

Dignity/San Antonio



And God's grace towards me
has not been in vain

Join us for **Mass**
Sundays at 5:30pm
St. Ann's Catholic Church

210 St. Ann St
(off Ashby and Fredericksburg)

For more information:
735-7191 *or* 340-2230
dignitysatx@yahoo.com
www.dignityusa.org

Dignity San Antonio, a small faith community and local chapter of Dignity USA, has been providing a safe space for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender Catholics to reconcile, heal, and integrate their sexuality with their spirituality since 1976. The best way to share the vision, hopes and inspiration of our community is to share our lived experience as a community of faith in exile from our church.

The inspiration to begin this ministry began in the late sixties and early seventies with a small group of gay men and lesbian women who had a deep desire to stay connected to their spiritual roots in light of their sexuality. We began meeting in homes discussing our spiritual needs with one another.

Our gatherings centered on reading and discussing scripture for spiritual enrichment and growth. We somehow knew that who we were, was not a bad thing and that we too were created in God's image. Not long after our initial gatherings, we found we were not alone in our desire and belief in our innate goodness. So, realizing the need to have a more public presence, we pursued meeting in more public space. We first met at St. Philips College at the International Student Center on the invitation of Sr. Maria Teresa Flores, CCVI. Some of the founding and organizing members of this growing group included Nickie Valdez, Molly Hoff, Chris Broadhurst, Vickie Aldeman,. We enjoyed an influx of more people and began looking toward the bigger picture. But it was not long after we got our feet on the ground that we were asked to leave St Philips by Archbishop Furey. We transitioned back to meeting in homes. This was our first encounter with the rejection from the Church, the anger that some experienced caused most to leave the group. We lost our momentum for a time but our deep need to stay in tune with our spiritual roots kept a few of us going. Meanwhile, we found Dignity, Inc. a national group of gay Catholics. Molly had written Dignity, Inc. to inquire about becoming a chapter. We sought more information and began the process of becoming a local chapter. After some time, Archbishop Furey left San Antonio, providing the opportunity for Fr. Balty Janacek to ask Archbishop Flores if he could invite the group to meet at SAC (San Antonio College), where he was chaplain. Sr. Maria Teresa Flores, CCVI got word to us that Fr. Balty Janacek wanted to invite the group to meet at the Catholic Student Center at San Antonio College. In the transition to SAC the core group fell apart. Chris left town for a teaching job (Saudi Arabia), Vickie and Molly broke up, and Sr. Leona left for Florida. Nickie was left to continue to show up weekly at SAC until Fr. Alex Nagy started joining her. Fr. Alex heard about Nickie meeting at San Antonio College from Bruce who came out to him while he was in the hospital after his first heart attack. Gradually, the group grew again. We began celebrating liturgy and we began the process of becoming a chapter in formation. The chapter was chartered in 1976 and we celebrated our first Mass August 1, 1976 at Our Lady of the Pillar Retreat House. With Archbishop Flores in office, we had healed some of our hurt and allowed the group to grow some. In 1977, the group raised \$2000.00 to send to counter the Anita Bryant Campaign "Save Our Children" in Dade County. By 1980, we had formally organized and had all our offices filled, as well as bylaws and a constitution. We were still centered on the liturgy but we began to deepen our understanding of the impact that our sexuality had on our spirituality. We held discussion groups with topics such as "Gay Morality", "The Gay and Lesbian Family", "What

