to us during this time, we look forward to even more growth in transparency and sense of common purpose as we continue to serve our volunteers and the global contemplative community.

### **Supporting Volunteers**

*There are different kinds of spiritual gifts  
but the same Spirit;  
there are different forms of service, but the same Lord;  
there are different workings but the same God  
who produces all of them in everyone.*

- 1 Corinthians 12:4-6

As stated in our guidelines, CO depends on the enormous generosity of those who serve and perform innumerable tasks without remuneration (CO Guideline #4). Since the onset of the pandemic in March of 2020, the generosity and passion of our volunteers has been more evident than ever. Early in the pandemic, training sessions were offered to support prayer group facilitators in developing skills with Zoom technology; one Sunday evening Zoom training session attracted over 100 participants. Web page how-to's were offered along with personal instruction. Zoom Centering Prayer groups literally kept people sane, centered, supported and connected when no other means was immediately available. Within a few months, local groups and Contemplative Outreach chapters pivoted quickly in this new world, offering workshops, retreats and other spiritual enrichment online. Hosts and participants became accustomed to people from all over the world attending their "local" events.

Our volunteer service teams have also been quick to respond to needs for training and enrichment during the pandemic. With the increased pressures of daily life and the increased online accessibility of workshops, larger numbers were drawn to learn Centering Prayer (CP). The first community-wide Zoom CP Introductory workshop was offered by the Introductory Program service team in July, 2020, with 302 registered, representing 10 countries. With support of CO staff, the Welcoming Prayer service team also provided an online Welcoming Prayer course in October which attracted over 500 participants. Other examples of how our volunteers have supported the understanding and deepening of practice in 2021 include the Facilitator Enrichment session hosted by the CP Facilitator Support team in February and the CP Presenter Enrichment session co-hosted by the CP Introductory Program and the Presenter Formation service teams on April 24, 2021. Both these events attracted several hundred participants who for the first time were able to connect with other presenters and facilitators from around the world to receive encouragement and resources for sharing the prayer and supporting weekly prayer groups both in person and online. The work of our service teams has also been supported through the sharing of stories and "great ideas" in *The Voice*, a quarterly e-newsletter for CO volunteers (see <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/the-voice-archive/>)

Along with the gifts of time and service provided by our many volunteers are the generous donations provided by many of you to support the financial health of CO. Again, in a year that saw a global pandemic and its related effects of economic distress for so many, I am deeply grateful to report that donations continued at rates similar to 2019. Specifically, our Circle of Friends donors (those who commit to giving a minimum of \$5,000 U.S. per year) contributed over \$250,000 in 2020, and other donations (including chapter, newsletter, direct mail, tithing, etc.) totaled over \$340,000. This

represents 83% of our expense coverage, with the remaining 17% handled by bequests, grants, royalties (including online courses offered via our partnership with Spirituality & Practice) and website product sales. For further details on our income and expenses for 2020 please see the charts at the end of this report or the full financial statements posted on our website (the balance sheet is [here](#) and the P&L is [here](#)). Truly the divine economy has expressed itself through this time of change and renewal!

### **Communications and Programming**

The CO website continues to be the central hub for sharing information, resources, programs and products. During 2020, over 220,000 users visited the site from 186 countries. The top ten countries represented are US, UK, Canada, Australia, Ireland, South Africa, India, New Zealand, Germany, Philippines. US visitors represented about 74% of the total.

The Centering Prayer mobile app timer for iPhones and iPads is seven years old and is offered in both English and Spanish versions. The app is very highly rated, and CO regularly receives notes of appreciation from customers indicating how useful the app is for supporting a daily practice of Centering Prayer. Despite no advertising or promotion, app downloads and usage are very strong. In 2020, there were over 54,000 new downloads of the app and even more importantly, over 4 million sessions using the app. There are over 29,000 active users per month. A French-language version is planned for 2021.

