

**Chapter or Community: Dignity Detroit**

**Segment II**

**Dignity USA “Taking Stock Today”**

- 1. How is Dignity USA different today than it was in the past? How are your local chapter and community different? How are YOU different?**

Dignity USA is very professional, assists chapters in such things as developing websites, provides resources for prayer, marriage liturgies, and speaks up when necessary, in response to world or Church events. Dignity USA officials have been available when challenges arise, such as press attention and picketing by ultra-traditional Catholic groups. (Church Militant is located a few miles away -) The Dignity USA website is helpful and up to date. Marianne Duddy-Burke, Executive Director, has provided responses to statements of the Pope or other situations where the GLBTQI voice needs to be heard, and has been contacted by NPR, the New York Times and other media outlets for coherent and cogent statements. Some battles the LGBT community fought seem to be resolved, like civil marriage equality, and openness in family and the community, however the resignation of Supreme Court Justice Kennedy is a reminder that some hard-won rights could be overturned with a shift of the court to a socially conservative majority.

Dignity Detroit has varied in the number of members over the years, with around 64 at the present time. Others attend but have not officially joined. Maintaining membership is an ongoing challenge. The organization members have aged and attracting and keeping younger members has proven an uphill battle. Engaging members in the many activities the chapter participates in is also challenging. We continue to have conservative religious leaders at the diocese, and our weekly liturgies are presided over by older, “Vatican II” priests. We operate in a kind of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” situation with the Archdiocese of Detroit. We have a number of women religious who regularly attend.

- 2. Considering the passion and conviction that fueled our growth, how well is our “engine” running (nationally and locally) in terms of inspiring passion, involvement, change, etc. – in service to our mission today?**

As was evident during our recent participation in two local PRIDE celebrations, Dignity Detroit is not the only game in town for persons who want a faith community which is welcoming to LGBT persons. Many religious traditions such as Episcopal, Methodist, and Lutherans had information booths, as well as Metropolitan Community Church. Two “alternative” Catholic churches were represented, as well as Catholic parishes from the Archdiocese which have made a deliberate effort to be welcoming to LGBT persons in their mission statements and participate annually in PRIDE. There are also parishes that don’t go as far as that but are overtly welcoming to all. Still, it was evident from those stopping at the Dignity Detroit booth that many people don’t know about us. We advertise in the local gay weekly and in their directory, as well as in the program books of GLBT choruses. We have a website, and a newly updated FACEBOOK page. Our publicity approach needs fine-tuning. We are planning a survey of our members similar to the

one undertaken by Dignity USA to better know what our members are looking for and how well we are meeting their needs.

**3. Is the Mission and purpose of Dignity still relevant today? If not, why not? If it is, what key challenges and opportunities do you see ahead?**

Dignity USA Mission: “Dignity USA works for respect and justice for people of all sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities — especially gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons — in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy, and support.”

Dignity Detroit Statement: “Dignity Detroit is a faith community of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Catholics, their families and friends who unite to celebrate God’s love for all persons.

We are a community rich in diversity, that worships in an affirming and supportive setting. Ours is a ministry that speaks to us by offering an expression of faith and fellowship not experienced in other church situations. In this way, Dignity has helped many who have lost touch with the church to reaffirm and establish a relationship with God.

Dignity envisions and works for unity, equality, and an end to all forms of hatred. Most importantly, we are devoted to nurturing faith and love through Christ, the Sacraments, and one another.”

These statements are still true today. While there has been increased recognition for gay and lesbian persons, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning/asexual persons are still finding their places in society, and often face violence and misunderstanding. Conservative religious traditions, including many Roman Catholics, still do not accept the goodness of LGBTQIA persons and their relationships. The current presidential administration has not supported our community and indeed, might oversee a roll-back of rights won. The recent Supreme Court Masterpiece Cake decision is an example.

**4. With the benefit of hindsight, how has Dignity changed lives for the better, locally and nationally? Changed the Catholic Community? Impacted the LGBTQ social justice movement?**

- Dignity Detroit has been a safe, welcoming community, affirming LGBTQI in the Detroit area.
- Dignity USA offers resources both as consultants, and resources offered on the website.
- Dignity USA was seen to be confrontational in former times to the official Church, but now offers witness when necessary. They offered an alternative to the Synod of Families in Philadelphia and will be in Ireland during the World Meeting of Families this year. They are exhibitors at meetings of many organizations, such as the Association of US Catholic Priests, New Ways Ministries and Call to Action.
- Rome, under Pope Francis, is more open to issues important to us, even if the official language has not changed, and he sometimes seems unclear on his understanding.
- Dignity Detroit has contributed money, goods and services to many charitable institutions in our area. Currently, we have members of the refugee community from Freedom House attending Mass and other activities with us, and we support them financially and other ways. We actively support services for the homeless offered at one

of our presider's downtown parish. We provide money and goods to local GLBT organizations.

- The 21 priests who preside at our Sunday liturgies have frequently told us that we inspire them. Our members value the arrangement that allows us to worship in a Catholic setting sponsored by the IHM Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Having a setting like this is important to our members. The number of priests and their expanded duties (multiple parishes or locations) and their aging is starting to make it harder to get diocesan priests. Several of our presiders are from religious communities like the Jesuits and Capuchins. We would like to better use the gifts of our women members.

