



# Special Report

Serving Dioceses, Parishes, and Religious Communities Since 1964

Summer 2004

## In Search of Best Practices in Ministry with Gay and Lesbian Catholics

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*The Christian community should offer its homosexual sisters and brothers understanding and pastoral care. More than twenty years ago we bishops stated that “Homosexuals . . . should have an active role in the Christian community”. . . What does this mean in practice? It means that all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral care. Homosexual persons living chaste lives should have opportunities to lead and serve the community.*

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—“Always Our Children”

In October 1997, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops released *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions to Pastoral Ministers*. The document suggests several ways that local Church leaders and ministers can reach out to lesbian and gay Catholics. However, relatively little is known about how dioceses and parishes that have attempted to institute formal programs for ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics and their families have gone about doing so. In 2003, the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (NACDLGM) launched a study of such parish and diocesan ministries. NACDLGM is a network of diocesan, parish, and campus-based ministries with lesbian and gay communities and their families. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University assisted with the study and prepared this report for NACDLGM.

The central goal of the study was creating a portrait of experiences and “best practices” among successful ministries with gay and lesbian Catholics that other parishes and arch/dioceses can use as a guide in planning their own ministries. The study had two components. The first was a mailed survey of parish and diocesan leaders of lesbian and gay ministries with reputations for success or excellence. The focus of the survey was on identifying the types of services—educational programs, outreach programs, support groups, spiritual and other resources, etc.—offered by the ministries and gauging the leaders’ perceptions of how successful those services are.

The second component consisted of personal interviews conducted by NACDLGM with a subset of the leaders from the mailed survey. The focus of this component was identifying experiences over the course of establishing and growing a ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics—successes, challenges, and insights—that may assist other parishes and dioceses that are considering establishing their own ministries.

# Major Findings from Responding Dioceses and Parishes

## DIOCESES

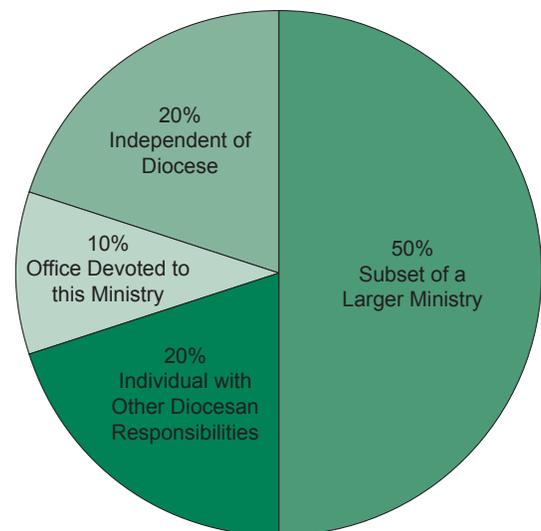
- In most responding dioceses, ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics is overseen by an office or individual responsible for other ministries or tasks. All respondents report that they spend less than half their time in a typical week on gay and lesbian ministry in the diocese.
- Nearly all responding dioceses provide resources on Catholic teaching related to homosexuality and pastoral care of gay and lesbian people and their families. Most also provide referrals to support groups and referrals to counselors or spiritual directors. About half of responding dioceses set up support groups for families of gay and lesbian people, but only about a third set up support groups for gay and lesbian Catholics.
- About four-fifths of respondents agree at least “somewhat” that their diocese supports parishes’ ministries to gay and lesbian people and their families, but only one-fifth agree “strongly.” Only about half of respondents agree that parishes in the diocese are encouraged to establish a ministry to gay and lesbian people.
- Diocesan respondents identify the support of the bishop and dedicated volunteers as among the chief factors facilitating their ministry with gay and lesbian people and their families.
- Ignorance and negative attitudes about homosexuality among Catholics are most often named by diocesan respondents as challenges to their ministry.

## PARISHES

- Most responding parishes offer gay and lesbian parishioners referrals to counselors, spiritual directors, or confessors. Fewer, but still more than half, offer a gay and lesbian support group in English. Six percent offer a gay and lesbian support group in Spanish. Sizable minorities of parishes offer days of recollection and social services. Relatively few parishes offer a gay and lesbian youth group.

