

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS
Dignity / Washington Discussion - February 2018

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”?

In the late 60s-early 70s there were many changes happening in the social make up of world. The Catholic community was changing particularly those younger than 35 or so or generally more liberal. Those who were LGBT were coming out of Vatican II involved in the social justice movement, civil rights movement, and sexual revolution. Gays and lesbians in the church wanted to have a community for ourselves and see ourselves as good.

The Church on a daily lived way was either tolerant or negative based on where you were. But a growing number of LGBT individuals in the church had positive views of ourselves. Given the many changes happening in the Church, LGBT individuals had a view that the Church would also be changing on issues of sexuality.

The first Dignity group formed in L.A., soon followed by San Diego and possibly other places along the West Coast. Members traveled a lot. As they traveled around the country, names got collected about people who wanted to do something about being gay and Catholic. “Me too — let’s talk about this!” People got really excited that others were like them and shared about similar identities. People visiting Provincetown, Palm Springs, Key West, San Francisco, New York talked about this group of gay & lesbian Catholics. Also gay and lesbian members of religious orders would spread the word at conferences about this gathering of homosexual Catholics. Ads began to appear in community newspapers — one of them in the Washington DC Blade.

Information about these groups spread like Johnny Appleseed moving across the country. In 1971 about a dozen or so Dignity groups sent representatives to Boston, got together and put together bylaws, and officially incorporated nationally in Boston. Dignity Washington started in 1972 by a group of six like-minded individuals meeting at the cafeteria at the Shrine.

Initially the church hierarchy reacted with no strong admonishment. Many chapters met in church buildings and there was more of a neutral stance on our group. Bishops were less hostile. This was true in DC where D/W had meetings in Catholic churches, colleges, and Newman Centers. Parish priests said Mass for D/W with no problems.

2. 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?

D/W started as a mostly religious/social group. D/W started meeting at the Newman Center on the George Washington University campus, on the 3rd Friday of each month. Sometimes Mass or sometimes a prayer service, a food social and social/discussions or formal programs occurred. There were also periodic visits to do charitable projects - food for the poor or visiting nursing homes. The first Sunday Mass began after four years. It was like a support group, people coming to terms with their own and the group's sexuality and faith.

Over the years, D/W evolved into an advocacy group of sorts, and later a medical/support group because of the AIDS crisis. Taking care of folks when they got sick, taking meals to them, going on doctor's visits, and providing them funeral services became important works of the community. Not only for members of our own community, but also the broader community who needed to be buried and had no other church community to offer that.

We did 47 panels in the AIDS quilt project — that's the number of folks our community lost to AIDS. In the 80s & 90s, we'd get together regularly, weekly or twice weekly in Lutheran or other churches that had big spaces and lots of tables where we could spread out and sew the banners. We'd have to ship them out in June to be included in the first AIDS quilt in October 1987.

Many times when D/W was beginning, people wouldn't use their real names. Government agencies and businesses would fire individual just for knowing they were LGBT. Also then as today people were surprised that you could be Gay and Catholic there was a community for that and it was growing. In the 80s we had almost 500 members.

Being the chapter in our nation's Capital, there were constant opportunities to be a witness for the church, and for broader society on national issues. And we have always been willing and able to make a statement, rising to the national moment, being a witness, and helping organize an effort among ourselves. Our witness at national "Marches on Washington" for political or HIV reasons, or at other national moments, or when Popes were visiting.

At the 1993 weekend of a big gay march in DC, D/W had 500 people at Mass, many from around the country. Many were DUSA members but for others it was their first Catholic space to be able to welcomed and feel loved & accepted. We would create our own spaces on the National Mall during marches with many large banners and be welcomed.

A few anecdotes from when Popes visited:

- We had a contingent directly across the street from St. Matthew's Cathedral while Pope John Paul II was saying mass. During the Mass the front doors were open and we could see right through the church to the altar, and we believe the Pope could see us — with our giant green and orange banner.

- Along Pope Benedict XVI 's procession through Rock Creek Park, when he went by our Dignity group, he waved and smiled at us. Cardinal Wuerl who was with him in the Popemobile and who did know who we were had a very unhappy look on his face.
- When Pope Francis visited St. Matthew's Cathedral in DC we had a spot on the lawn of the Human Rights Campaign building a block from it and because of a traffic stop, several buses full of bishops had to creep by our banners as we waved back and forth.

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?

John Willig who was the first D/W president would regularly speak at public gatherings starting in the 70s. He worked at the Bishop's national office and was out there. Later he was our first member to die of AIDS and was one of the first to have the word AIDS in his Washington Post obituary.

