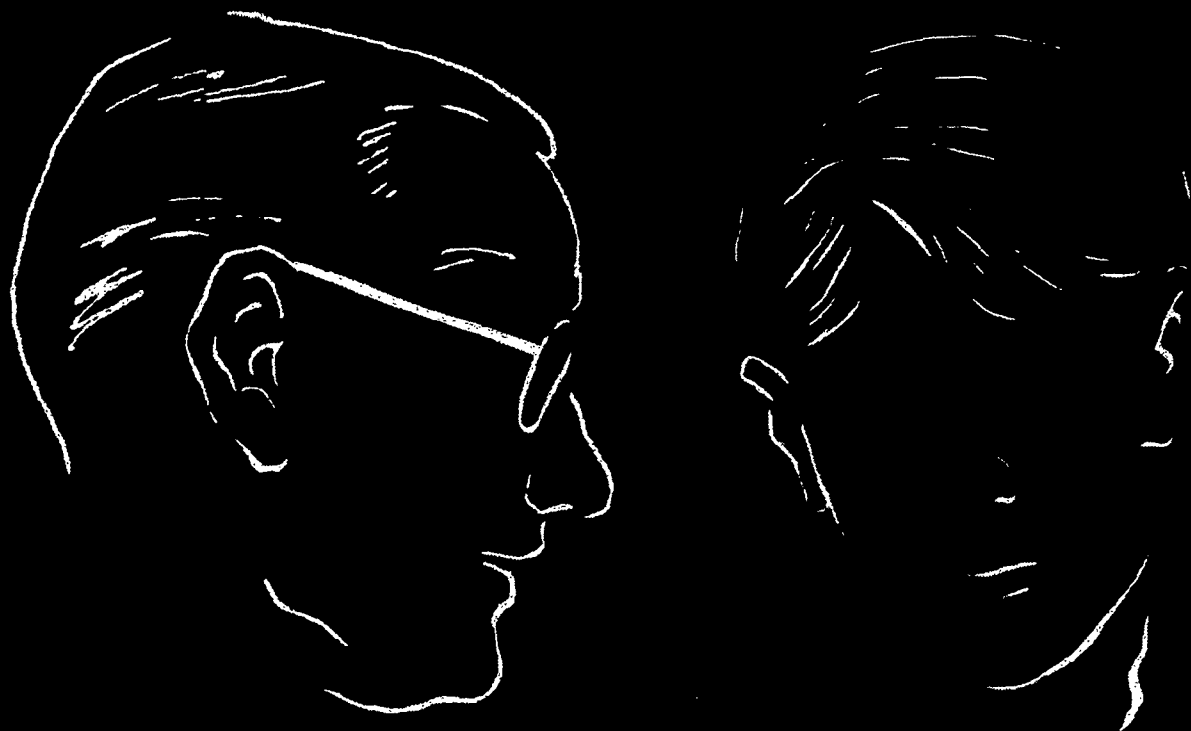


ON THE MOVE

Story by
Mike Latona

Coming next week:
Hairstyles



Keeping the door open

As the fourth-year campus minister at Aquinas Institute, Larry Anderson has worked extensively with homosexual teens and the issues confronting them.

"We have students who are gay and lesbian. I've had numerous students come to me," Anderson said.

Several of those students, Anderson said, have struggled to admit to him — and themselves — that they're homosexual. Contributing to their anxiety, he noted, is the possibility of rejection by the teens' family and friends.

"They feel not as good as others, misunderstood," Anderson remarked.

These concerns led Anderson to attend two workshops concerning teens and homosexuality on Sept. 19, at the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM) Conference in downtown Rochester. The seminars were titled "Understanding the Needs of Catholic Gay and Lesbian Youth" and "Imaging Justice in Catholic Schools: Addressing Sexual Identity."

At the "Understanding the Needs" workshop, presenter Marc Giguere cited some significant statistics derived from national studies:

- Half of all teens who tell their parents they're homosexual receive a negative reaction.
- 30 percent suffer physical abuse from their parents.
- 40 percent of all homeless youths are homosexual. "They ran away from home or were thrown out," Giguere explained.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among gay adolescents.
- 30 percent of all youth suicides are gay-related.

A critical fear among homosexual teens, Giguere noted, is the potential loss of their parents' love and support.

"I've heard kids say that of all the issues, this is the worst: 'At least if I came home pregnant, I'd be (considered) normal.' And that turns out to be true, unfortunately," said

Giguere, a youth ministry coordinator from the Diocese of Providence, R.I.

Adults, Giguere said, must promote an atmosphere of trust so that homosexual teens can feel more comfortable about "coming out." He also warned that this process may occur over a long period of time.

"You don't just wake up one morning and say 'I'm gay.' It's a process of coming out within, and then coming out to those around you," Giguere said.

Anderson said he tries to assist teens during this process by affirming them.

"I let them know they are created in God's image and loved by God, and that they're not evil," Anderson said.

Giguere said that adults should approach teens who are questioning their sexual identity with a spirit of patience and compassion, not confrontation. Direct questions such as "Do you think you're gay?" should be avoided, he explained.

The process of acceptance by family members is also gradual, Giguere noted. Therefore, teens should be patient with their parents as well, rather than express an attitude of "I'm OK with this, and you should be too."

Giguere stated that acceptance of an adolescent's homosexuality is often more difficult for adults than for either the teen or his/her friends.

"I've found that the kids are a lot more comfortable with this than the parents," Giguere said.

"In many cases, gay and straight student are far, far ahead of where we (adults) all are," agreed Bill Kummer, who presented the "Imaging Justice in Catholic Schools" workshop.

In 1994, Kummer began a ministry in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn., known as Families and Friends of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) Persons in Catholic Education. The program, which operates in nine archdiocesan Catholic secondary schools, ministers

to homosexual students as well as gay and lesbian faculty members.

Kummer's program has promoted such activities as liturgies celebrating diversity; "zero-tolerance" policies in which no abusive language against homosexuals is allowed; in-school support groups; and editorials about homosexuality in school newspapers.

Although no such outreaches exist at Aquinas Institute, Anderson said that he and school officials have discussed the possibility. Without a ministry for homosexual students, Anderson remarked, "You're leaving these people to fend for themselves."

Mary Smith, who attended the "Imaging Justice in Catholic Schools" workshop, said that her 40-year-old son, Mark, came out six years ago. Had a support program for homosexuals existed when he attended two Southern Tier Catholic schools, St. Mary Our Mother School in Horseheads and Notre Dame High School in Elmira, Smith said that Mark's coming-out process likely would have been speeded up.

"At the time he was probably aware of his sexuality and identity, but who could he turn to?" commented Smith, a parishioner at Church of St. Mary Our Mother. "It's not something you would want to flaunt. It was something — I hate to use the word — snickered at."

SHOULD THERE BE MINISTRIES
IN THE SCHOOLS, CHURCH AND
COMMUNITY
FOR HOMOSEXUAL TEENS?

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