- About half of parishes offer outreach to gay and lesbian people in the surrounding community, and about half offer a support group for parents of gay and lesbian people. About a third offer a support group for friends and families of gay and lesbian people, and about a quarter offer a support group for gay and lesbian parents and their children.
- About four-fifths of respondents describe the pastor as “very” supportive of the parish’s ministry to gay and lesbian people and their families. About a third describe the parish community as a whole as “very” supportive, and about a quarter describe the bishop as “very” supportive.
- More than half of parishes collaborate at least “somewhat” with other parishes in ministering with gay and lesbian people and their families. Only about a third collaborate with social service agencies or with other community-based organizations. Parishes that are also campus ministry sites tend to be more collaborative than other parishes.
- Respondents describe a supportive pastor, general social justice commitment of the parish, and parish location as among the most important factors in facilitating ministry with gay and lesbian people and their families.

FIGURE 1. RESPONSIBILITY FOR GAY OR LESBIAN MINISTRY IN THE DIOCESE



- Many respondents view the Church’s stance or perceived stance on homosexuality as the greatest challenge they face in gay and lesbian ministry. Other frequently-mentioned challenges are: obtaining or maintaining diocesan support, the need for education about gay and lesbian issues, and attracting or reaching potential participants for the ministry.

## Mailed Survey

In all, 52 parishes, including a few Catholic college campus ministry programs and independent organizations serving parishes, and 20 dioceses responded to the mailed survey. They represent a wide range of geographical areas of the country and both relatively new and long-standing programs for ministry with lesbian and gay Catholics and their families.

### DIOCESAN MINISTRIES

Relatively few of the diocesan ministries are stand-alone programs (see Figure 1). Half of the programs are housed in an office in which gay and lesbian ministry is a subset of a larger ministry. Twenty percent are led by an individual with other diocesan responsibilities. Another twenty percent are coordinated by organizations that are formally independent of diocesan offices. Only ten percent are official diocesan offices dedicated solely to gay and lesbian ministry.

The typical focus of the diocesan ministries (see Table 1), is providing resources about Catholic teaching and referrals to counselors and other local ministries. All of the diocesan ministries report that they provide resources on Catholic teaching on homosexuality.

**TABLE 1: RESOURCES AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY DIOCESAN MINISTRIES**  
Percentage of responding diocesan ministries that provide each

Resources on Catholic teaching on homosexuality	100%
Resources on Catholic teaching on pastoral care of gay and lesbian people	95
Resources on Catholic teaching on pastoral care of families and friends of gays and lesbians	90
Referrals to support groups	90
Referrals to counselors, spiritual directors	90
Presentations for various arch/diocesan constituencies	70
Referrals to welcoming and inclusive parishes	70
Encouragement for parishes to implement ministry programs for gay and lesbian parishioners	70
Educational resources for religious educators	65
Speakers for parishes	60
Setting up support groups for families of gays and lesbians	55
Diocesan wide ministry programs for gay and lesbian Catholics	55
Setting up support groups for gay and lesbian Catholics	35
Training of volunteers to address issues pertaining to the gay and lesbian community	16

Nearly all provide resources on pastoral care of gay and lesbian people, and 90 percent on pastoral care of their family and friends. Ninety-percent of diocesan ministries provide referrals to counselors or spiritual directors and to support groups. Seventy percent provide referrals to welcoming and inclusive parishes. Other services and resources provided by a majority of the ministries include presentations, educational resources for religious educators, and speakers for parishes. Services that are less commonly provided at the diocesan level include setting up support groups for gay and lesbian Catholics and training volunteers to address issues pertaining to the gay and lesbian community.

Diocesan leaders were asked their opinions about several aspects of ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics in their diocese. These items are shown in Table 2. In general, respondents feel ministry is supported in their diocese. About four in five agree at least “somewhat” that their

diocese supports parishes’ ministry to gays and lesbians and that it supports ministry to their families—though only a fifth agree “strongly” with these statements. However, some responses also reflect perceived need for growth and expansion in ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics, particularly at the parish level. Only about half of respondents agree that parishes are encouraged to establish a ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics, and a similar proportion agree that ministry is primarily organized at the diocesan level rather than the parish level.

