

[New National Evangelization Team director called back to ministry](#)

Pierre O'Reilly has a pretty easy answer to why his long and winding life path has led to [NET Canada](#) and the chair of executive director.

"The Lord kept opening these doors, that's the long and short of how we got here," said O'Reilly as the organization celebrates its 25th anniversary.

As a young man, O'Reilly experienced the kind of religious life-altering experience NET (National Evangelization Team) now offers to high-school age students. O'Reilly was evangelized through Catholic [Christian Outreach](#) (CCO), a campus ministry to university students, but has had a strong connection to NET.

O'Reilly grew up in Moose Jaw, Sask., in a Catholic family of four boys and became involved in CCO at the University of Saskatchewan in the early 1990s.

Co-founders Angèle and André Regnier launched the apostolate in 1988, patterned after the evangelical ministry Campus Crusade for Christ, and it maintains a strong connection to NET.

In an interview, O'Reilly described his upbringing as that of a "typical Catholic home." The family went to Mass on Sundays. He and his brothers attended Catholic schools.

"It really didn't go much further than that," he said. "I knew the basics of who Jesus was and who Mary was."

What was missing was a personal relationship with God, he said.

"I turned my back on the faith once I left home to go to university. I decided I wasn't going to be practising or go to Mass," he said. "I wasn't really living the faith before I went to university."

He arrived at the University of Saskatchewan to pursue an arts degree, but he was more interested in partying than studying and he "bounced around" in various courses of study.

A couple of his brothers had become involved in CCO and he had seen a change in their lives, something he "found intriguing." He got to know some of the people involved in the ministry and "saw something very attractive" in the people who were "serious about their faith but fun to be around."

"They were real, but ultimately, they had something I was missing," O'Reilly said.

He found there was something in him "not being fulfilled in partying" and the

lifestyle he was leading.

"I had a few moments of honesty where I realized: 'I don't know what they have but I want it.' "

O'Reilly said he was "dipping his toes in" by participating in CCO faith studies and events, but it wasn't until he attended a retreat that he realized "the Lord wanted everything; He wanted my whole life."

About a week after that retreat, O'Reilly attended Mass for the first time in three years and made the decision to turn his life over to Jesus Christ.

"Lord, I don't know what you want," he recalled praying. "But basically I'll do it. I don't know what You have for me but I'll do it.

"That changed everything for me," O'Reilly said. "I found that peace and that happiness that I had seen in these young people. It's that relationship with God that I was seeking and that I was missing and trying to fill with other things in my life.

"That experience of really encountering God is what I was meant for," O'Reilly said. "Now I had a passion to share that with others."

He met his future wife Laura around this time. She was on staff with CCO after having served for two years as a missionary with NET USA, the parent of NET Canada, that launched in the United States in 1981.

The first NET team came to Canada in 1985. Since then, the movement has grown internationally to include Australia, Scotland, Ireland and Uganda. NET teams have also served in Guam, Honduras, Mexico, Malaysia, New Zealand and Nicaragua, according to the NET USA website.

The O'Reillys married in 1997. He had finished his degree and there was "no question" he would join the staff of CCO and the couple began as missionaries at the University of Regina. Once they began having children, Laura stepped back from ministry to look over them.

The growing family moved back to Saskatoon and Pierre worked at CCO head office.

"These were the early years of CCO, and we were still figuring things out," O'Reilly said. "It was such a formative time; how to learn to effectively evangelize. It doesn't need to be complicated."

O'Reilly says it is "mind-blowing" to see how CCO has spread to university campuses across Canada. "I don't even recognize it now. It's amazing to see how the ministry has grown from such simple and humble roots."

O'Reilly began to work in fundraising and development for other Catholic institutions, including Notre Dame College, a Catholic high school in

Saskatchewan, and Campion College at the University of Regina.

At the same time, the O'Reillys remained "very active" in evangelization and outreach at their local parish and with youth groups. They started Alpha courses; his wife became a pastoral assistant and his daughter became a youth minister.

"I always felt a call back to full-time ministry and I knew the Lord would call us back some day," O'Reilly said. "The Lord started working on both of our hearts as something to look into."

Because of Laura's experience with NET, the couple had kept in touch with the ministry, had hosted NET teams in their home and remained friends with people involved.

When the opportunity opened with NET Canada in Ottawa, O'Reilly said they were "surprised," because "we hadn't been looking outside of Saskatchewan."

"I always had the promise to do whatever He wanted me to do, and go wherever He wanted me to go and say whatever He wanted me to say," O'Reilly said.

The couple spoke to their four oldest children – the couple has six altogether – and told them they were thinking and praying about this and "they thought it was a great idea."

"It was another sign we took," O'Reilly said.

Since the fall of 2018, NET Canada has sent out four retreat teams to high schools and parishes nationwide and another four discipleship teams that have stayed in various locations for the year.

O'Reilly said eight teams ran about 300 retreats over the last year, reaching more than 15,000 young people.