### **Segment Three:**

### **Discerning the Path Forward**

#### **1. When we last met we talked about key challenges and opportunities we saw ahead. Those were:**

- **Maintaining/increasing number of engaged members, younger members**
- **Continuing to have a worship space in a Catholic setting**
- **Learning more about what our membership wants/needs from us**
- **Responding to the current political climate as it affects LGBTQIA life**
- **Enhancing our online and other media presence to reach those looking for a spiritual home**
- **Taking advantage of funding by optimizing Mass offerings, Amazon Smile, Kroger Bonus Program and online payment of offering or other donations**
- **Look beyond our organization to other local resources and alliances**

#### **How do we need to change to tackle the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities?**

The Council (2018/2019) met for a strategic planning session on 6/23/18. An annual calendar is being developed. Service Projects and charitable donations will be reevaluated based on recent year's experiences and to better focus our efforts and resources. A budget is being developed based on expenses of the past two years. These efforts will help us stay on track to reach goals. We will also be sharing more of our financial information with the membership as we suspect most have no idea how many expenses go into providing Mass every Sunday, decorating for seasons, updating vestments and linens, etc. Ways to contribute using automatic contributions through one's checking account and the rewards programs listed above will be described in the newsletter.

We have updated and reorganized our website, with the help of Logan Bear. It is now possible to renew or become a member on that site. The log in information for our Facebook page has been reestablished and will be refreshed weekly. Advertising copy for the local gay paper has been revised.

A Survey Monkey tool has been created to query our members/attendees and will be deployed soon.

Welcoming those in attendance who we do not recognize as "regulars" and finding out how they learned about us will be helpful in maximizing outreach. Offering a variety of opportunities

for persons to contribute to our chapter as liturgical ministers or other projects will help to create more engaged members.

We can take advantage of the expertise present on the Board of Dignity USA and other chapters in reading their responses to these questions on the D-USA website. The recent visit of the Board was very informative to the membership. We will publicize attendance at the national meeting.

**2. What should the key priorities of Dignity USA be in the next few years? What's most important to us; what values from our rich history do we want to ensure are carried forward?**

It will still be important to speak out as expert witnesses to national, world and church events. Informed Board members should maintain contacts with media personnel.

It will be even more important to serve as consultants for the chapters and members as they face challenges.

Our witness to the fact that "You can be gay and Catholic", and "Love is love", and speak to the truth of our lives and relationships will still be needed.

**3. What resources do we need to fuel our "engine" (passion and purpose) in the future? Why would people want to invest their life energy and financial resources in support of this desired future?**

The value of community is a powerful one. Focusing on activities that build community will be important, as well as increasing engagement and willingness to participate. A few Council members can't maintain all the activities. For many of us, this is our only spiritual community.

Informing members about local, national, and international issues in a way that motivates them must be prioritized. Using the newsletter, which is distributed to a wider audience than just the membership, will help with this, as will the website, and Facebook. Quarterly membership meetings should be an opportunity for two-way conversation with attendees, though attendance is not great.

We need to mentor/partner the next generation of Council members. Finding new candidates has been very difficult and in at least one case, Council members basically abandoned their office and the organization part way through the term. Thorough job descriptions need to be developed where there aren't any, so each officer is clear on their duties.

**4. What is this community's guidance to the national leadership as they create a strategic plan for the next few years of Dignity USA's mission and work? Consider topics such as key commitments to mission, key goals, investments, financial resources, volunteer and leadership resources, talent recruitment and partnerships/outreach.**

The hand-out provided from Dignity USA Board when they visited was very helpful in highlighting the mission and successes of Dignity USA in its first 50 years. "Speaking truth to

power” and being “A prophetic voice for LGBTQI Equality in the Church and Society” will continue to be of paramount importance. Helping chapters by sharing successful membership-increasing strategies and recruiting “stand alone” members outside of chapters can help all of us to be more effective. Hosting conferences with expert speakers and opportunities to share has proven effective in the past. National Board members attending conferences held by other groups such as Call to Action and New Ways Ministry, as well as meetings with ecumenical participants and international points of view. Sharing insights from these assemblies with the rest of us is helpful for us. Visiting Chapters should continue to be a priority. When useful, forming partnerships with other groups with related goals (like Equally Blessed) has been fruitful. When the value is less than the effort, knowing when to pull out is important, too.

We were impressed to see that Dignity USA had submitted an amicus brief with other faith and civil rights groups to the US Supreme Court in the Masterpiece Cakeshop case, recently decided, as well as comments on other cases. We suspect you will need to do more of this type of activity, best done at the national level, with the replacement member for Justice Kennedy surely swinging the Court further to the right.

Dignity USA needs to have an Executive Director. It has been blessed to have such a talented one in Marianne Duddy-Burke. Employing a tech expert may prove to be important going forward as well. Fundraising efforts, to date, have been appropriate. We would have to see a break-down of the budget to comment on more specific line items. Glenn Crane, from our Chapter was the national Treasurer until recently.