

**FCPCSM and Its Roots in Dignity/Twin Cities:  
Looking Back After 20 Years**

by David J. McCaffrey

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Following our original strategy to focus on parishes in our future outreach projects, with our training tools in hand the video and the guidebook we created the Parish-Based Gay and Lesbian Ministry Project (PBGLMP), which spanned the years 1990 - 1995. During that period we conducted the seminar series in about 25 parishes of the archdiocese, for a wide range of parish groups priests, pastoral ministers, parish council members, members of various parish committees, parish volunteers such as Stephen Ministers, Befrienders, and Samaritans and for a number of other groups.

The results of PBGLMP continue on to this day in the form of various official parish-based GLBT ministries at the following parishes: the Basilica, St. Stephens in Minneapolis, St. Stephens of Anoka, St. Frances Cabrini, St. Joan of Arc, Pax Christi, and at a number of other parishes where a small group of staff members or volunteers quietly minister to GLBT persons. Beyond the Twin Cities, the seminar series has been requested by a wide range of Catholic pastoral professionals from across the United States as well as by a few working in foreign countries.

In the spring of 1995 another need came to our attention. Statements from the local conservative Catholic Defense League (CDL) began appearing in the media strongly criticizing the GLBT safe staff programs in the local public high schools (e.g., Out for Equity in St. Paul and Out for Good in Minneapolis). The CDL asserted that such programs that were purported to be counseling programs for GLBT students were actually encouraging immoral same-sex behavior among all students and posed a threat to the religious rights of Catholic public school students and their parents.

At that time CPCSM's Parish-Based Project was winding down and, except for the very successful visit from Bishop Thomas Gumbleton that we had sponsored in October 1994, our organization's energies were dissipating. The disturbing CDL media statements were just the shot in the arm that CPCSM needed to get re-energized. A number of parents of GLBT persons who had helped organize the Gumbleton visit were now part of our group and were moved by the same sense of outrage as our GLBT members had been.

From that energy emerged our next project, known as Families and Friends of GLBT Persons in Catholic Education. Again it would seem that Divine Providence was playing a role as other fortunate events were simultaneously occurring that would greatly aid our efforts. At the same time as we were organizing our Families and Friends project, the presidents from a number of the local Catholic high schools were expressing concern that many of their students were "coming out" and seeking services similar to those available to GLBT students in many public schools. The presidents did not know where to turn for help.

Also, at the same time, Sister Mary Ellen Gevelinger, OP, Director of Personnel and Planning for the archdiocesan educational administration office (now known as the Catholic Education and Formation Ministries CEFM ) was asked to chair a study group with representatives chosen by the school presidents to examine the issue of ministry to students exploring sexuality issues and to make recommendations. She felt strongly about the need for support services for GLBT students; and, when we approached her to inform her of our Families and Friends Project, she agreed to meet with us and later invited us to join the study group.

Our participation in the study group resulted in our being asked to train the entire CEFM staff about the needs of GLBT students and their families and friends. At that session we emphasized the GLBT students' need for "safe" staff in their schools with whom they could talk openly and honestly about their sexuality-related issues and needs and from whom they could expect to receive respect and understanding as well as helpful guidance.

Pleased with our training approach, Sister Mary Ellen was very receptive to our request to work with administrators at the individual Catholic high schools and help them determine how we could best train their faculties and staff members. Consequently, from 1996 through 1998, in nine of the 11 high schools in the archdiocese, our Families and Friends Project presented general sensitivity training to the whole faculty and our four-session safe staff training package to a select group of teachers and staff members who expressed interest in serving as safe staff persons. Following the initial training, we also provided continuing education seminars and consultations at some of the schools. In all, we have trained approximately 750 faculty members and other school staff persons.

Bill Kummer and I, who both played a major role in the Families and Friends Project, sometimes look back in wonder at the project's accomplishments. We had always said that in our lifetime we would never see the day when CPCSM would be allowed to set foot in any Catholic school and talk to teachers about GLBT issues let alone conduct intensive training sessions in nine of the 11 high schools. At times, it has seemed like this has all been a dream

## news & announcements



### How Catholic Schools Are Creating A Safe Climate for Gay and Lesbian Students

Sister Mary Ellen Gevelinger, O.P., Ed.D.  
and Laurel Zimmerman

Jan 20, 2006

*Catholic high schools in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis have found a new ministry in providing support for their gay and lesbian students.*

Several years ago, in a Catholic high school in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, teachers asked seniors in an interdisciplinary honors symposium to tell about their own experiences, or the experiences of individuals they knew, as part

of a unit on gender. Their task was to think about all the ways that gender can affect people.

