

DignityUSA Jubilee 1st Round of  
Consultations Summary  
*“Recalling our roots”*

At the 2017 Boston National Conference, DignityUSA launched its two-year Jubilee period in preparation for celebrating the organization’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019.

Included among several Jubilee-related activities is the opportunity for all of our communities, i.e. chapters, caucuses and national members, to engage in a series of three consultations beginning with the theme of “Recalling Our Roots”.

We’ve completed the first round of consultations and we are happy to report that to date 24 chapters and 3 caucuses have submitted a summary of their discussions! In January of this year, we also conducted a conference call for national members (those who are members but do not identify with a chapter or caucus) to gain their insights and engage them in the process. We heard very positive feedback from many communities that submitted a report, saying that the experience brought together their people in a very meaningful and moving way.

The following is a brief summary of the key insights and learnings from these reports. The actual reports will be made available on our DignityUSA website.

**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”?**

- Safety, community and liturgy were key drivers from the beginning of the growth of chapters, followed by the national organization
- Seeking spirituality in a safe space and for integrating our sexuality and spirituality
- Providing pastoral care lacking in the Church locally and institutionally
- Communities developed in many different ways and are the product of local history, environments, etc. Often the first resource beyond bars for lesbian/gay people.
- “Word of mouth” – what would be associated with an “underground” movement that had to fly below the radar for reasons of safety and anonymity
- The institutional Church provided no vehicle for communication
- Growth/impact of significant rights movements in the 70’s and 80’s – women, gay, civil rights, Vietnam/peace movement
- Initial support of some local Bishops, parishes; significant some gay priests but more men religious in early communities along with support of religious communities who provided spiritual guidance and liturgical participation
- John McNeill’s writings provided theological content that would be formative of sexual ethics work and “gay” theology; and early/sustained personal witness that cost him dearly and served as a sign of courage
- Other key early authors and thinkers, such as Brian McNaught and John Boswell brought solid theological and ecclesiastical LGBTQ perspectives when none others existed

**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?**

- Key factors that brought communities together broadened from mostly pastoral/ social to include prophetic and movement leadership
- Two key, seminal events drove evolution of our mission: 1) the 1986 “Halloween” letter – and DignityUSA’s response – and 2) the transition – forced and by choice – from Church property; followed by our response to HIV/AIDS which expanded our pastoral care but also prompted our focus on survival
- Making the move from church property was traumatic for many chapters but proved to be strengthening and defining moments in the evolution of our identity as truly welcoming, affirming and inclusive Catholic communities
- Women were part of early gatherings and early leadership, but then communities experienced struggles around inclusive language, incorporating women in liturgical leadership and tensions between men and women as Dignity spread across the country; and as the feminist and women’s ordination movements helped crystallize Catholic women’s sense of oppression within the Church
- Local communities evolved in relation to key milestones in the national organization’s work and leadership, e.g. Sexual Ethics Taskforce, SPP, etc.
- Expansion of welcome and inclusion of transgender members and women’s liturgical and communal leadership moved our communities to a greater experience of understanding, enrichment and growth
- AIDS crisis was both a challenge as well as an opportunity to shift the focus of leadership and resources to pastoral care and advocacy
- Ongoing questions around: a) do we stay “in” the structure of the institutional Church or not?, b) what makes us Catholic or not?, have been a source of tension but also growth in the scope and direction of our mission and SPP
- Ecumenical welcome and increased focus on being inclusive communities
- Societal changes supportive of LGBTQI people have helped to affirm our identities, relationships and families
- As we’ve found and amplified our voice, we have helped to influence the views and experience of “in the pew” Catholics; national polling over a number of years now show a large majority of U.S. Catholics are supportive of LGBTQI issues, relationships and families
- The mission and work of DignityUSA has expanded locally, nationally and now globally

**The theme of our 50<sup>th</sup> 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?**

- We’ve stood our ground - our beliefs, our existence, our values, our LGBTQI Catholic identity, etc. – and have charted new paths forward
- Leaving church property along with local church authorities banning priests and ending relationships with Chapters re-directed thinking to claiming our communities as “church” and claiming our truth as baptized LGBTQI Catholics
- Expansion of the intersectionality of justice movements and work
- Our response to HIV/AIDS as communities of care and as providers of our own ministries

**Locally, and nationally, how has Dignity changed lives for the better? Changed the Catholic community? Impacted the LGBTQI social justice movement?** (select quotes representing our regions and a cross-section of our communities)

- “Catholics consistently come out on top in terms of supporting gay rights and there is the sense that Dignity can claim some of the credit for that fact; Dignity literally “changed the Bible,” referring to our work in lobbying for a replacement of the term “homosexual” when US Catholic bishops wanted *The New American Bible* to say “practicing homosexuals” would not be admitted to Heaven.
- “Our community changes lives for the better by providing a way to sanctify and honor our relationships; by giving us paths to spiritual growth through both traditionally Catholic avenues as well as an array on nontraditional approaches; by affording women the opportunity to pursue their calling to be spiritual leaders; by bringing together straight and LGBTQI people in open and affirmative spiritual and social activities; and by serving as a platform for us to speak our truth to the church and to society at large.”
- “In New York, starting the first AIDS ministry and pastoral care organization of any kind under the leadership of Rev. Bernard Lynch and others; helping pass LGBT civil rights bills.”
- “People in LGBTQI parish ministries telling us, ‘If it wasn’t for you, we wouldn’t be where we are today.’”
- “Providing leaders to many other organizations, including City Council members in New York City, Ginny Apuzzo and Matt Foreman formerly of the NGLTF, etc.”
- “A worshipping environment that can celebrate the ‘Supper of the Lord’ and be vibrant and relevant.”
- “DIGNITY provides community, love, and friendship that cannot be found elsewhere.”
- “DIGNITY has given a mission to LGBT Catholics searching for one. Without a mission, we’re just a social club.”
- “Helping members to feel renewed in their relationship with God, more peaceful, and happier.”; “Helping some transition from ‘closeted’ to ‘out’”
- “The Church has been changed by Dignity by its leadership in ecumenical and interfaith issues—these are no barrier for members of Dignity; and by its efforts to ‘enlarge the tent and welcome progressive Catholics/allies.”
- “Dignity has contributed to the LGBTQI justice movement by providing spokespersons to talk to the press (locally and nationally) about Church issues affecting us, by continuing to speak out about our issues and by cultivating relationships with other progressive Catholic organizations to help amplify our voices.”
- “The organization encouraged caucus members to think about how to make communities better and help model government policy and actions to truly function for the greater good.”
- “Dignity has changed the Catholic community through its involvement with WATER, WOC, WCC, CCL, Future Church, etc. The Women of Dignity and supporters have made the Catholic Community more aware of women’s capabilities & equality in leadership.”
- “Women of Dignity are on the forefront on the future Catholic Church – small faith communities that have Spirit filled Liturgies, challenges to help our faith grow, and be Community.