Our community not only got involved and were witnesses for gay rights, but for other issues of justice. We were a presence at the annual Bishops meetings and at the Vatican embassy in DC, requesting the option for women to become priests, supported Nuns on the Bus, etc.

We've always had good connections to the media. We were lucky to know individuals in the media. Publications would come to us for a good story and we used advertising with the National Catholic Reporter to declare ourselves a people in exile and worked with DUSA to prepare an ad in Newsweek magazine. We also sent a letter to all of the priests in the Washington and Arlington dioceses letting them know about D/W and our thoughts about being Catholic and LGBT and that it was good. Twice we were a presence at the Red Mass (a Mass honoring the Supreme Court when they begin their session in October - red because of the martyrdom of Thomas Moore), in the Cathedral to make ourselves known.

Recently when Pope Francis visited DC, then president Daniel Barutta was in the New York Times and we were quoted in Danish press, the Washington Post, and other news feeds. Many other international press groups came to film and cover Dignity's work in our community. For the Supreme Court DOMA decision many members were in the local media and a picture of current president Vin Testa waving the rainbow flag in front of the Supreme Court has been in many national and international publications.

For the past several years we've participating in DC's St. Patrick's Day parade, the only religious LGBT group to do so. D/W's contingent in the DC Pride parade two years ago was depicted in a full page in the Advocate.

From the start we have stressed that we're LGBT & Catholic and helped individuals develop what that means for each of us. As with other DUSA chapters, each has been finding its own way discussing what is the moral way to be LGBT?

- Long time member Bob Mialovich wrote a statement about how you could be gay, single and Catholic and accept and act on your sexuality and still be a moral person.

-One of our founders Sr. Jeannine Grammick summoned to Cardinal Ratzinger to be questioned about her acceptance of Church teachings on homosexuality said she could not participate in a punishment that ignored her conscience. She had to change religious orders, but it didn't stop her mission. She's a real hero in our community.

- From the start D/W members particularly Tony LaVecchia would go to bars to pass out fliers with information about Dignity, and later materials on safe sex. In addition to the regular chapter, D/W is proud to have a Defenders Chapter to participate in the leather levi community with our ministries.

- Many D/W members were regional members when that was part of the organization. In addition many D/W members have been highly effective national officers and members of the national board.

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

We're the stepping stone in people's faith journeys. Many people have come through our community, found the strength to be LGBT, learned who we are, become comfortable, and then they go on in their life to find what's next for them. Some have gone back to their own denominations — the Lutherans, Methodist, Episcopal — start other similar groups like Dignity in their own churches. This has happened throughout our history and still true today. Our community helps people explore where they stand on their sexual or spiritual paths.

Former Dignity folks always appreciate our role in their lives. Many ex-Dignity folks and ex-Catholics are members, active, and many are leaders at MCC, UCC, churches that are welcoming. They got their start or were inspired by Dignity.

D/W was an early and strong supporter of the annual Pride Inter-faith Service attracting voices from twenty or thirty denominations who want to honor God in whatever format.

D/W members provided support for the start of the various DC gay sports leagues that have since flourished. This includes the Pride celebration of Night Out with the Nats (Nationals DCs baseball team) which attracts ca. 3,000 LGBT individuals to the stadium.

While the institutional church hasn't changed much or at all, Catholics families and individuals as Catholics, have changed tremendously - becoming more accepting of LGBT Catholics. We've been a major part of that.

As we have reminded the local hierarchy we serve as stepping stone for those who want to come back to the church. They come to us, become comfortable with themselves, who they are, and then many go back to parishes. The archdiocese has been surprised that we aren't antagonistic — "down on the church." But that we're more of an evangelist in some ways.

People on either side of us (on the church-spectrum) think the opposite side has our loyalty, but it's not true. We're exiles who were forced from Church property, not those who have left it. From those who don't like the Church in the LGBT community they see us as connected to Rome and think we're crazy to be /wanting to be connected. But Rome wants nothing to do with us thinking we're not Catholic!

Bishop Dixon from the Episcopal National Cathedral many years ago presented a homily to us, and challenged us asking, "what's wrong with this crowd?" Where are the women, Hispanics, Blacks? She challenged us, and we began a Latino group that year (since they transferred to MCC which had a larger Latino group) and we have recently allowed for the option to have women priests preside from our Masses. Note that we were fine having an Episcopal bishop with us, and it didn't affect her in her episcopalianism or us in our catholicism, the same for a rabbi and protestant ministers who've also presided with us. Yet after multiple invitations, our own bishop is still afraid of stepping foot into our church or responding directly to us.

Our community is deeply intellectual, on faith, theology, and sexuality. Many members work at Catholic organizations or have theological training, theology degrees, etc — and from the beginning have taught each other about the Church, our faith, liturgy, etc. This is still true today among our members and in our programming.