One girl stood at the front of the class and described the life of her friend Heidi. Heidi, she said, had been beaten, kicked, and reviled repeatedly by her parents. When she was 14, they told her she could no longer live at home. Where she went and with whom she lived were her problem, they said.

Heidi moved from place to place, staying with a succession of friends and relatives. She was rarely welcomed, and often was barely tolerated. Heidi attended three different high schools and had not seen her parents or siblings for four years. Students and teachers at the schools she attended often treated her as an outcast, so eventually she learned to keep to herself and tell no one about who or what she was.

What was Heidi's sin? When she was in her early teens, she told her parents that she was a lesbian. They would not, and could not, accept her. Now, at the age of 17—after much self-doubt and pain—she had only recently come to accept herself.

The girl ended her talk with the admission, "I am Heidi."

## **A Mandate for Educators**

Heidi is not alone. In schools across the country, students are struggling to deal with issues of sexual identity. How can we ensure that all students feel safe in school and that they are able to learn?

First, we have to make careful decisions about the messages we convey to students concerning gender roles. Social and behavioral codes, curriculum, and school activities all are based on traditional, heterosexual roles. Seemingly innocuous activities such as the prom, Valentine's Day, the election of kings and queens for various activities, and classes about marriage all create situations where gay and lesbian youth must hide their identities, where they feel they are excluded. We do not acknowledge their identity and presence.

There exists in our society a negative perception—if not an outright fear and loathing—of homosexuality. The stress and pain with which gay and lesbian youngsters must deal is reflected in the statistics. Consider the following:

- Fifty percent of lesbian and gay teens say they are rejected by their parents because they are gay (Hetrick-Martin Institute 1992).
- Eighty percent of lesbian and gay youths report severe feelings of isolation (Hetrick-Martin Institute 1992).
- Thirty percent of all young people who commit suicide are gay or lesbian (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1989).

## **The Archdiocese's Response**

In the fall of 1995, the Schools Team of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis invited a representative, counselor, or campus minister from each of our 11 high schools to join a Study Group on Pastoral Care and Sexual Identity. (Although each school in the Archdiocese has its own administration and develops its own policies, the Schools Team is available to provide resources on any issue.) Our charge was to consider the issues confronting gay and lesbian students.

The group met for a full year. We looked at church documents, including letters from bishops regarding the church's response to homosexuality and its directives that we must minister to all, because all of us are God's creatures. We also studied homosexuality. We looked at the treatment of homosexuals throughout history, the experiences of homosexual adolescents in schools, psychosexual development, gay culture, and psychological and sociological perspectives. We found the literature on schools as safe communities to be particularly significant.

We developed the following mission statement: "The Pastoral Care and Sexual Identity Study Group in the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis exists to support competent and compassionate pastoral care for all students, families, and staff in the Catholic schools communities." By the end of the year, we had identified four goals:

1. Hold a workshop for all teachers, administrators, and counselors on the topic of sexual identity.
2. Train faculty members in each school to function as “safe staff.”
3. Teach students and teachers that homophobic behavior is inappropriate and unacceptable.
4. Form an interschool support group for students.

Each school proceeded individually to achieve the goals, based on its own identity, climate, and level of readiness.

Training for administrators, teachers and counselors. We have offered this training seven times to date, and will offer it again in the future as it is needed. Training sessions last a full day. Participants review a summary of the psychological and social research on homosexuality. They discuss the issues emerging in their various schools. They hear presentations by gay and lesbian graduates of our schools about their experiences relating to sexual identity. And, they have the opportunity to share their own discomfort, concerns, lack of knowledge, and hopes for the future.

Training for safe staff. This training is designed to help interested teachers learn how to help students who approach them with sexual identity issues. The trainers are adults from an organization called Family and Friends of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Persons in Catholic Education as well as community counselors—both gay and straight—who have worked with students. Teachers who complete the training may—if they feel comfortable doing so—display a rainbow sticker in their classroom. The rainbow sticker is generally associated with the Gay Pride movement. Students know, however, that in our schools the symbol means everyone is safe in that teacher's space.

