



By Jane Cooper

One More Member Every Year: Do We Gain or Lose?

The Women's Institute (WI) is a member-based organization. The structure, bylaws, offices and executive are meaningless without the members behind them. Many of the problems faced by the organization today are the result of declining membership.

In January of this year, Eastern Area circulated a questionnaire to stimulate discussion, collect membership statistics and generate ideas for attracting new members. Sixty-six Branches answered the questionnaire, reporting for 1,024 members or about two-thirds of the Area membership. This is an excellent statistical sample of Eastern Area, and the findings would probably be similar for much of Ontario. What follows are some of the findings:

Branch size is steadily shrinking

The average Branch membership has fallen steadily from 22 members in 1986 to 16 members in 1996. Only 12% of our Branches increased their membership between 1986 and 1996. The remaining 88% of the Branches had shrinking memberships. Branches that disbanded during those ten years were not included in these numbers.

Not attracting members of all ages

Half our membership is over 65 years of age. The largest group, or 30% of the membership, is between the ages of 70 to 79. The number of members below 60 years of age

drops off rapidly. Only 5% of our members are younger than 40.

This is not a problem today. In fact, the experience of our senior members is one of the biggest strengths of the WI! However, in ten years time, many of our senior members will have retired from active participation. If we don't find new members, the WI will only be half the size.

Potential members are out there

Now is the time to bring in new people, so they can learn from the experience of the current membership. Although new members of every age are good for an organization, likely one of the best age groups to look for new members is the 50 to 59-year olds. Only 16% of our current members are in this group, yet this is the age when many women have more time available for community activities and lots of energy to contribute.

The Girl Guides of Canada have the same problem of shrinking membership. They have issued a challenge this year to every unit to bring in just one new member. We can learn from their example. If we add just one woman to each Branch each year, we can stop the shrinkage, and ensure that we have a WI to celebrate the 125 anniversary in 2022. If we continue to lose, on average one member per Branch per year, we may not have a WI to celebrate in ten years time!

Any Branch who would like to discuss membership issues or would like to help in planning a program to attract new members can contact their Area Membership Organizer, or Lorna McGrath, Provincial Membership Coordinator. We can all make a difference!

Jane Cooper is the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario Membership Organizer for the Eastern Area. The Provincial Membership Coordinator is Lorna McGrath and she can be reached at RR 1, Elmvale ON L0L 1P0, Phone: (705)322-1320.



A Tea Party in Fine Style

The Durham West District Women's Institute held a promotional tea at the Bowmanville Museum. From left to right are District members Shirley Bubar, Marjorie Prescott, Dora Martyn and Elaine Baker.

Submitted by Dora Martyn, PRO, Durham West District.

Top Ten Ways to Gain New Members

This list was compiled from ideas collected from the questionnaires, and none of them are new ideas. They are the tried and tested ideas which have worked for the last 100 years. We need to ask ourselves, are we doing these things in our Branch to move forward into the next 100 years? A minority of Branches are doing these things and they are finding new members of all ages.

- 1. Invite friends as well as members to meetings. Establish a commitment to have at least one guest at every meeting. Maybe the hostess for each meeting can be responsible for inviting a friend or neighbour?
- 2. Plan an interesting program. Bring in guest speakers. Every meeting should have a speaker, an activity, a craft, a field trip, something. Ordinary business is not enough.
- 3. Write newspaper articles about your program. Every program activity is of interest to your local community newspaper. Write it up!
- 4. Plan your program to reflect current society. Find speakers on current topics (ie. doctors will talk about new medical practices, teachers can talk about changes to the school system, high school students would love to show you how computers work, visit a new business in town, etc.).
- 5. Be visible! Join in community events. Be seen at your local fair, garage and craft sale and farmers market (etc.) Advertise your Branch at the same time.
- 6. Organize trips open to the public. Rent a bus and visit a local place of interest.
- 7. Run educational courses. Hire a local person who can teach a craft or skill, rent a hall and advertise. Charge registration fees to members and the public. You can make money and advertise the WI at the same time.
- 8. Hold meetings at different times to suit different members. Some Branches are holding half their meetings in the evenings; some are holding all of them in the evenings. Take a look at your schedule. Would different meeting times bring in more members?
- 9. Hand out program cards to area newcomers. Print your program and use it to advertise to new and old neighbours.
- 10. Remember to have fun at your meetings!!