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Parish ministries set welcoming tone

Nothing about starting a gay and lesbian group at St. Mary's Church in 1990 seemed easy — even posting the schedule of its meetings, according to Mary Lou Wenthe.

"In the beginning, every group was on a sign-up board. We were afraid to put up our notice," recalled Wenthe, one of the first coordinators of St. Mary's Connection. "Just to step up in the Commons Room for our first meeting, just to come to that meeting was frightening. They weren't sure Father Jim (Lawlor, pastor at that time) would be there. They didn't realize how supportive he was."

Anyone in the church wearing clerical garb seemed a threat, she said. "Where did I get this idea? Because of the negative atmosphere around it."

The fact that Bishop Matthew H. Clark had met with her and others at St. Mary's before that meeting, to listen and to talk about the church's statements on homosexuality, meant a great deal, she said. It also meant a great deal when an interested parishioner, Owen Crumb, began to wander into the meetings after choir rehearsals.

Everyday parishioners don't often go to the meetings, although they are welcome, Crumb agreed.

"In general we do not have people coming in saying, 'Teach me more about this,'" he said.

Crumb said the meetings helped him to gain understanding for his son Charles, who had told his parents he was gay and who for a while wasn't seeing his parents. Crumb recalls feeling at home the first time he attended one of the meetings.

"I realized instantly how little I really knew about homosexuality and the people involved," he said. "I knew absolutely nothing about the (Catholic) church's relationship at that time. I assumed, like everybody, it was verboten."

Corpus Christi started a similar ministry in 1992. Jim Bridges, one of the ministry's coordinators, said one of its most popular events was an educational series that it and the parish sponsored a couple of years ago.

"Hundreds came. Oh, it was amazing," Bridges said. They heard from gay Catholics, as well as St. Bernard's Institute faculty, and were invited to ask any questions.

"It was a forum where it wasn't all pro-gay, a platform to sell something. It was, 'If you have doubts come here and ask questions.' Basically, any position was respected; any question was respected."

These two ministries, at Corpus and St. Mary's, along with a new one in the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, are apparently the diocese's only on-

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Father Raymond Fleming of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward co-coordinates a ministry group for gay and lesbian Catholics and their friends and families. Such groups often provide parents and families opportunities to share their concerns and feelings.

Where it all begins

The Catholic Gay & Lesbian Family Ministry, which works on behalf of the Diocese of Rochester, suggests using "Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers" as a starting point for parishes considering some type of ministry for gay and lesbian people and their families.

"Doing just that much will help the staff and parishioners to open their hearts a little bit and understand the gay and lesbian people in their parish are good people. It's a very very difficult subject and you can't make big changes overnight," said Mary Ellen Lopata of the ministry.

The document is a statement of the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Marriage and Family. Its suggestions to church ministers include:

- Be available to parents and families who ask for your pastoral help, spiritual guidance and prayer.
- Welcome homosexual individuals into the faith community and seek out those on the margins. Avoid stereotyping and condemning. Strive first to listen. Do not presume that all homosexual people are sexually active.
- Learn more about homosexuality and church teaching so your preaching, teaching and counseling will be informed and effective.
- Maintain a list of agencies, community groups, and counselors or other experts to whom you can refer homosexual individuals or their parents and family members.
- Help to establish or promote support groups for parents and family members.