The last two items in Table 2 are summary indicators of respondents’ views of the extent to which gay and lesbian ministry in their diocese is successful. Slightly fewer than half of respondents agree that the pastoral needs of gay and lesbian Catholics and of their families and friends are being met in their diocese. And very few agree “strongly.”

**TABLE 2: DIOCESAN RESPONDENTS' VIEWS OF MINISTRY WITH GAY AND LESBIAN CATHOLICS IN THEIR DIOCESES**

	Agree "Somewhat" or "Strongly"	Agree "Strongly" Only
The diocese supports parishes' ministry to gays and lesbians	85 %	20 %
The diocese supports parishes' ministry to families of gay and lesbian people	80	20
The ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics in this diocese is focused in a few parishes	80	45
The diocese's gay and lesbian ministry is sensitive to diverse ethnic cultures	58	21
Ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics in this diocese is primarily organized at the diocesan level rather than the parish level	53	32
Parishes in the diocese are encouraged to establish a ministry to gays and lesbians	50	10
The pastoral needs of gay and lesbian Catholics in this diocese are being met	40	5
The pastoral needs of families and friends of gays and lesbians in this diocese are being met	45	0

## PARISH MINISTRIES

Parishes responding to the survey represent all four major Census regions (see Figure 2). They also represent metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. The cover letter accompanying the questionnaire mailed to parishes requested that it be completed by the person who coordinates the parish's ministry with lesbian and gay Catholics and their families. Four in ten returned questionnaires were filled out by the pastor or another parish priest. About one in ten were filled out by a religious sister, and the remainder were filled out by a lay person. Among respondents who are lay or women religious, four in ten report that ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics and their families is their primary ministry.

Table 3 shows the types of programs and services provided by the parish ministries. The great majority, nearly nine in ten, refer

parishioners to counselors, spiritual directors, or confessors. Most of the responding parishes also offer at least one type of support group. Six in ten responding parishes offer a gay and lesbian support group, and slightly fewer than half offer a support group for parents of gays and lesbians.

Other types of support groups are less common. About three in ten parishes offer a support group for friends and families of gays and lesbians. Similar proportions offer a support group specifically for lesbians and a support group specifically for gay men. One quarter of the parishes provide a support group for gay and lesbian parents and their children. Six percent offer a gay and lesbian support group in Spanish.

Aside from referrals and support groups, the most common types of programs or services for parishioners are social services and days of recollection, each provided by about four in ten parishes. Gay

and lesbian youth groups are relatively uncommon among these parishes.

One of the more interesting findings in Table 3 is that many of the parishes offer programs and services for people other than gay and lesbian parishioners. Approximately half have outreach to gay and lesbian people in the surrounding community. Just under half have a support group for parents of gay and lesbian parents and about a third have a support group for friends and families of gays and lesbians.

Respondents were asked to rate each of the services and programs offered by their parish on a scale ranging from "poor" to "excellent." Very few respondents rate any program as "poor," and there are also relatively small numbers of "fair" responses. However, there is a great deal of variation in "excellent" ratings. Table 4 shows the percentage of "excellent" ratings for each program or service. It should be kept in mind that each percentage reflects only respondents whose parishes offer that particular program or service.

Generally, respondents view days of recollection as the most effective program. Seven in ten respondents in parishes that offer days of recollection rate them as "excellent." At the opposite end of the spectrum, support groups for gay and lesbian parents and their children represent the lowest rated program or service. Only two in ten respondents whose parishes offer such a support group rate it as "excellent."

Social services, support groups for lesbians, and gay and lesbian support groups are also rated relatively highly—about half of respondents whose parishes offer

*Respect for the God-given dignity of all persons means the recognition of human rights and responsibilities. The teachings of the Church make it clear that the fundamental human rights of homosexual persons must be defended and that all of us must strive to eliminate any forms of injustice, oppression, or violence against them.*

—“Always Our Children”

each of these programs and services describe them as “excellent.” Support groups for gay men are rated somewhat less highly than those for lesbians (36 percent compared to 46 percent).

In general, programs and services aimed at people other than gay and lesbian parishioners are not among the most highly rated. Only about one-third of respondents whose parishes offer a support group for parents of gays and lesbians rate it as “excellent.” Slightly fewer respondents rate outreach to gays and lesbians in the surrounding community or support groups for friends and families as “excellent.”