Education for students. Our student education effort is designed to make sure students understand that behaviors that hurt others will not be tolerated. We also provide positive reinforcement for those students who already are supportive of others. We have delivered the message about tolerance and respect for all in various ways, depending on the school:

- At one school, the principal talked with students at each grade level about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. The principal discussed the importance of individual dignity as a rationale for a safe climate and stressed that homophobic behaviors are as unacceptable as racist behaviors.
- Another school devoted an entire edition of the school paper to various aspects of the sexual identity issue. One student described her coming out at home, another wrote an article discussing church teachings, and yet another described how it feels to be the only heterosexual in a group of homosexuals. The writer concluded that it's normal to feel strange when you are different.
- In some schools, counselors have placed gay and lesbian-related posters on the walls. One poster states, “My best friend just told me he is gay! Now what do I do?”
- We encourage teachers to incorporate discussions of homosexuality into the curriculum. Topics covered to date have ranged from famous homosexuals and their influence in history, to the struggle of homosexuals to gain acceptance and how that struggle compares to the efforts of other groups, to the lives of some famous homosexual athletes.

A support group for students. We are fortunate to have the assistance of Family and Friends of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Persons. This local group, which has been in existence for about 20 years, provides us with research, information, staff training, and support. Recently, Family and Friends members helped us establish an off-site, interschool support group for students. Safe staff members in each of our schools can refer students to the group. Before joining the group, however, students meet with a trained referral person in each school who can address other, more serious problems that might not be appropriate for a group setting. We strive to ensure that the steps we take are thoughtful and caring, and that we ensure student safety and privacy.

What steps do we plan to take next? There are several goals that we would like to address in the future:

- Training the members of our boards of directors. Most Catholic schools are governed by a board of directors that is responsible for setting policy. We would like to provide training for our board members about our efforts and their underlying principles.
- Developing our parent support group. The foundation for a parent support group is in place. Now, we would like to see the group become active, because we know parents of gay and lesbian youngsters often feel very isolated.
- Supporting gay and lesbian staff. We want to address the very real concerns of gay and lesbian staff members and teachers, many of whom remain closeted because of concerns about job security. We also believe these individuals

could serve as valuable resources for our program.

### **Approaching the Problem in a Catholic Setting**

It may come as a surprise to many readers that Catholic schools are dealing with topics such as homosexuality and the rights of homosexual students. However, recent writings by the American bishops place a greater emphasis on the call of Catholics to demonstrate justice and respect for all people. These writings show less concern for homosexual behaviors and more concern for the pastoral care and just treatment.

Consider this statement by John Roach, Archbishop of St. Paul and Minneapolis (1991): "Many homosexuals experience unnecessary pain and suffering ... It is the firm intention of this local church not only to advocate for the rights of homosexual persons, but to provide care for such persons."

Members of our study group view our work as a matter of justice and charity. All our work has proceeded from the basic adherence to the Catholic teaching that sexual activity outside of marriage is not acceptable. Our basic assumptions and guidelines are aimed at promoting chastity.

What we have done in our archdiocesan schools for gay and lesbian students can serve as a useful example of a process to improve school climate in any school—public or private. We believe strongly that as educators we must address the larger, albeit sometimes difficult, issues of society. We also believe—and articulate for our students—that if one person is not safe, no person is safe.

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## **CPCSM - Related News**

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**Archbishop Roach, Supporter of  
Human Rights for GLBT Persons Who  
Shared in CPCSM's Journey, Passes Away**



**Archbishop John R. Roach**  
**July 31, 1921 - July 11, 2003**

*God has called you out of darkness into marvelous light.*  
**1 Peter 2:9**

*(Revised on April 30, 2004)*

CPCSM and the greater GLBT community lost a good friend and a champion of their human rights on July 11th when Archbishop Roach passed away. As far back as 1978, during a struggle for GLBT civil rights in St. Paul, the Archbishop first spoke out publicly on behalf of social justice for GLBT persons.

In 1973 St. Paul -- along with Minneapolis -- had been one the first cities in the nation to pass an ordinance protecting gay and lesbian persons from discrimination. Then in 1977, a right wing religious crusade, begun and energized by the Baptist minister, Richard Angwin, and his Temple Baptist congregation, succeeded in calling for a referendum vote in 1978 that rescinded the GLBT human rights ordinance in St. Paul. Prior to the vote, the Archbishop felt moved to issue the following statement.

