

Jubilee Discussions - Discussion Recording Form - 1

Date: February 1, 2018 (session held November 5, 2017, notes taken and video recorded)

Chapter /Community/Caucus Dignity/New York

SEGMENT ONE: RECALLING OUR ROOTS

Facilitator / Recorder Worksheet

What was the initial need that Dignity USA 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"?

Need for sanctuary and support. We were originally a support group for people seeking basic acceptance in church, family, and society.

Need for community. We were seeking not only to be gay or lesbian (the terminology of the time) and Catholic but also to be around people who were like us. "It felt like home."

Seeking a refuge from the competitive and sometimes alienating and rejecting worlds of the bars, the baths, and the clubs. At Dignity people could be openly affectionate without sexual tension.

Need to integrate sexuality and spirituality. Desire to find a place where spiritual life as well as gay identity could be nurtured; to be affirmed in both the sexual and the religious aspects of our identity.

Younger LGBT people could find older role models, who had made successful lives for themselves.

The social aspect was very important—meals, dances, putting on plays, fashion shows, etc.

The extremely closeted, underground nature of gay life at the time reinforced the needs for sanctuary, support, and community. These were days of fear of violence, fear of exposure, and

anonymity for many – people using pseudonyms like “Mickey Mouse” and the names of popes on membership lists.

Prophetic early national leadership by people like Pax Nidorf, Gilgamesh, and many others.

John McNeill’s writings were critical in forming a foundational literature and rationale for Dignity. John was a co-founder of the New York chapter, and became a key evangelist for Dignity, traveling the country to help start chapters.

The ability to use Catholic facilities in parishes and religious communities, as well as the support of friendly clergy and religious, often gay or lesbian themselves. At the local level, many of our most influential and active early leaders were members of the clergy. In New York, the support of the Jesuits was particularly crucial in providing meeting facilities and prophetic clergy leaders like Jack Walters, Bob Carter, and John McNeill.

Early activism within and on behalf of the entire LGBTQI community. In particular, the organizing of pro-LGBT religious figures in San Francisco prior to Stonewall helped fuel our growth. This likely influenced and energized Pax Nidorf and the early attendees of the group that became Dignity, who were meeting in Los Angeles and very aware of what was happening in San Francisco.

The Stonewall uprising provided further impetus to create LGBTQI religious and secular groups of all kinds. It took several years for Dignity to spread from Los Angeles to the other early chapters, which were all founded in 1972.

Many early members had backgrounds as clergy, seminarians, and members of religious communities. Many others had many years of Catholic education. There was a much greater involvement with the Church among Catholics than today.

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?

Women. The struggles and dissatisfaction of the many women within the chapter in its early years and the formation of the Conference for Catholic Lesbians by Karen Doherty, Christine Nusse, and others.

The AIDS crisis and the huge need for pastoral, physical, social, medical, and financial care and support. The spiritual and material crisis it created across our community, from the people with HIV and AIDS to their caregivers, friends, families, and communities.

The Ratzinger letter and our expulsion from Catholic spaces. The confrontation with the hierarchy that followed through demonstrations, public statements, and other forms of witness.

The struggles for civil rights and same-sex marriage rights. We participated with great passion, energy, and effectiveness in all.

Growing awareness of transgender, bisexual, intersex and queer realities, as well as gay and lesbian.

Growing diversity in our local and national Dignity communities, beyond the predominantly young and middle-aged gay white men of our early years.

Addressing the expanding needs of the LGBTQI community in organized ways: prison ministry, peer counseling in partnership with psychological organizations, programs for the homeless and LGBTQI youth, etc.

As society has become more open to LGBTQI people, there is less need for sanctuary and support for many.

The aging of our communities and a growing need for pastoral care and support of elders.

Growing desire to model a more inclusive and progressive church in all ways.

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?

Extraordinary activism and public witness over nearly fifty years. Countless demonstrations, marches, media interviews, articles, press conferences, rallies, public appearances, meetings with clergy and the hierarchy, legislative lobbying, conferences attended, and more, on the part of thousands of members, locally and nationally.

Particular to New York: the Cathedral Project, a highly visible public monthly witness at St. Patrick's Cathedral that took place for three years after the expulsion from our former parish home at St. Francis Xavier.

Inclusive language. Responding to evolving needs and awareness.

Inclusive liturgical leadership. Including women and others in liturgical leadership through preaching and expanding ministerial roles. In the past few years, lay presiders have also begun to serve as leaders of our chapter's Eucharistic liturgies.

The message from John McNeill from our earliest years that we were not only OK but that we had unique gifts to offer the church and society – “that blew everybody's head off, and cemented for me and a lot of other people that this was now a movement, and not just a bunch of people hanging out.”

“Why do I keep coming back to Dignity? It is where we can be true to who we are and what we believe, without apology. Parish and diocesan groups always have to look over their shoulders at the hierarchy.”

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

In New York, starting the first AIDS ministry and pastoral care organization of any kind under the leadership of Rev. Bernard Lynch and others. This was a model that provided people and expertise to the Gay Men's Health Crisis, still New York City's preeminent organization responding to the AIDS crisis and the challenges of HIV.

People in LGBTQ! parish ministries telling us, “If it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be where we are today.”

Locally, helping to pass LGBT civil rights bills pass in New York City (again under the leadership of Rev. Bernard Lynch and others) and statewide in Albany through many years of vast effort on the part of hundreds of members.

Providing leaders to many other organizations, including City Council members in New York City, Matt Foreman formerly of the NGLTF, etc.

Continuing involvement in social justice issues, from legislation to the Inclusive St. Pat's for All Parade, which helped bring about the participation of LGBTQI groups in the New York City St. Patrick's Day Parade.