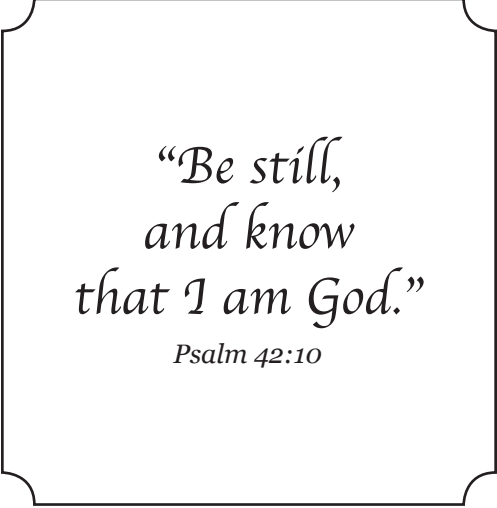


Contemplative Outreach of Maryland and Washington: A History



Contemplative Outreach of Maryland and Washington (COMW) is a chapter of Contemplative Outreach Ltd, which is a spiritual network of individuals and small faith communities committed to living the contemplative dimension of the Gospel. The common desire for Divine transformation, primarily expressed through a commitment to daily Centering Prayer practice, unites our international, interdenominational community.



*“Be still,
and know
that I am God.”*

Psalms 42:10

Since its founding in 1997, COMW has been guided by a series of Coordinators and Leadership/Coordinating Teams. In addition, one or two facilitators have led each of the over 25 prayer groups throughout the area. Their collective efforts have enabled the Centering Prayer to spread, as well as supported a deepened understanding of the Christian contemplative tradition. COMW would not exist without the dedicated servant leadership of them all.

This history presents an overview and highlights of COMW from 1997 to 2022. To the extent that information was available, the names of Coordinators and Teams are included in each section with approximate dates.

THE ROOTS OF CENTERING PRAYER



In the 1970s, when Fr. Thomas Keating was a monk at St. Joseph's Trappist Monastery in Spencer, Massachusetts, young people sometimes stopped by asking directions to a nearby ashram where they could meditate. This started Fr. Thomas and his brother monks, Basil Pennington and William Meninger, thinking, How can our Western monastic tradition of meditative prayer be offered outside the monastery for the Christian community? They also were responding to the Vatican II invitation to revive the contemplative teachings of early Christianity and present them in updated formats.

Over the next ten years, the method of Centering Prayer developed. The monks offered Centering Prayer workshops and retreats to both clergy members and laypeople. Interest in the prayer spread, and shortly after the first intensive Centering Prayer retreat in 1983, the organization Contemplative Outreach was formed to support the growing network of Centering Prayer practitioners.

Today, there are hundreds of thousands of Centering Prayer practitioners around the world, and prayer groups meet 24 hours a day across the time zones that span the globe. Our COMW community is part of this global community. Like practitioners everywhere, we seek a deeper relationship with God through contemplative prayer and experience God's grace in the fruits and gifts of the Spirit in our own lives.

*A detailed history of Centering Prayer and
Contemplative Outreach can be found here:*
<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/history/>

1990S: CENTERING PRAYER COMES TO THE DC METRO AREA



In November 1996, the first Centering Prayer group began at St. Margaret's Church in downtown Washington. The group

evolved out of a Taizé service and a Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop led by the Rev. Eugene Sutton, who was then priest-in-charge (currently The Right Rev. Eugene Taylor Sutton serves as Bishop of Maryland).

Bishop Sutton's commitment to Centering Prayer came from his own personal experience. As he recounts, "Centering Prayer saved my life." In 1994, while he was teaching at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, he experienced that his life was falling apart. He sought out the Rev. Tom Ward at Christ Church Cathedral for guidance. The Rev. Ward asked him: "Do you pray?" His immediate response was "Of course I pray, I've been a priest for 12 years." But then Sutton heard the deeper question being asked, whether he had a "prayer life." The Rev. Ward, whose mentor was Fr. Thomas Keating, taught him Centering Prayer, and the practice has been part of his life since.

