By Tony DeGol

During these wintry days, most of us are longing the renewal of spring.

Many people throughout the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown experienced a different renewal last fall and are eagerly awaiting the next opportunity in just weeks.

"It was like a window opened," explained Rita Redden, a member of Saint Patrick Parish in Johnstown.

Redden is describing the joy of better knowing and experiencing the Lord thanks to the diocesan renewal initiative ARISE Together in Christ.

She and five fellow parishioners comprised one of the small faith sharing groups at Saint Patrick.

Like the many other ARISE groups around the diocese, the gang met weekly for the six sessions of season one in October and November.

ARISE Together in Christ is rooted in Scripture and encourages the practice of Lectio Divina, Latin for Divine Reading. Participants are invited to meet Jesus through the Word and explore faith's connection to daily life.

That focus is important to Redden because she considers most of her earlier Catholic formation to be centered on Liturgy and the sacraments rather than Scripture.

A member of Saint Patrick for about 36 years and a Religious Education instructor, Redden, who facilitated the group, said there was a great comfort level among the six members.

"The people always seemed other-centered," she mentioned.

"We were very lucky – we got a very nice group," concurred Patricia Wolfhope. "The people were extraordinary in that they were willing to share things."

Indeed, one of the keys to ARISE is the desire of the participants to share their thoughts and feelings if they choose to do so.

The Saint Patrick group promised to keep what was discussed among themselves private, perhaps encouraging more openness.

"It made me just a little more curious about things," continued Wolfhope, a lifelong member of Saint Patrick. "Some things about myself came up."

Lois and Mike Dipko also found the experience beneficial.

"I think I realized that I need to pray more, and talk to God more, and give Him my problems, and hopefully have answers from Him on ways I can improve myself," accessed Lois, another lifelong parishioner.

Mike experienced some health challenges in 2017. He said his engagement in ARISE helped him better understand the ordeal.

Milissa Else, director of pastoral services for RENEW International, which offers the ARISE program, said the experiences of small faith sharing groups – like the one at Saint Patrick – should be reminiscent of the example Jesus gave when he called his disciples.

“They were a small Christian community, and they were gathered together, they broke bread together, the talked about their faith, they shared, they learned from one another in that sharing, they gave one another mutual support, and ultimately they didn’t stay together in one room but they went out together in mission,” reminded Else.

The second season of ARISE Together in Christ will happen during Lent. Those who participated in season one are welcome back, and those who did not are invited to begin the encounter.

"Give it a try," urged Mike Dipko. "If you don't like it, nothing ventured, nothing gained. I think it is a good learning experience."

He and his friends from season one are ready for the next chapter of their journey.

Just like spring, it promises to be a welcome renewal.