During 2020, three online courses were offered in partnership with Spirituality & Practice (S&P):

1. Guidelines for Christian Life, Growth and Transformation: offered during Lent, this course focused on the 42 guidelines first published in the back of *Open Mind, Open Heart* in the early 1980's. The guidelines were presented both in their original form as well as with updated teachings and commentaries. Three live Zoom prayer groups were offered each week throughout Lent. 249 participants
2. Embracing Living: The Welcoming Prayer: our most popular e-course was updated with both new email and video content, as well as three live Zoom practice sessions. 545 participants.
3. Lux Divina: this was a live re-run of a popular Advent online course. Many of the same participants from the Lenten e-course also showed up for this season as well. Three live Zoom prayer groups were offered each week, where a different practice focus was offered with musica divina, Lectio Divina and visio divina after the time of Centering Prayer. 313 participants

Since 2008, Contemplative Outreach has developed 22 e-courses serving over 14,000 people through our partnership with S&P. A list of our self-guided, on-demand e-courses [may be found here](#).

Contemplative Outreach continued to offer [The Word of the Week email program](#) as a donation-based offering, which also included two weekly Zoom prayer groups. The program continues to grow in subscribers, now with over 2400 global participants. About 75-90 people attend the two prayer groups each week.

Social media: Posting is now done regularly several times each week and, in some cases, daily. Our Facebook group presence continues to grow rapidly, now with over 16,600 global members; our Facebook page has 5656 followers; the Centering Prayer Twitter feed reaches over 9614 followers; Instagram has 1311 followers and YouTube 13,300 subscribers. An Insight Meditation Contemplative Outreach group was added and has 169 members.

## **Outreach to Diverse Populations**

As the cornerstone of CO's outreach to those with unique needs, our 12 Step Outreach community has responded to the very real challenges and opportunities of the pandemic. In addition to several 12 Step groups on the Meditation chapel, there are a number of daily online 11th Step meditation meetings which are listed on [cp12stepoutreach.org](http://cp12stepoutreach.org) webpage. Two global online events were also hosted: a weekend fall retreat last September with Father Bill Sheehan and a Spring series of Father Thomas's teaching in 12 Step language with more than 600 people registered for each. Another teaching series will begin on September 28 and will include several international speakers. See [cp12stepoutreach.org](http://cp12stepoutreach.org) to register. All are welcome.

The past 18 months have also brought renewed interest in outreach to our contemplative friends living behind prison walls. Through the tireless efforts of Chandra Hanson and a network of dedicated volunteers, a mailing list was developed and hard copies of CO newsletters are now being sent to over 775 incarcerated individuals and another 750 copies sent to prison volunteers for their use. Chandra also took the lead on developing a survey for prison outreach volunteers that was implemented early in 2021. The survey yielded a rich, diverse and exuberant response from 88 volunteers who serve in 30 different U.S. States, Canada and Mexico, in both men's and women's facilities. For more details about the survey and its responses, please see: <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/prison-outreach-survey/>

As a result of this survey, a Prison Outreach Service Team has now formed, comprised of eight dedicated volunteers, whose vision is to identify the strengths and opportunities related to Principles #3 and #12 of CO's Vision: *the presence of the Divine in us is the permanent self-giving of God to every human person (3) and we are invited to make available the gift of Centering Prayer to everyone, particularly to the needy and the marginalized (12).*

Outreach to our "under 40's" community also received a boost in 2020 through the efforts of Keith Kristich, an active member of the Buffalo NY CO chapter and CP presenter. After advertising a new online group for younger contemplatives in four monthly CO newsletters, there are now three online prayer groups serving the "under-40's" demographic in three different US time zones. Keith will continue to take the lead in partnering with others and developing our own CO initiatives to share the prayer and mentor younger contemplatives in contributing their gifts to the wider community.

## **Global Initiatives**

It is an understatement to say that paradigms shifted in the CO community during 2020. The challenges presented in pandemic isolation simultaneously created a deeper call to silence and contemplation for many. Communities were created across geographical boundaries that would not have been as easily accessed without the enablement of Zoom video conferencing. Our online Zoom event with Cynthia Bourgeault in May 2020 in many ways was the spark that ignited this global embrace. Initiated by our South African community, this event attracted over 4000 registrants, immediately becoming the largest event of its kind hosted by the CO community, one truly global in nature but united by our common bond in Silence. Video recordings of the event were edited and are now freely available on the [CO YouTube channel](#).