In the late '90s, Bishop Sutton went on to offer more Centering Prayer Introductory Workshops and start new Centering Prayer groups throughout the DC region. Some of the new Centering Prayer practitioners got together to explore creating a structure to support the growing Centering Prayer groups and programs. At the time, Fr. Bill Sheehan was serving as "contact person" with the expanding national Contemplative Outreach network. The new emerging leadership group coalesced to form Contemplative Outreach of Metropolitan Washington (COMW), encompassing DC, Maryland, and Virginia.

1998- 2000: CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH OF METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON LAUNCHES AND GETS UNDERWAY



Eugene Sutton and Janet Aldrich were the key servant-leaders in forming the new chapter as well as in organizing and leading various programs including Centering Prayer Introductory Workshops, group facilitators and leadership training, and retreats. The chapter grew quickly and had a mailing list of 750 and website

after only a year and a half in existence. A small group began meeting at the home of Bob and Liz Maxwell who were central in leading a longstanding Centering Prayer group at Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Chevy Chase, MD. This group discussed chapter business and enjoyed a monthly potluck meal together. This became the chapter's first Leadership Team.

The core group included Eugene Sutton (Coordinator), Janet Aldrich (contact person), Bob and Liz Maxwell, Ron Barnett, Laurel LaCivita, Bill Sheehan, Ben Lamberton, Larry Weiss, and others.

*... to do nothing but be in
God's presence for a regular
period of time every day...
leads to a communion with
God that is more intimate
than anybody can imagine
or foresee. Divine love never
stops coming but waits for us
to shed the obstacles in us to
awaken fully to the Divine
Presence within us.*

Thomas Keating

Contemplative Outreach Newsletter June 2021

Notable during these early years was Fr. Thomas Keating's visit to DC in February 1998. He led a one-day retreat, "Discovering God's Healing Presence: A Day of Centering Prayer with Thomas Keating" at the Washington National Cathedral with over 700 in attendance which increased the visibility of the chapter. Bishop Sutton, Coordinator at the time, marks this date as the public launch of Contemplative Outreach of Metropolitan Washington.

EARLY 2000s: COMW HOSTS THE CONTEMPLATIVE OUTREACH "TRANSFORMING THE HEART OF THE WORLD" TOUR



Coordinator: Ron Barnett (2000-2006; also served 10 yrs. on the national CO board)

Leadership Team: Guy and Dana Semmes, Carol Leach and Laurel LaCivita

The highlight of this period was the 20th Anniversary of Contemplative Outreach Capital Campaign Tour entitled, "Transforming the Heart of the World" in 2005. The Tour visited various CO Chapters throughout the country. Fr. Thomas, Marie Howard, and Fr. Carl Arico from CO were guests of the DC chapter. Fr. Thomas gave an important presentation in Falls Church, VA to a large public audience. The Tour's visit to our area was not only successful as a fundraiser for CO but also fostered an increase in Centering Prayer in the area, greatly enriched the chapter, and involved many new servant-leaders.

2006-2013: COMW EXPANDS AND OFFERS NEW PROGRAMS



Coordinator: Guy Semmes

Leadership Team: Laurel LaCivita, Carol Leach, Dana Semmes, Gigi Ross and Moira Notargiacomo With new members added over time including: LJ Milone, Pam Harding, Sherril and David Pantle, Bob Gullo, Isabel Robinson, Ellen Kadow, Eileen McCabe, Boots Quimby, Mary Knipmeyer, Alice McCormack (Frederick MD contact person), Sally Wittig, and Julie Pascu

CO Contact Persons (as of 2011): Suzi Kindervater for DC, Laurel LaCivita for VA, Guy Semmes for MD, Pastor Larry Glover-Wetherington, Baltimore

The decade was a period of growth and expansion for the chapter. Some of the programs offered in this period included a regular quarterly newsletter (sent by snail mail), a steady website, and the clarification of content and structure of the Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop including how the chapter provided this service to new and existing Centering Prayer groups. The Introductory Workshops became the chapter's focus for managing expansion, with many CO-trained "presenters" in our chapter making that possible. The chapter often presented up to four Workshops in a year, one of which was open to the whole region.