does it mean to be gay?” and “What about gay relationships?” Over the next year, we also managed to get financially independent and were able to fulfill our obligations to our Region and the National Organization. We took on more responsibility, in 1981; we hosted our first Region VII Convention at Incarnate Word College. In September of 1981 Archbishop Flores formally appointed Fr. Alex Nagy and Nancy Shafer to minister to the Chapter. Our confidence was high and we felt supported in our efforts. We decided to pursue meeting in a Catholic Church. Joe Scroggins approached Msgr. Charles Pugh (Vicar General of the Diocese at the time) at St Patrick’s and he said yes! On Easter Sunday 1982, we found a home at St Patrick’s Catholic Church where Msgr. Pugh was pastor. By this time, Alex and Nancy had moved on and Sister Martha Ann Kirk, CCVI was assisting with ministry to the group. Not long afterward getting settled in at St Patrick’s, Daniel Helminiak was formally appointed our new chaplain. We enjoyed the luxury of meeting in “The Church” as well as having several dedicated presiders that rotated, for weekly liturgies. Some of the presiders included Fr. Danial Helminiak, Fr. Jack Czcepiewski, Fr. Emil Wesselsky, Fr. Barney Diekemper, Msgr. Charlie Pugh, Sister Martha Ann Kirk. We worked to educate and increase the reach of our ministry not only in the GLBT community but in the parish. We participated in the larger community at St. Patrick’s, we fixed the marquee, painted the sacristy, and provided food for the Elderly lunch program. Our comfort did not last too long, though. We began experiencing the pressures and discrimination of being GLBT and Catholic/spiritual, on coming out of liturgy many Sundays we would find that air had been let out of their tires, lug nuts were removed, mud balls were thrown at us, and slurs were written on our cars. Then in 1985, Msgr. Pugh left St Patrick’s, and the new pastor asked us to leave and our hearts were broken. Neither he nor the parish council wanted the group to stay. So on Palm Sunday 1985, over 200 members of the community came to share in our farewell celebration to St Patrick’s. From there the group found a very temporary home as St. Francesco De Paola, on the invitation of **Fr. Ted Bretaglia**. But when the parish council there found out that he had invited the group, he had to ask us to leave. We found out later that the parish council from St. Patrick’s had called the parish council at St. Francesco and told them that we had defaced their property, we were dirty, and we caused trouble. Our search took us to Brother Dana who asked Fr. Bill Davis at St. Mary’s Downtown if he would take us in. At the same time, Fr. Daniel Helminiak left for graduate school in Austin and Paula Rieder stepped in as chaplain to guide us through this difficult transition. It was a very stressful time for the group and once again we lost attendance. Several things

happened at about the same time. First, there was information that there was a gay individual in San Antonio that had experienced a breach of the Seal of Confession, with respect to his orientation. This was brought to the attention of the Diocese, and the Archbishop called for an investigation, due to the seriousness of this allegation. Dignity San Antonio worked with Dan Helminiak in this investigation and asked to bring this person forward, more than one was found and the issue was dropped by the chancery. Second, in October of 1986, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its now infamous Halloween letter stating that homosexuality is an intrinsic disorder and those that acted on their sexuality. intrinsically evil. Dignity USA, at this time in its history found itself at a difficult crossroads. After long discussion, the national organization decided to include in its statement of position and purpose that GLBT people can act on their sexuality in an ethically responsible way, one that is consonant with Christ's teaching, and in a way that is life giving, life affirming and loving. We also stated that we believe through our baptism we are members of Christ's mystical body and numbered among the people of God and it is also our right and our duty to live the sacramental life of the church. Dignity chapters all over the country were being asked to leave Catholic Church property due to the document from the CDF and Dignity's subsequent statement of position and purpose. Our chapter was very fortunate to have Archbishop Patrick Flores. The way he addressed this issue was to no longer formally assign a chaplain to the group, and gratefully, we continued to meet at St. Mary's. Our ministry suffered as a result all of this, fewer priests were willing to preside for fear of reprimand. Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Catholics were once again alienated by the church due to the harsh language in the document, stating that the inclination toward homosexuality is an "objective disorder" and "a more or less strong tendency ordered toward an intrinsic moral evil." The document also went on to state that homosexual persons seeking legislation favorable to their cause should not be surprised if "irrational and violent reactions increase" and that "all support should be withdrawn from any organizations which seek to undermine the teachings of the church, which are ambiguous about it or which neglect it entirely." Many people felt this was more that they could take from the church and just left. There was a small group that continued to gather. With few priests and few members, we were forced to truly answer our baptismal call to minister to one another. This matured us in our faith and spirituality. We were now responsible for our own spiritual well being. We learned how to create and provide our own liturgical services, took responsibility for their content and language. We began to use inclusive language more regularly and

