



Discussion Recording Form

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS

Facilitator / Recorder Worksheet

1. What was the initial need that DignityUSA was organized to meet and that drove our rapid growth from a local community in L.A. to a national network of chapters? What “fueled our engine”?

USA:

- There were few places we could meet openly, especially in a faith context.
- Fr. Nidorf noticed that the Church was failing to provide any spiritual support for the gay community
- The second chapter was in Louisville. Marie S. was in the convent in nearby Bardstown then and recalled that the Bishop was very progressive and women’s religious communities were very responsive to Vatican II reforms as well. She did not think it odd at all that Louisville started the second chapter.
- We talked about the “Halloween Letter”. Some members had to explain that to others – and what precipitated it – Dignity’s Statement of Position and Purpose which included physical expression as holy. Dignity refused to change that as the Bishops demanded. The expulsion from Church property was the result – although not explicitly connected to it. Logan B. was a member of Dignity New Orleans at the time and remembers that they were told in the middle of Mass that they could no longer meet there. “It felt like the Church did not want us at all”. One member recalled that a priest in Boston told him that this was a direct reaction to Dignity. The Church was threatened by its growth and the depth of its theological reasoning and traction..

Columbus:

- Joe G. saw an article by John McNeil which mentioned a group in California named Dignity. He wrote to inquire. He was referred to a Marianist priest in Dayton who sponsored a Gay Christian conference there in 1974. Dignity was mentioned there again. He met a man there from Columbus and they joined forces with a student at OSU then who was a member of Dignity NY. They started a chapter in Columbus in 1975. Joe noted that he wrote to then Bishop Herman to request permission – which was denied. Joe knew he was a member of CTA and was therefore progressive. He requested a meeting in person. The Bishop asked him “how can I help you without putting me on the spot?”

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- We recalled how brave John McNeil was with the publication of his book “The Church and the Homosexual”. And marching in the NY Pride Parade and being interviewed on Phil Donahue etc. We had to explain all this to newer members.
- In about a year, 100+ men were attending Dignity Columbus.
- There was conflict between two leaders of the Chapter – which eventually caused a split and then there were two. “That led to the demise of both” Joe said.
- Before the Halloween Letter, there was cooperation between the Diocese and Dignity. Communication was regular. Several members recalled driving to Chicago where the Cardinal Archbishop celebrated Mass with Dignity.
- A Paulist priest at the OSU Newman Center came out publicly – which was unheard of. In 1981 a “Gay Men’s Support Group” was established there and grew fast to fill the void left by Dignity. After the Halloween Letter, this group felt threatened as well even though it was never called Dignity. Members recalled that clergy and religious were often put in the middle – making it very hard for them as well to minister as they felt they should.
- Eventually, with a more conservative Bishop, Newman had to become less explicitly welcoming to LGBT people. The Gay Men’s Support Group died. Finally, Leo R. I was inspired to try to reform a Dignity Chapter in Columbus. 12 people showed at the first meeting including several women. The group decided it did not want Mass – for two reasons. No priest would take that risk with us. The women resented a patriarchal Church and didn’t want Mass as long as women were excluded from the priesthood.
- This eventually changed – in about 10 years, when a priest from Cincinnati started driving the two hours to join us. He couldn’t attend Dignity Cincinnati there. He initially declined to say Mass because he “wanted to be a part of us, not minister to us”. But later he did and finally liturgy became a part of our meetings – but it has never been as central as it was in other chapters for our history, because there was one priest who had to drive a long ways, and because the Ohio State Newman Center was still a place of welcome for us for Mass and most sacraments (not marriage or baptism). Some members noted that it was very important to them when we started having Mass. It was noted that only at Dignity could we experience the fullness of the sacrament of Eucharist and our own wholeness. “Even accepting communities could only go so far”. “Dignity enabled me to integrate my spirituality and my sexuality for the first time.
- One local priest invited Dignity to meet in his Church near downtown but the requirement that members enter through the back door after dark was unacceptable. We were “being true to ourselves”.
- Marie S. asked why allies were not welcomed for so long. The response was that most of us had been totally conditioned to not put our allies in the crossfires of the Church by publicly associating with them. We marched in the

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Columbus Pride Parade by ourselves. Dignity Dayton joined us. Our banner said “Proudly Catholic, Proudly Gay!” We shed our shame by doing that – and were applauded by Catholics in the crowds. Logan B recalled that Dignity New Orleans wanted and need a safe space – and that would not be possible at the time with straight people there – no matter how well intentioned.

- One of our members has never been Catholic – he is a Disciple of Christ. IT was noted that Dignity has served many LGBT Christians like him. Dayton had many Lutherans. Grand Rapids was almost entirely protestant because their churches offered no support at the time. That chapter eventually closed as Protestant Churches have become more welcoming as society in general has.
- One member said “Dignity Columbus gave me hope when I was a teacher in a Catholic School in a small city about 45 minutes away. It was well worth the drive for me. It reminded me I was GOOD.”
- The member from New Orleans remembered that Dignity put fliers out at the local bars – and that is how he became connected.
- Dignity Columbus was an active force in Columbus. About 5 years ago a Protestant woman was fired from Bishop Watterson HS after 19 years because her partner died and she was recognized as the surviving partner in the paper. The students and faculty were enraged. Dignity led loud protests downtown in front of the Chancery – blocking the street (Gay Street!) – and attracting the media. It was just the latest in many protests we held – on our own and in partnership with CTA Columbus – and we often drove to Dayton, Cincinnati, Cleveland and even Chicago to swell their ranks. That is community!

Historical Context:

- American Psychological Assn. took homosexuality off the list of Psychological Disorders in 1973.
- Reparative Therapy was still practiced – and one of our members talked about that.
- Civil rights movements were all over the country at that time.
- HIV (GRID) forced the gay community to “come out” and begin to demand recognition by political powers. A member recalled that they were not allowed to pray for the sick and dying at Mass – HIV was not mentioned.
- Some recalled that sick men were coming to the cities to die – as they were a pariah in small rural communities and families often did not want to be associated with the illness. One member took such a man into his home and took care of him till he died – where there was no previous friendship. That care-taker was Asst Superintendent of the Catholic Schools at the time and not out. Very brave,
- Sodomy laws were in place in most states still.
- The Church issued a report on Sexual Ethics



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- Following Vatican II reforms, “gay men in the seminary and women in the convents were coming out in droves – which became a real issue for formation teams” Happening at same time as “sexual revolution” in society was challenging all kinds of gender norms.
- The Vietnam War protests and MLK civil rights marches showed people had the power to push back against institutions
- Election of Ronald Regan saw the return of conservatism and the new alliance between the Christian Right and the Republican Party.

There was overall pride in how Dignity has withstood so much through the years. Was truly brave and prophetic. And now is looked to by LGBT Christians in Europe who are inspired by us. “WE will never know the impact we have had in countless conversations behind closed doors – including among the Bishops.”

We believe Dignity helped change the culture around us and the Church as well

The entire conversation was enlightening to many of our members who knew little about the history we discussed!