In 2007, the CO nine-month Living Flame program was organized and coordinated by Laurel LaCivita and held at the Falls Church Presbyterian in Virginia beginning in September.

Susan Komis of CO Ltd came to lead a visioning day to help determine the interest in consecration of a Virginia Chapter. A Northern VA Service Team was created, and in 2009 Contemplative Outreach of Northern Virginia (CONOVA) formed. Isabel Robinson served as the first Coordinator for CONOVA. Contemplative Outreach of Metropolitan Washington then became a separate chapter maintaining the same acronym, COMW, now standing for Contemplative Outreach of Maryland and Washington (COMW).

In 2008, a facilitator training program led by Roseanne Havrid of CO Ltd. was hosted by Bishop Sutton at the Washington Cathedral's College of Preachers. This was a very successful program with a large turnout.

The chapter also began outreach in the Baltimore region with the help of Pastor Larry Glover-Wetherington who aided in the creation of new Baltimore Centering Prayer groups with Introductory Workshops. Larry became the contact person for the Baltimore area. In 2011 with the help of Bishop Sutton and Daniel Webster, several more CP Groups developed in the Baltimore area.

As one sits in Centering Prayer with the intent to rest in and trust in God, the unconscious begins to unload "the emotional junk of a lifetime." Repressed memories, pain, accumulated dull hurt rise to the surface and are, through the attitude of gentle consent, allowed to depart.

Cynthia Bourgeault "Centering Prayer and Inner Awakening"

In 2010, the chapter initiated a program of Half Day Retreats, which were held at different churches around the region and included periods of Centering Prayer plus a video of Fr. Thomas' teachings. Guy and Dana Semmes began a tradition of Annual COMW 12th night dinners for all Centering Prayer group facilitators. A weekend retreat to teach the "Refined Essentials" to all regional presenters was led by Anne Mazza of CO Ltd and organized by Henry Burke of Richmond. Also, a week-long formal formation training for new Centering Prayer presenters was instituted, also by Anne Mazza.



25 YEARS

The Chapter was helped during this period with great support from CO Ltd members including: Susan Komis, Tom Ward, Anne Mazza, Teresa Saulnier, Marge Rafferty, Roseanne Havird, and others.

2014-2016: COMW RENEWS ITS SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND EXPLORES “THE MYSTICS”



Co-Coordinators: LJ Milone, Boots Quimby

Leadership Team: Ellen Barlow, Ellen Kadow, Suzi Kindervatter, Sally Metcalfe Swanson, Steve Swanson, Eileen McCabe, Martha Johnston, and Michael Markovich

In August 2014, Susan Komis returned to DC for a second Visioning Day for the chapter. Susan led a group of about 30 gathered at St. John's Catholic Church Silver Spring in a process to identify and build on the many achievements of the past and reflect on ways to serve the growing Centering Prayer community. Out of the process, new Coordinators were selected, and a new Leadership/Coordinating Team got organized. The Team adopted a “servant leadership” approach, with one or two team members responsible for each particular program, including: support for Centering Prayer groups, monthly half day retreats, outreach to youth, and the Introductory Workshop.

Under the leadership of Boots Quimby, the CO Living Flame program was offered in the chapter for the second time.

In Fall 2015 and Spring 2016, Sally Metcalfe Swanson coordinated the chapter's launch of a series of half day retreats with the theme, “Christian Contemplation—Learning from the Masters.” All of the sessions were held at National Presbyterian Church/DC and included periods of Centering Prayer plus a presentation by a team member on a mystic and way of praying they inspired. These included: Thomas Keating and Thomas Merton (Bill Haardt); Teresa of Avila and Hildegard von

Bingen (Suzi Kindervatter); Evagrius/the Desert Contemplatives and The Cloud of Unknowing (LJ Milone).

