



Discussion Recording Form

Chapter or Community: Columbus, Ohio

Date: 6/26/18

SEGMENT TWO: Taking Stock Today

Facilitator / Recorder Worksheet

1. How is the world different today than our starting point? What opportunities might these changes present?
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?

The world around us has changed dramatically in terms of its understanding and acceptance of other forms of sexual expression. When Dignity was founded, the LGBT community lived in fear – of exposure, of judgment, of exclusion, of violence, of discrimination in housing and employment. You could be jailed for sleeping with someone of the same sex. We were depicted as sick, morally corrupt, criminal – IF we were depicted at all. Our community remembered that we were largely invisible. The Church was hostile as well – particularly to those who had been brought up in RC families. Dignity was initially a place of sanctuary from all of this. A safe space.

We discussed numerous influences that have changed our standing in society as a whole since we were established as a place of sanctuary and refuge. They are listed below in no particular order.

- **AIDS** forced many of us to be exposed to our community, to our families, and our churches.
- We embraced the **civil rights movement** and feminism to literally fight for our lives. Thousands and thousands of courageous coming out stories paved the way for a change of heart.
- The **women's movement** affected the Church – and also challenged the traditional reliance on a male clergy within Dignity's local communities. Some chapters embraced women celebrants fairly quickly. Others had to engage in a process that could have taken a decade. Today almost all Dignity Chapters have female celebrants as well as married priests. We are much better at modeling gender diversity than we have been. Racial diversity is another story.

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- **The national media** played a big role in our changing experience from covering AIDS and HIV to facilitating the coming out process that has driven much more understanding and acceptance. Archie Bunker had to come to grips with the fact his macho football hero was gay. Ellen Degeneres came out on national television in a way that made people laugh. Will and Grace was an ordinary evening comedy series. Laws changed. The Human Rights Campaign became our legal advocate. Many other Churches debated and changed their standing. The Catholic Hierarchy meanwhile was being discredited by the clergy-sex abuse scandal in the media and in movies. Their teaching authority was seriously compromised and continues to be. The Catholic people's hearts changed over time until today they are among the most supportive of LGBTQ rights. Transgender people have not enjoyed the same progress as the rest of us – but their day is coming.

Today the LGBTQ community is largely embraced by society. There is same-sex marriage in dozens of countries including Catholic countries like Spain and Ireland! We became subjects of civil discourse on television. But it was not quick. Nor complete – as this welcoming is largely contained to large urban areas. LGBTQ people in more rural areas, particularly in the South, may find themselves 10-15 years behind in time. Dignity's Chapters have largely been in the large urban areas – where there is less need for "sanctuary" than there was 40 years ago.

- **Technology** was a key component of this transition. **The internet and social media** has totally changed the way we connect with our "tribe". **Meeting places:** It used to be you had to go someplace physically to meet other LGBT people. Bars were the primary place. But if that was not your "scene" and/or if you sought assurance that you were loved by God, you needed someplace else. Dignity was such a gathering place. That is what fueled the growth of our chapter in Grand Rapids MI for most of its existence. Media changed all of that – enabling LGBTQ people to connect on-line. Grand Rapids closed because people found other alternatives for meeting and other churches were becoming much more welcoming. **Social Media also enabled Dignity to spread its message globally and inexpensively!** That was impossible when we got started.

IN the Catholic Church in Central Ohio, being LGBTQ is still largely not embraced. Largely it is don't ask don't tell as far as the clergy are concerned. There are welcoming allies but LGBTQ Catholics are not explicitly embraced or celebrated. Many gay Catholics have fatigued with the "fight". The battle is not as important as it once was. In our community, we have largely abandoned lobbying the Bishops for change. We have noted that anti-LGBTQ discrimination in Ohio by the Church is meeting with much stronger ally opposition – such as when a 19-year veteran of a



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local Catholic High School was fired when he name was listed as the partner in the obit of a woman whose mother had died. The Diocese had never witnessed such public anger and protest – dominating the local news for days. Our Chapter was a part of all the ruckus – and reached out to the woman to offer solace and sanctuary if needed. She did not accept, because she is not even Catholic!

- **Dignity USA moved its headquarters** out of Washington, off Massachusetts Avenue, blocks from the NCCB – to Boston. This signaled a switch in attention from lobbying the Bishops for change to bypassing the Bishops to cultivate change – building our local communities, hiring a strong Executive Director, building a strong national Board and stepping up our investment in and use of technology and social media to spread our message. It has worked! We are no longer seeking approval from the institution. However, our community noted “the enemy is still out there” and the Church remains a powerful voice. Around the same time national developed the motto “Amplify the Voice and “Empower the Voice” as a fundraising tool – at the Las Vegas Convention. Some of our members said they just don’t feel motivated to engage the institutional Church any longer. We have moved on.

How has Columbus Changed – the chapter and city?

