

Ministry

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going parish-based ministries to gay and lesbian Catholics, their families and friends.

Leaders involved in such ministries here and in other dioceses are scheduled to meet in Rochester Sept. 17-20 for the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries' (NACDLGM) fifth-annual conference. The Catholic Gay & Lesbian Family Ministry that operates on behalf of the Diocese of Rochester is hosting the conference.

Mary Ellen Lopata, a co-founder of the ministry in this diocese, is vice president of the national organization, whose members are affiliated with about 35 dioceses.

Coordinators of local ministries plan to attend, and, in some cases, help facilitate small-group discussions. Among others planning to attend is Deacon Richard Lombard of Holy Name of Jesus Church.

"Experience I've had as a pastoral minister is the issue can be very divisive, hurtful and confusing," he said. "What better place for the church to be ... That's where we belong."

Although he might advocate for a parish ministry, he said, the decision remains that of the parish.

"We would be hoping some of our parishes might be attending this to learn more about the ministry," said Father John Mulligan, a diocesan vicar general.

"I think we would like all our parish communities to be welcoming, to have ministries to parents and families," he said, or at least to be able to refer people for any assistance.

Other models

St. Mary's and Corpus' ministries began before the diocese began its formal collaboration with the Catholic Gay & Lesbian Family Ministry. Parish-based ministries are the approach taken in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and have served as models elsewhere.

Father Peter J. Liuzzi, OCarm, has directed the archdiocese's 12-year ministry for the past nine years. He gave the keynote address at last year's NACDLGM conference in Los Angeles.

His attitude, he said, is, "I don't care to talk unless you start out (with the assumption) we are talking about baptized people. For clergy, I'd ask, 'What is your oblig-



Father Fleming, pastor of Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, makes the sign for "deep feeling in the heart," which he's used in gay and lesbian ministry.

ation to the baptized? In this case, they happen to be gay."

While he is the diocesan resource for setting up such parish ministries, he said, "It would take the initiative of the pastor and his people to willingly declare themselves open, embracing and welcoming of gay Catholic people; and I would say also ... of their parents."

Seven Los Angeles parishes are dedicated to outreach, he said, noting, "In those parishes you would find literally hundreds of gay Catholics participating."

There is no formal structure, he said. "Courage has a program, Dignity has a program. They say 'What's your program?' We say there is no program. It is the life of being a disciple. It is up to the group and the spirit of the parish. It depends a lot on the faith community. They are part of what everybody's doing. The other question is, 'How is that ministry?'"

The very fact the archdiocese has an office for ministry with lesbian and gay Catholics gives credibility to the existence of gay and lesbian Catholics, he said. It's there to direct people to the participating churches, as well as others that are open to gay and lesbian Catholics.

An open parish, he suggested, might include prayers for parents whose children are homosexual. In Rochester, it would announce the upcoming conference, he said.

"The idea is it offers people a step," he explained. "It sends out the message there is caring."

Although programs aren't set, his office does require that the seven participating churches' gay ministries "be contributing something positive to church life, should be turning not inward but outward, building up the faith community of the parish, not just this group."

He added the primary concern "should be to be calling back to the fold gay people who are so alienated they don't know anything is going on in the church regarding gay people."

Meetings of gay Catholics in the seven churches, he said, are "very ordinary," with prayer, Scripture, perhaps talks on spiritual direction and prayer life.

"My impression (of the meetings) is, 'My church is important to me and my spiritual life; I also am a gay Catholic and need the company of the gay community.' A lot of times they say it is very hard to stay in church, with gay friends who are not Catholic and not in church, and who do not understand why you belong to something so hostile, that persecutes you. The fact you know other gay Catholics and say, 'I could bring you to a meeting and it isn't like that,' is part of it."

Meanwhile, the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries is trying to solidify its mission. Father Liuzzi said, and has drawn people from various camps, including Dignity.

"We couldn't be more at odds. Dignity is clear, it takes exception publicly (to church teaching) ... and goes so far as to advocate gay marriage. That's hardly our focus. ... I also think we're miles apart from Courage, which is so far the other way. They're orthodox. Here's what you do with gay people."

"We're committed to working around a centrist, moderate approach," he said.

He said he's strongly loyal to church teaching, adding, "Pastorally, I think it's a marvelous position the church has taken at this time. God doesn't offer us ways out of anything, God offers us a way through."

New territory

In Rochester, the Lopatas were moved to research homosexuality and the church because one of their sons, Jim, is gay and felt alienated from the church. In 1996 they and other team members in the Catholic Gay & Lesbian Family Ministry became the

Rochester Diocese's resource for ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics.

"With very few exceptions, this is new territory. The national association is less than five years old; there are dioceses out there that don't know that it exists," Mary Ellen commented. "So we are all learning together."

"A good analogy is the way special ministries grew up several years ago for the divorced and separated. I don't think there are that many anymore," Casey said, adding that the people in such ministries have now been integrated into their parishes.

Ministries for gay and lesbian Catholics and their families should be a mix of parish-based and diocesan-based approaches, he said.

"The goal is really to have gay and lesbian people incorporated in parish life, but we've got a long way to go to get there," he explained. "So diocesan ministry in general needs to be focused on education. You get support much better through a parish ministry, but education through a diocesan ministry."

The couple stressed that what's right for some parishes may not be for others. St. Mary's, for example, has an educational bent, Mary Ellen noted, while the 19th Ward seems to be aiming for a spiritual approach.

Still other parishes simply ask the Lopatas to present a talk.

"For any parish interested in getting into the ministry or being open, the most important thing is breaking the silence. You have to talk about it and give signals you are willing to," Casey said.

Connection

Wenthe recalled she'd heard Sister Joan Sobala, then St. Mary's pastoral associate, speak nonjudgmentally about the gay community years ago.

"I remembered her words. I stuffed them in my mind," she said. The memories of those words made Sister Sobala more approachable years later, she added.

St. Mary's Connection, the longest-running parish ministry for gay and lesbian Catholics in the diocese, first met as a support group. After the Lopatas helped to formalize it, Wenthe explained, its schedule grew to include potlucks, guest speakers, education, discussion and support.

Participants have watched and discussed movies together. They've discussed their emotions at Christmastime. They've participated in passing out cards on Solidarity Day, pledging nondiscrimination against gay people, and have sent Christmas cards to people with AIDS.

St. Mary's Connection opened its 1995 year with H. Darrell Lance, a professor emeritus of Old Testament interpretation at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, speaking on the "clobber texts" — a common phrase, Wenthe explained, for biblical passages people use to "clobber" homosexuals.

Such talks, Wenthe said, have helped educate people — "ourselves, for one thing," she said.

Lance, in fact, was writing a book on the Bible and homosexuality, but said that Father Daniel Helminiak's 1994 book *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* is so thorough that he stopped pursuing his own and recommends the Catholic priest's, instead.

Jim Buckheit, current coordinator for Connection, said he became involved in Connection after teaching a confirmation class six years ago. He'd asked junior and senior high school students to list questions they had. Church teaching on homosexuality was usually second or third.

It is important to have such a church ministry, he said.

"What we tend to get is parents, siblings of many different faiths who don't have anywhere else to go with their religious questions," Buckheit said. "They don't want an off-the-street perspective."

However, noting that he discerns so much fear among people interested in it, he said, the ministry is still evolving.

"It's not where it could be yet," he said.

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