2016-2019: COMW INNOVATES; UPGRADES ITS ONLINE PRESENCE



Coordinator: Martha Johnston, LJ Milone

Leadership Team: Ellen Barlow, Kathleen Blank Riether, Marjorie Centofanti, Bill Haardt, Suzi Kindervatter, David Morgan, Benedicte Vibe Christensen.

In September 2016, a day-long Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop was convened at Annunciation Church/DC for the entire Metro area. Over 60 participants attended. For the “Continuing Sessions” that follow-on the Intro, the chapter facilitated the sessions at four different churches around the area on different days and times and used a new DVD series Centering Prayer—A Training Course for Opening to the Presence of God.

A highlight of 2017 was a day long retreat led by Ilia Delio OSF at the National Presbyterian Church. The retreat, which was organized by Martha Johnston, was titled The Universe Within, and included periods of Centering Prayer plus two presentations by Sister Delio. She explored the inner universe and the role of consciousness, elaborating on the insights of modern science, the tradition of the mystics, and her understanding of Teilhard de Chardin.

In Fall 2018, the chapter convened its first week-long residential retreat at the Claggett Center in Maryland, with Kathleen Blank Riether and Suzi Kindervatter serving as coordinators. Ron Barnett and Mary Dwyer from Contemplative Outreach served as leaders. Thirty-eight retreatants attended and expressed appreciation for this opportunity to deepen their prayer practice—and requested another retreat in two years. During this period, outreach to local prayer groups expanded, and monthly half day retreats continued, offering a rich array of

programs that each included a presentation by a Team member or video and periods of Centering Prayer. Attendance at these programs ranged from 25-40. For the first time, a half day with the theme of “Contemplative Movement” was offered. Organized and led by Suzi Kindervatter with Benedicte Christensen and Kathleen Blank Riether, the program included periods of Centering Prayer plus the complementary practices of a Labyrinth Walk and several Sacred Circle dances.

As the chapter and prayer groups continued to grow, the Leadership Team realized that the COMW website needed a major upgrade in order to be more accessible, offer online registrations for events, and archive materials. Martha Johnston led this major and timely initiative.

During this period, COMW connected with and made contributions to two sister chapters: Contemplative Outreach of Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and Contemplative Outreach of Poland.

**2020-PRESENT: COMW GOES MOSTLY
VIRTUAL DURING THE
COVID PANDEMIC; OFFERS TWO
RESIDENTIAL RETREATS**



Coordinator: Martha Johnston (through 2020); Benedicte Vibe Christensen (from 2021)

Coordinating Committee: Ellen Barlow, Kathleen Blank Riether, Marjorie Centofanti, Bill Haardt (until 11/21), Suzi Kindervatter, David Morgan, and as of 11/2021, Linda Boyd, Josephine Garnem, Linda Hall, and Richard Hall (Note: In accord with CO practice, the name of the Team was changed from “Leadership Team” to “Coordinating Committee”)

In March 2020, as COVID hit, the chapter transitioned from in-person to virtual monthly retreats. This pivot required additional work on the website and development of expertise with Zoom. While the initial learning curve was steep, the monthly half day retreats on Zoom generally have been well-attended and also had

a silver lining. Participants who may not have been able to attend the previous in-person events joined on Zoom, and a wide range of noteworthy presenters from outside the Metro area were featured.

Especially noteworthy was a Centering Prayer Introductory Workshop in July 2020 organized by Martha Johnston and Ellen Barlow, and led on Zoom by Fr. Carl Arico with LJ Milone. Fr. Arico is one of the long-time leaders of Contemplative Outreach, and COMW was honored to be able to offer this special opportunity to those in our chapter as well as throughout the CO network. The Workshop was recorded and can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBE6fmRmYU8hkxzWdjOq69IECsajl95->

Other topics and presenters over the past two years have included: The Cloud of the Unknowing, LJ Milone; Finding Your True Self, David Morgan; God is One, the Heart of All Creation, Kathleen Blank Riether and Benedicte Vibe Christensen; In the Shadow of Your Wings, Fr. Vincent Pizzuto; Guard of the Heart, Bob Mischke; Lectio Divina, Mike Potter; The Welcoming Prayer, Mary Dwyer; Icons as Portals for Unlocking the Contemplative Heart, Mary Altalo; Practical Mysticism: Teachings from Evelyn Underhill, Rt. Rev. G. Porter Taylor; and Unbinding Thomas Merton and Ourselves, Leslye Colvin.