Columbus has become a very inclusive city – proud to be LGBTQ friendly. It is common to see young same-sex couples holding hands in public. City Hall is bathed in rainbow colors in June. We have the largest parade in the city’s year and the largest Pride parade between Washington and Chicago for Pride. This is typical of most American cities. But LGBTQ people in rural areas do not have this experience largely. DignityUSA chapters are in cities. The need for our place of sanctuary has changed dramatically. Apparently Millenials are leaving organized religion in general. They don’t have the need generations before them had. Our membership reflects that.

Gay Columbus has changed significantly with the city. 30-40 years ago, LGBT people gathered in a cluster of bars in downtown, which was largely deserted after businesses closed. The bars were well protected visually. Today Columbus has a thriving downtown that is alive 24x7 with lots of young people. LGBT-owned restaurants and bars have plate glass windows and are well known and attract straights. Many of the traditional bars have closed as escalating land prices put them out of business. “Gayborhoods” are everywhere, including the suburbs. Huge corporations headquartered here like Nationwide Insurance, Limited Brands, Abercrombie and Fitch, and Wendy’s welcome LGBT employees and have lobbied the city and state legislature to be more welcoming.



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Dignity Columbus has ceased meeting for Mass every other week for several reasons. Primarily because our members had **other welcoming options**, even within local parishes and preferred to be a part of a more diverse community.

Secondarily because of the **time, energy and resources** it took to plan Liturgy, find celebrants, and pay for rent for a place to meet. We missed Regional gatherings but we also no longer could afford the talent from our local needs to sustain a region – which was also shrinking fairly steadily. We saw Toledo close, then Cincinnati. Then Cleveland. Today only Dayton and Columbus remain as active chapters in Ohio and Columbus is limping along – although providing significant talent to National.

Celebrants: In Columbus, we did not have access to any area clergy. The Bishop would not permit it. We did have a priest who drove from the Archdiocese of Cincinnati for several years. When that stopped, we relied on a straight married couple who co-celebrated our liturgy and a straight woman we believed was called to priesthood. They served us for years and are still members. We did lose some members as a result of those changes. But we do not regret our choices – which were both about principle and necessity.

Many former member's **relationship with the institutional church changed** over time. Some found other welcoming churches (protestant). Some left the Church over the sex abuse scandal. Some over misogyny. Some just left and are unchurched. Those who remain Catholic attend Mass in welcoming parishes – such as the Newman Center that serves Ohio State University.

Our membership was shrinking, **becoming older** and we had cycled through most people willing to lead – several times. We discussed disbanding but decided to continue to meet socially every other month – largely to support DignityUSA. We wanted national to continue to have “boots on the ground” in Central Ohio when we were needed. That has been our practice for the past five years or so.

We stopped marching in the Pride Parade or having a booth. Members were simply tired of it. The parade evolved from a social justice movement to a celebration of inclusion. It is now full of companies and churches marching to show their support.

Our local **Defenders Club has also ceased functioning**. It was supported by both Dayton and Columbus. The reasons for its demise track many of the ones listed above. Leather bars and clubs have folded. The bars no longer exist. People who share that fetish can find each other online using phone apps like Grindr. As members have aged, and so many of our members are in long-term committed relationships, life priorities have changed.

Dignity Columbus has been adapting to changes, but we are not thriving.



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But we are helping Dignity USA thrive. We exist to support Dignity USA's voice. Our one requirement for local membership is national membership. Dignity Columbus has provided a national President, numerous Board Members, a Finance Committee member, a national Editor for Dateline, the national IT staff member and members of the National Convention Committee. We believe now it is important to just keep "showing up".

3. What have you learned as you have grappled with change?

Change is slow and deliberate. Two steps forward and one back. It is remarkable the pace of change in Dignity's 50 years all considered. Humans are creatures of habit and therefore we tend to have a love/resistance to change. We believe the changes we have gone through in Columbus are part of the progression. We have adapted and figured out new ways many times – and let go of what wasn't working anymore, even when we didn't know what would replace it. We think this is how the Spirit works.

The main wisdom is TRUST the Spirit's inclinations and calling – individually and as a community. We lost good friends as they found new and different ways to nurture their spiritual life. We honor that. Being in the midst of change – between shores – is stressful and unnerving. But this is a necessary place to be and perhaps where faith is most strengthened. The conversation brought us back to one main point: You don't have to know where you are going so much as just showing up – even when you don't feel like it.

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

Yes! Dignity's work was valuable to each of us in time for various reasons and contributed to the general positive evolution we have seen in society. One reason would be giving LGBT people more self-dignity – un-reliant on Church sanction but rather the Grace of a loving God.



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We all believe the mission of DignityUSA is still very relevant today. With all that is going on in our nation today under the Trump administration, with strong evangelical support, our fight is not over. The Catholic Church remains the largest Christian denomination in the country. LGBTQ Catholics need a strong voice. We are proud that the media contact our Executive Director regularly. The press that we get is much greater than our size would suggest. We have many allies in the Church – in fact our allies are becoming a source of support and energy that we should embrace and encourage. That requires a change of mindset from a sanctuary drawn in on itself in protection to an out and proud voice that is OUT THERE as leaven for a different kind of change.

“When nothing is certain, everything is possible.” – Margaret Drabble