United in Prayer day on March 6, 2021 was a miraculous and continuous 28-hours of prayer in community, hosted by 15 countries representing over 15 different languages. Each hour-long prayer time ranged from 60-320 participants and many chose to stay on hour-after-hour to experience a kind of global retreat. Participants described the event as follows: *sublime, transcendent, a gift, uplifting and nourishing, best birthday party ever, absolutely transforming, in awe, extraordinary*. Others spoke of how it:

- expressed the common spirit of love in diverse expressions
- we became whole, finding our missing parts
- this is what the Body of Christ looks like.
- this is what the Body of Christ sounds like
- gave new meaning to what a world day of prayer truly means

Alongside these newer connections, we celebrate the continued work of Extension [Contemplativa Internacional](#) as well as CO's Global Team who meets bimonthly to coordinate efforts in serving our non-English and non-Spanish speaking communities around the world. Since October of 2020, an informal network of volunteers has also been forming to further the work of translating CO resources into multiple languages. This group consists of about 12 active members representing 17 languages -- a truly amazing group of dedicated and passionate volunteers! The network has also formed a sub-title working group under the very able guidance of Ray Mueller, our long-time videographer partner. This group has been very busy over the past few months with the following:

- Production of a two-page PDF document and online video explaining how to produce subtitled videos in any language.
- 15 CO videos or video series now have improved English captions and are available in a OneDrive shared folder, including the Prologue and first two videos of Part 1 of the Spiritual Journey series, Part 1 of The Secret Embrace conference with Cynthia Bourgeault, and the complete 2020 Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop. The latter includes the four remaining videos of the Six Continuing Sessions series.
- CO of Iceland is working on subtitling the Six Continuing Sessions series, which they will use in a fall Zoom retreat.
- Two new translators have started working on German and Italian subtitles for some of Fr. Keating's videos.

### **Dialogue and partnering.**

In March 2018, Contemplative Outreach began an experimental partnership with [Meditation Chapel](#) (MC), an online, Zoom-enabled prayer chapel originally created by members of the WCCM community and now operating and managed independently. A pilot training program of 15 Centering Prayer group facilitators was engaged in May 2018, which included both Spanish and French-speaking representatives.

In 2020, within three months of the pandemic's beginning, Meditation Chapel doubled size and now has more than 6000 people registered and over 150 groups. The partnership is growing and mutually beneficial. It is estimated that more than 2/3 of the growth comes from Centering Prayer practitioners

joining the chapel. There are now groups offered in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian and the 12-step tradition.

Other partners with whom CO has been in dialogue include the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation (<https://shalem.org/>); the Center for Christogenesis (<https://christogenesis.org/>); Center for Action and Contemplation (<https://cac.org/>) and the Contemplative Society based in Victoria, BC, Canada (<https://www.contemplative.org/>).

### **And the story goes on!**

As I finish writing this report, I am seeing evidence already of how CO is continuing to emerge and transform in 2021 and beyond. For example, a small group of dedicated volunteers is working with the stories that were submitted earlier this summer as part of [CO's community conversation project](#). The results of this project will in turn help to spark further conversation and emergence during our upcoming [Global Conference](#), September 16-19, 2021. A Lectio Divina workshop planned for August 14 already has more than 900 participants registered while countless Centering Prayer groups and retreats continue to hold an almost daily vigil of silence. As these past eighteen months have shown us, a new world for CO is indeed possible. And as we continue to learn from the gifts of the pandemic, let us continue to live into the vision of Fr. Thomas:

*All is possible for the Creator of all,*

*Who loves to manifest the impossible*

*In endless configurations.*

(Thomas Keating, the Secret Embrace, "Out of a Stone", 2018)