incorporated many of the liturgical suggestions made by Dignity USA. We did feel abandoned by the church during this period but at the same time we felt empowered in our ability to be honest and open about who we are, our belief in our own goodness and the responsibility we were taking for our own spiritual growth and development. All this by our 10th anniversary! To celebrate, we hosted the regional conference at Casa San Jose (Oblate) with keynote speaker Sister Jeanine Grammick, SL and workshops with topics such as “The human side of AIDS”, “Homophobia”, and “Feminism for the non feminist”. We hosted our first Ball, a dress up affair, which has become an annual event that celebrates our work in the community. On the occasion of Pope John Paul II visit to San Antonio in September of 1987, we responded by asking all people of conscience to gather with us in prayer and celebration of the Eucharist, for reconciliation and healing for the gay and lesbian community. We hosted the liturgy at Metropolitan Community Church at 1136 West Woodlawn, and Fr. Eddie Bernal was our presider. Then in 1990, Fr. Bill Davis left St. Mary’s for Africa and once again the new pastor was not comfortable with us. After about one year of avoiding contact with us, we insisted on meeting with him, and at that meeting he thought it would be best if we found another place to worship. Through a woman in our community, we were invited by Fr. Stuart Juleen to meet at St. Ann’s and remained there through the transition of the parish to the Dominicans in 1993 and several new pastors! With more stability we have been able to focus more on ministry to the community at large. We worked with other communities on the Food for Today program, a meals program for people with AIDS. After many years as a community project, it was almost stopped but Dignity decided to take it on, so we became the organizing community. We also worked very hard to develop our liturgical resources. Through the vision and leadership of the national organization, use of inclusive language was incorporated into our practices. Bruce Jarstfer organized the resources, made available to us through Dignity USA, into readily available materials that make creating inclusive liturgies very easy today! Another national Dignity project that came about in the mid 90’s was Solidarity Sunday, also organized by Bruce. It is a non-violence project that asks people to take a four-point pledge to end violence against all people, including GLBT people. Dignity San Antonio celebrates annually with an interfaith service that memorializes those who have been killed in the past year because they were GLBT. We hosted the Mountain Plains Regional Conference in 1996 at the Holiday Inn with Tom Keene as the keynote speaker. For our 20th Anniversary (1996) we invited Dignity USA President Marianne Duddy as our homilist. We hosted several gatherings over the

weekend to celebrate (dinner at Jacala, and Mexican Buffet with homemade sangria in Deb and Nickie's backyard). For our 25th Anniversary, August of 2001, we celebrated with a sit-down dinner with guest speaker Dennis Doyle and a special liturgy at St. Henry's Catholic Church, with Fr. Eddie and Fr. Emil as co-presiders. Dignity USA Vice President Pat McArron was the homilist. In April 2002, Dignity SA hosted the first National Regional meeting/conference after the national structural reorganization at the Crockett Hotel. There was a one-day retreat on Friday, the theme "We Shall Not Be Silent - Our Personal Journeys". The conference in Saturday and Sunday included several workshops (*Speaking Up for GLBT Rights*, Diane Hardy-Garcia; *A Time to be Silent and A Time to Speak*, Tom Keene; *A Parents Panel: What Happens When Someone in Your Family Comes Out and What Should the Churches Do*, Representatives of PFLAG; and, *We Refuse to be Enemies: Speaking Singing and Dancing from Jerusalem to Jasper*, Sister Martha Ann Kirk, CCVI), with keynote speaker Sister Jeanine Grammick, SL. In 1999, Pastor Fr. R.B. Williams called us and wondered if we would mind moving from the convent to the main church for liturgy...we were very surprised and relieved that this was not a call about moving again! We successfully transitioned into the main Church.