*It is the false self that we
bring to the spiritual journey;
our “true self” lies buried
beneath the accretions and
defenses. In all of us, there
is a huge amount of healing
that has to take place before
our deep and authentic quest
for union with God... This,
in essence, is the spiritual
journey.*

*Cynthia Bourgeault, “Centering Prayer and Inner
Awakening”*

See COMW's video library:

<https://contemplativeoutreachofmarylandandwashington.org/services/video-library/>

Based on feedback from the 2018 week-long Centering Prayer retreat at the Claggett Center, a second retreat was planned for 2020. Due to Covid, the retreat was postponed a year and finally took place in October 2021. The 40 participants all agreed to wear masks and share their vaccination cards. Retreat leaders were: Kathleen Blank Riether, Nick Cole, Suzi Kindervatter, and Susan Rush. For many of the participants, the retreat was the first time to gather in a group since the pandemic began, and all felt extremely blessed and grateful.

In March 2022, for the first time, the chapter participated in Contemplative Outreach's 2022 United in Prayer Day, hosting one hour of the global 24-hour day of prayer on Zoom. COMW's program offered a triptych including: a body attention practice led by Benedicte Vibe Christensen; a period of Centering Prayer led by Ellen Barlow; and "Contemplative Seeing the Visual World" led by Ron Barnett who is a practicing contemplative photographer.

A residential retreat for prayer group facilitators, another first for the chapter, had been planned for 2021, but was postponed and finally convened in May 2022 at Our Lady of Bethesda Retreat Center, MD. The overnight "Facilitating Workshop" was organized by Marjorie Centofanti and led by Bob Mischke and Eileen McCaffrey from Contemplative Outreach. The workshop was designed to follow on CO's "Facilitator Formation" training (now available online). Thirty-two facilitators or would-be facilitators attended and expressed appreciation both for the practical content and the opportunity to network amongst themselves.

COMW was invited to lead Centering Prayer at the Pax Christi USA's 50th Anniversary Conference gathering in early August 2022. The Committee was excited by this opportunity for a unique collaboration.

In summer 2022, attention turned to the 25th Anniversary event. We are pleased that the chapter's co-founder, Right Rev Eugene Taylor Sutton agreed to lead our one-day retreat on September 10 at Christ Episcopal Church in Columbia, MD on the theme, "How Contemplation Can Heal a Violent World."

In conclusion, we are deeply grateful for the support we've received from the national Contemplative Outreach organization and for the tools and resources that have helped us carry out our mandate. Most of all, our hearts are brimming with love and gratitude for Fr. Thomas Keating, Contemplative Outreach's founder, for his vision for this organization to renew the Christian contemplative tradition through the practice of Centering Prayer.

COMW looks forward to gathering as a community in September to look back in awe at how far we've come and anticipate where we are led at this time in the life of the chapter and our country. We give thanks for yet another opportunity to deepen our own prayer practice and to open our hearts to discern how we are being called to help heal world.

~ Compiled and Written by Suzi Kindervatter, COMW Leadership Team and Coordinating Committee, 2011-2022

*As you practice
Centering Prayer, you
begin to experience the
value of inner silence,
which reveals the true
self. The presence of God
can also be experienced
through the love of
nature, deep friendship,
conjugal love, generous
service of others, or the
discoveries of genuine
science. ...Contemplation...
is a gift that has already
been given. You have got
it! What you have to do
is to allow it to awaken
within you.*

*Thomas Keating and Joseph Boyle
"World Without End"*