

Jubilee Discussions - Discussion Recording Form - 1

Date: 4/25/18

Chapter /Community/Caucus Dignity Northern Virginia

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS

Facilitator / Recorder Worksheet

What was the initial need that Dignity USA/ Dignity Dayton 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"?

How did the mission of Dignity evolve over time? What drove those changes in how we did our work? Consider dynamics in the organization, in the Church, and in society. In what ways might your chapter/community/caucus have contributed to this evolution?

The theme of our 50th Anniversary Conference is "True to the Spirit, True to Ourselves." In what ways has "being true to ourselves and true to the calling of the Spirit" evident in our history? Your local history?

Locally, and nationally, how has Dignity changed lives for the better? Changed the Catholic Community? Impacted the LGBTQ + social justice movement?

SESSION FEEDBACK FORM

(To be completed following each Segment discussion)

- Approximately what percentage of your community participated? 10%. How productive was this conversation for your community? As a facilitator, what worked well and why:
Of the 30 or so regular attendees at our weekly Mass 10 people attended the discussion (roughly 1/3).

- What would you do differently next time? Consider both the preparation, the actual conversation and follow-up..

More one on one invitation to members to participate. I explained the process we were hoping to follow and asked that anyone willing to take part would let us know. In consultation with those who expressed interest, we set a time and place to get together and announced it at Mass for a couple of weeks.

A few people were unavailable on the date chosen, but it was the best available for the largest number.

For the next session, we are making the announcement and also speaking directly to each member.

The conversation was open to the experiences of the participants and may not have specifically answered the suggested questions. It was, however, very meaningful to the group and met the spirit of the theme.

The following is a summary of what emerged from the conversation.

- What are your suggestions for improving the supporting materials, process and the discussion they were meant to encourage?

First, a little background on our Chapter: Dignity Northern Virginia started out as an offshoot of Dignity Washington which has a long and fascinating history of its own. For various reasons including geography some members of Dignity Washington decided to establish a new chapter located in Northern Virginia. This made some sense because Northern Virginia was not a part of the Washington Archdiocese and it could be difficult to get to D.C. for some individuals.

There were also disagreements as to the role of the Dignity Chapter. At least some of the members felt that Dignity Washington was too political and activist and were uncomfortable with it. At any rate, a group split off and applied for a charter from Dignity USA and established itself in Arlington, VA (1991). The group arranged to use the facilities of Clarendon Presbyterian Church and scheduled a weekly Mass.

This group disbanded after a while and established an unaffiliated group , Ave Maria, which is no longer active.

The following year, 1992, the remnant of the Northern VA group began meeting in Alexandria at Immanuel Church on the Hill and is still going strong.

Each participant shared his or her discovery of Dignity, reason for seeking it out and what has kept them coming back:

For most of us, the underlying idea of a safe place to express our reality as both gay and Catholic made Dignity the obvious choice. We recognized this as the mission of Dignity both nationally and locally. Certainly, the mission of Dignity was more than that but in terms of how we came to Dignity, what we were hoping to find and what we did find, this “safe place” was the initial draw.

Our community is mostly older people many of whom were members of Dignity before the Northern VA chapter was established, some in D.C. and others from various chapters. Although the “safe place” was frequently the initial attraction, we as individuals and as a community understood the mission of Dignity as more than that.

In our conversation some of the recurring themes were:

A sense of welcome: One member spoke of discovering Dignity as she was discovering, acknowledging and dealing with her own sexuality. She commented that the welcome and acceptance she found from the mostly male group at Dignity Washington in 1986 and the use of gender neutral language in the liturgy combined to make her feel extremely comfortable. The space was not just safe, it was affirming and encouraging, supportive and reassuring. It was a place that acknowledged her dignity.

Appreciation for the role of Dignity USA as a voice for the Catholic LGBT Community and as a force for change in the Church and the country.

A spiritual home in which we are nourished in Word, Sacrament and Community.

The Uniqueness of our Community:

An intimate loving community in which we share the joys, sorrows, achievements and struggles of each other.

The role of Dignity on the national level has evolved over the years as the result of societal changes, Church related events and a growing sense of the organization’s purpose and power. As a community some of us saw a challenge to involve more of our members in Dignity USA.

The specific events which were addressed in our conversation and which affected the mission of Dignity USA included:

The AIDS Crisis:

On a national and international level, the AIDS Crisis solidified the LGBT Community. We came together for survival, support and strength. Dignity USA was critical in representing the Gay- Catholic role in the crisis.

On the local level, the crisis brought out the incredible power of love and compassion. Significantly, the response of the Lesbian community to the crisis was overwhelming. The bond that arose from that outpouring of care and concern changed countless lives.

Dignity Northern VA is a great example of gender parity rooted in mutual respect and love.

The Ratzinger Letter (Intrinsically disordered):

When Dignity Chapters were expelled from Catholic facilities, the level of hostility from the Institutional Church was elevated. The move was intended to undermine our mission, our goals and our very existence. Dignity USA led the response. The mission had evolved, driven by the need for survival.

On the local level, chapters sought out other venues to continue providing Spiritual and Communal sustenance to our members. Many communities found a new home in other Christian Churches. What we found in Immanuel Church was not just space but also allies and friends as did many other communities in other welcoming churches.

A Changing World

When the Supreme Court declared Sodomy laws unconstitutional and States began to legalize same sex marriage, there was a feeling in some circles that Dignity was no longer necessary. The reality was much different. There was an inevitable backlash. Attacks on LGBT groups and individuals continued and in some ways intensified. More than ever a strong voice was required. Dignity USA was a major component of that strong voice.

The role of Dignity USA continued in the face of new challenges.

For Dignity Northern VA, the new legal landscape was exciting. We had weddings that were recognized by the State. One of our presiders was licensed by the Commonwealth of Virginia to officiate at Weddings.

At the same time, a growing movement to legalize discrimination in the name of “religious freedom” began to gain traction. The “voice” was needed in a new battle.

Gay Friendly Churches

As more parishes seemed welcoming to LGBT people, there was a question about the relevance of individual chapters. In Northern VA, the consensus was that Dignity might not be the only

place to worship as a gay catholic, but it was still the best. Our Chapter had become our family and we would not find that in another place. A number of our members attend Mass at local parishes in addition to Dignity.

True to the Spirit, True to Ourselves

Although we did not specifically address the third or fourth questions, I think we answered them in our own way. We are here in Dignity Northern VA because we are committed to our Catholic Faith and committed to living authentic lives. In our commitment to our faith we try to live out the command of Jesus to love one another, to care for the least of our brothers and sisters, to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God