

Jubilee Discussions - Discussion Recording Form - 1

Date: 12/16/2017

Chapter /Community/Caucus Dignity San Fernando Valley

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS Facilitator / Recorder Worksheet

1. What brought you to Dignity? What “fueled your engine” in your initial participation?

Members of the San Fernando Valley chapter gathered at the home of two members for liturgy and dinner on the third Sunday of Advent. After dinner we gathered for a conversation on “Recalling Our Roots.” We started by asking everyone to share what initially brought them to Dignity. Even though many of us have known each other for years, these were fascinating conversations in which we learned more about each other and our spiritual journeys.

While there were many different circumstances that brought us to Dignity, a common theme and phrase used was “community.” Some members were coming from religious life, some just recently out of the closet, and some from Latin American countries where the oppression of LGBT people is harsh and the risks of being out great. All were searching for a safe place to worship in a supportive community.

Dignity SFV grew out of the Dignity LA chapter, as several members moved to the San Fernando Valley and could no longer participate as easily and as often at the D/LA center. One of those original members described finding D/LA for the first time, saying “it was exciting. It was BIG!”

One member found Dignity a year after being denied ordination to the priesthood because of his sexuality. For him Dignity was an important part of the healing process. After a time away from the organization, he came back when he realized he needed to find ways to be more social, and have a social circle. Another member found Dignity shortly after leaving religious life as a Christian brother, similarly searching for a community that could honor and nourish both his spirituality and sexuality.

2. How did the mission or purpose 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?

Some of our chapter’s longtime members were originally active with Dignity LA. They shared stories of Dignity working more within the diocese in the early days, with diocesan priests presiding at liturgy. After the 1986 Halloween Letter, diocesan priests were forbidden to say Mass for Dignity, and the

organization had to work completely outside the institutional church. One longtime member said, “We have a more prophetic stance now,” as seminarians are typically more conservative and the hierarchy unwelcoming.

In the early days of the San Fernando Valley chapter, started in 1996, the chapter provided a safe place for members to be out and proud at a time when legal rights for LGBT people were few. As legal rights have expanded for LGBT people, some of those basic needs have changed. In the beginning Dignity was also a vital social outlet for many members, perhaps their only connection to a gay identity. That has also changed immensely with increased visibility and acceptance.

3. 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?

The San Fernando Valley chapter has members with an array of gifts that they offer to the community. Many spoke of the joy and importance of using their talents and interests in service of the chapter, and how meaningful it is to have that opportunity.

Our leader of music puts in countless hours planning the music ministry and scheduling pianists, but this also allows him to have an important outlet for his talents.

Another member has a gift for floral arrangements, and generously provides beautiful displays for various liturgical celebrations throughout the year. Before returning to Dignity about 10 years ago he regularly attended Mass at a local parish, but says “it didn’t even occur to me” to offer to work on the flowers because he did not feel spiritually moved or fully welcomed by the parish community. Dignity provides him the context and connection to fully realize his talents, while being true to himself.

Similarly, among our chapter members is a deacon with a passion for and extensive knowledge of liturgy. Dignity allows him the opportunity to be true to himself while also being true to his calling and his commitment to worship and liturgy.

The SFV chapter has often organized full-day retreats and days of recollection in Lent or Advent. There are several retreat centers in the LA area that the chapter has used, and we always identify ourselves as Dignity when arranging to use space. At Holy Spirit Retreat House in Encino, a beautiful facility with a bucolic, prayerful campus, our chapter is always listed on the board with all the other groups and organizations using the facility that day. In this small way, we are true to ourselves and true to the spirit, proudly and openly taking our place as an LGBT community of faith.

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

One longtime chapter member spoke about how his involvement with Dignity allows him to join in conversations with co-workers and others as a person of faith, and he finds this has emboldened him to speak out more honestly, impacting those he encounters, one person at a time.

In the early 2000s there was a San Fernando Valley Pride Parade and Festival for several years. Dignity SFV always participated, and members marched with a banner identifying the group as “gay” and “Catholic.” This very public witness would always receive cheers of support and surprise from onlookers.

Written into the bylaws of the San Fernando Valley chapter is that the chapter designates 10% of all contributions to St. Ferdinand’s Pence. This money is put aside to donate to individuals, organizations or other groups serving those impacted by HIV/AIDS in the San Fernando Valley area. There was a time when social workers would call and ask for small donations to help individuals pay utility or rent bills. Presently the chapter has a practice of making a single, more sizable annual donation around World AIDS Day to an organization serving those living with HIV/AIDS. Over the years the chapter has provided thousands of dollars in support to those in need.