On October 13, 2010, Fr. Eddie Bernal called to tragically inform us that in a meeting with Bishop Oscar Cantu we were being asked to leave St Ann's. A letter from Bishop Cantu was sent to Fr. John Restrepo, pastor at St Ann's. We met for our final liturgy at St. Ann's on Sunday October 17, 2010. Fr. John Markey presided and Dignity president Fred Anthony Garza delivered the news to the group. Nickie called Rev. Tom Heger at Beacon Hill Presbyterian Church to share the news and without us asking, he offered us the keys to the church. Dignity found a place of welcome with our Presbyterian sisters and brothers. And without skipping a beat, we began celebrating liturgy at Beacon Hill on October 24. At first with lay-led Eucharistic services and then over time with several priests who came forward to preside with us. In this transition we recognized the value of all the work we had done to own our faith and spirituality, allowing us to stand on our own and more forward! We found ourselves so grateful for all that Bruce had done for our group in creating liturgy materials in writing and on the computer, purchasing all the needed liturgical accessories to provide us with the "comforts" of home when we moved!

We hosted a Prayer Vigil on November 20 at San Fernando Cathedral to pray for dialogue with the Bishop.

For our 35th Anniversary (August 2011), we held a prayer vigil at San Fernando Cathedral and put an ad in the Express News, stating that we are the church.

In 2011, we began hosting a biennial art show to help raise funds to help more people attend our biennial national conventions. This is one way for us to foster new leadership in our chapter and build community with the larger Dignity community.

We met at Beacon Hill Presbyterian Church but we also joined together with them for special occasions such as Easter Sunrise Service in the Community Garden, Christmas services, community discussions, work days at the church, and contributions to repairs to the building. Sadly, in October of 2014, Beacon Hill Presbyterian Church closed its doors due to the retirement of the pastor, an aging population, and financial stress.

Dignity San Antonio once again was in search of a physical home...this time in a very different context. We had time to seek out places of worship: we were blessed with 3 communities that welcomed us...University Presbyterian Church, Laurel Methodist Church, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church...it was a tough decision, in the end we decided on St. Paul's Episcopal Church...We began meeting at St. Paul's October 12, 2015. We have gained several presiders since we left St. Ann's.

(Names of some people, especially presiders have been purposefully omitted from this writing)

At St. Paul's, we are contributing to the Food Program, we also regularly make contributions (monetary and goods) to The Catholic Worker House. We were fortunate to be asked to participate in the First Annual Dorothy Day Conference at Oblate School of Theology in 2015, where we had a panel discussion on being GLBT and Catholic and had a table to distribute materials. The chapter was honored in 2009 at the Dignity National Convention in San Francisco for its diversity (women, youth, people of color) and percentage of members in attendance at the conference.

Since 1976, most all who have come through the doors of Dignity San Antonio have, at some point, had the desire to embody and work for Dignity's vision. For a critical few, our community has literally saved their lives by giving them a glimpse at their goodness and their God given gift of sexuality. For some, they have come and found some healing from the

painful experiences of the past but have no passion or strength to struggle further. They have moved on. Then, there are others who have come and joined the ministry and struggled to balance their faith in the context of Catholic Doctrine with the teaching of the Gospel of Jesus. All of us find ourselves forging a path where there is not one, in the hope that one day we will be united with and fully included in our church and society.

Vision Statement

Dignity USA envisions and works for a time when GLBT are affirmed and experience dignity through the integration of our spirituality and sexuality, and as beloved persons of God are encouraged to fully participate in all aspects of the Church and society.

Mission Statement

Dignity USA works for respect and justice for all GLBT persons in the Catholic Church and the world through education, advocacy, and support.

Dignity SA Motto

By the grace of God I am who I am and God's grace towards me is not in vain. I Corinthians 15:10