

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM)**

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### **Study Documents Successes, Challenges of Parishes and Dioceses in Ministry with Lesbian and Gay Catholics**

The National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM) will release findings from a study more than a year in the making on ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics and their families during its 11<sup>th</sup> annual conference in Richmond, Virginia, September 24th. The study profiles a national sample of active Catholic gay and lesbian ministries at both the parish and diocesan level. And it identifies approaches and models of ministry that are especially effective.

The study was launched in November 2002 with the assistance of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University. It consisted of a mailed survey of leaders of 20 diocesan and 52 parish ministries with a reputation for excellence, followed by personal interviews with a small subset of these leaders.

This research finds that many parish leaders feel that days of spiritual retreat for gay and lesbian Catholics, social services, and basic support groups are among the most effective programs they use in reaching out to gay and lesbian Catholics. Additionally, they tend to say that their ministries are most successful when they include effective programs for parents, families, and friends of gay and lesbian persons in addition to programs for gay and lesbian Catholics themselves. Many leaders also feel that integrating gay and lesbian parishioners into general parish

life, including positions of general parish leadership – rather than having a “ghettoized” ministry as one leader puts it – is an indicator of success.

Factors identified by many parish leaders as important in facilitating their success in ministry include support of the pastor and parish staff, a larger parish commitment to social justice, and a general parish reputation as a welcoming community. Though some leaders also say that the presence of a sizeable gay and lesbian community in the surrounding area helps, this does not appear to be vital. Parishes in the study represent all regions of the country and exist in both suburban and central city areas (though very few appear to be in truly rural areas).

Only two of the 20 diocesan ministries surveyed operate as stand-alone programs. Most are a subset of a larger ministry or are coordinated by a single individual who has other responsibilities. Many of the diocesan ministries focus on providing resources on Catholic teaching and referring people to parishes, support groups, or spiritual directors. Diocesan leaders often report that they see their role as cultivating a welcoming and accepting atmosphere in their dioceses, supporting parish ministries, and educating about Church teaching and pastoral needs of gay and lesbian Catholics. Several diocesan leaders cite regular diocesan liturgies for lesbian and gay Catholics as a particularly effective form of outreach and community-building.

Both parish and diocesan leaders identify negative perceptions and misunderstandings about Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality as among the biggest challenges they face in their ministries. They report that using the 1997 pastoral letter of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children*, as a teaching tool is extremely helpful in responding to such perceptions and misunderstandings. They use it both in reaching out to disaffected gay and lesbian Catholics and in educating other Catholics about pastoral sensitivity to gay and lesbian issues. In addition, some parish leaders say they face a lack of support from their dioceses and feel the need to “keep a low profile.” Though six in ten parish leaders surveyed agree at least “somewhat” that their diocese is supportive of their parish’s gay and lesbian ministry, only three in ten agree “strongly.”

Suburban St. Bernadette Parish in Severn, Maryland provides a model for how to start a thriving gay and lesbian ministry “from scratch” in an area without a sizeable gay and lesbian community. The Diocese of San Jose and the Archdiocese of Chicago provide models of weekly Masses held at a single parish church but with rotating presiders from around the diocese.

Father Jim Schexnayder, NACDLGM Resource Director, describes the findings of the study as important because “they reveal the pastoral commitment of the Church to lesbian and gay Catholics and their families and at the same time they indicate that much more needs to be done on the diocesan and parish levels to create welcoming communities.”

A press conference will be held on September 24, 2004, at 11:30 AM in the Grand Ballroom of the Crowne Plaza Hotel, 555 East Canal Street, Richmond, Virginia. Representatives of NACDLGM and CARA will be present to speak and answer questions.

A full report of findings from the study entitled “In Search of Best Practices in Ministry with Gay and Lesbian Catholics” is available from NACDLGM. A shorter summary is presented in a CARA Special Report with the same title and is also available from NACDLGM.

Founded in 1994, NACDLGM membership includes people from 55 Catholic dioceses and 130 parishes. Since 1997, when the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Marriage and Family issued their pastoral letter, *Always Our Children*, to parents and church ministers, increasing numbers of dioceses and parishes have explored the development of such ministries.

The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) is an independent, non-partisan Catholic research center. CARA has conducted applied social scientific research related to the Catholic Church in the United States since 1964. CARA has been affiliated with Georgetown University since 1989.

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