*It is a matter of injustice when due to prejudice, they [gays and lesbians] must suffer violation of their basic rights. Like all persons, they have a right to human respect, stable friendships, economic security, and social equality. . . . Consequently, both religious and civic leaders must seek ways to assure homosexuals every human and civil right which is their due as persons, without, however, neglecting the rights of the larger community. (*

Aware of such concern for social justice for gay men and lesbians and other marginalized persons in society and the fact that he had recently been elected as president of the

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, six leaders in the local GLBT Catholic community sat down with the Archbishop for a listening session on May 9, 1980 -- the event that CPCSM would later mark as its founding.

About 10 years later, after much of CPCSM's outreach work with parishes and other archdiocesan groups was well underway, CPCSM leaders requested a second listening session, this time with Archbishop Roach and the directors of all of the archdiocesan offices.

Convened at the Maryhill Retreat Center on Summit Avenue, the meeting was comprised of the Archbishop and his department heads and a few successful lesbian and gay professionals from a Catholic background and two pairs of Catholic parents of gay or lesbian children -- including a deacon and his wife.

As the facilitator of that meeting, after the presenters had shared their stories, I recall that Archbishop Roach gave a response on behalf of all of his department heads. Among his comments, he admitted that he and fellow priests from his era had been "very poorly prepared" in the seminary for dealing with gay people and had "made many mistakes along the way," especially as confessors.

However, except for his 1978 statement regarding the St. Paul referendum, in the earlier years of his administration, Archbishop Roach's human rights record regarding GLBT persons was not always as stellar as we had hoped for. Almost every year from the early 70's until the passage of the 1993 Human Rights Amendment, a gay-lesbian human rights bill had been brought before the Minnesota legislature, and each time it had been defeated -- largely because of the lobbying efforts of the bishops of Minnesota via the Minnesota Catholic Conference and the fundamentalist Berean League (today known as the Minnesota Family Council).

In fact, in 1977, while receiving an award honoring him for his ecumenical work with the Jewish community, Archbishop Roach was hit in the face by a pie thrown by an angry young gay man with Catholic roots. This episode soon came to symbolize the outrage of the local gay community toward the Catholic Church for their failure to respond to the pain and special needs of GLBT persons. A friend of the Archbishop later told CPCSM leaders that Roach confided to one of his auxiliary bishops after the incident that "there must be a lot of pain in that community for someone to want to do this to me. This should cause all of us to look deeper."

It is apparent, however, that Archbishop Roach heeded his own advice in response to the pie episode. Following his listening session with CPCSM's cofounders in 1980 and following the dissemination of the findings of CPCSM's 1984 *Needs Assessment Survey Report*, in 1986 the Archbishop convened a large archdiocesan study group on GLBT ministry, comprised of priests, liberal and conservative theologians, medical and mental health professionals, leaders of the local GLBT Catholic community -- including some members of CPCSM, and parents of GLBT children. After meeting for six months, the

study group's report concluded that more support for human rights of GLBT persons and more pastoral sensitivity to their special needs and gifts were clearly needed.

It was the Archbishop's experience from that study group and his work with CPCSM and other pastoral groups that culminated in the two high points of his ministerial career in relation to GLBT human rights. In the September 26, 1991 issue of the *Catholic Bulletin*, he issued a very comprehensive and pastorally sensitive document, that emerged as the gold standard among Church leaders throughout the world. The article was entitled [A Statement on Homosexual Persons and the Protection of Human Rights](#). (Please click on the title to read this .pdf document. \*)

Furthermore, it was under Archbishop Roach's leadership -- in sharp contrast to its earlier lobbying efforts against human rights legislation for GLBT persons -- that the Minnesota Catholic Conference successfully advocated for a bill that added sexual orientation as a protected class under the Minnesota Human Rights Act in 1993.

Archbishop Roach's final public appearance with CPCSM came in 1998, when he was invited to kick off the group's first speakers' series, *Discovering Our Hidden Treasures: Reshaping Pastoral Ministries with GLBT Persons and Their Families*, as the program's first keynote speaker.

On April 14, 1998, in the Hall of the Angels in the St. Paul Cathedral, Archbishop Roach shared his personal history with GLBT ministry in his presentation, entitled *A Bishop's Journey with Gay Ministry: Transforming Gospel Values into Human Rights and a More Inclusive Church*.

A summary of the Archbishop's keynote presentation can be found in the article [Archbishop John R. Roach Addresses GLBT Issues](#) in CPCSM's *Rainbow Spirit, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (Spring 1998)*. (Please click on the above link to view this .pdf file. \*)