Parish leaders, like their diocesan counterparts, were asked their opinions on a number of aspects of their parish’s ministry with gays and lesbians. As seen in Table 5, the views of these leaders are generally quite positive. About nine in ten

(92 percent) agree that gay and lesbian Catholics feel welcomed in their parish, with about six in ten (59 percent) agreeing “strongly.” Similar proportions agree that gay and lesbian parishioners have leadership roles in the parish. More than four-fifths of respondents agree that their parish does a good job ministering to gay and lesbian people and that it does a good job ministering to the families of gay and lesbian people. Six in ten respondents agree that their diocese supports their parish’s gay and lesbian ministry. Only a minority feel that their parish dedicates too little financial or personnel resources to gay and lesbian ministry.

## Personal Interviews

Several of the parishes and dioceses that responded to the mailed survey were selected for in-depth interviews. Those that were chosen offered a large number of programs and services and were described as successful ministries by the leaders who completed the survey.

Leaders of two dioceses and one parish agreed to be interviewed and gave permission for their ministries to be identified in this report:

- The Diocese of San Jose
- The Archdiocese of Chicago (Archdiocesan Gay and Lesbian Outreach, or AGLO)
- St. Bernadette Parish in Severn, Maryland

Several NACDLGM board members conducted the interviews, either in person or by telephone. The purpose was to develop a qualitative understanding of the experiences of the parishes and dioceses in building successful gay and lesbian ministries—particularly any experiences that might provide useful insight to other parishes and dioceses wishing to initiate or grow such ministries.

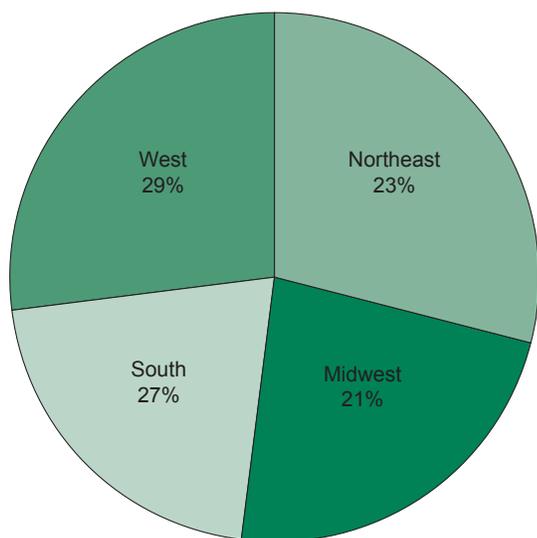
### THE DIOCESE OF SAN JOSE AND THE ARCHDIOCESE OF CHICAGO

The gay and lesbian ministries of the Archdiocese of Chicago (AGLO) and the Diocese of San Jose each began in the mid to late 1980s under the close guidance of a

TABLE 3: PROGRAMS AND SERVICES PROVIDED BY PARISH MINISTRIES  
Percentage of responding parish ministries that provide each

Referrals to counselors, spiritual directors, or confessors	88%
Gay and lesbian support group (English)	62
Outreach to gay and lesbian people in the surrounding community	51
Support group for parents of gays and lesbians	46
Days of recollection for gays and lesbians	42
Social services	40
Support group for friends and families of gays and lesbians	32
Support group for lesbians	31
Support group for gay men	29
Support group for gay and lesbian parents and children	25
Gay and lesbian youth group	12
Gay and lesbian support group (Spanish)	6

FIGURE 2. LOCATION OF RESPONDING PARISHES



Cardinal or Bishop and continue to thrive under new ordinaries. Bishop Pierre DuMaine officially launched the ministry in San Jose. The Bishop was already familiar with the needs of and ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics from his previous service. He developed guidelines for a ministry in San Jose based on recommendations of a committee he had appointed on the topic and personally presided at a Eucharist launching the ministry. At the diocesan level, the ministry was placed under the guidance of a new Pastoral Resources Committee.

One of the ministry’s greatest successes over the years has been outreach to the Hispanic community, offering an annual retreat which has sometimes had as many as 130 Hispanic participants in a year. From those retreat experiences, small groups have been established for Latino(a) gays, lesbians, and those who are transgendered.

In the Archdiocese of Chicago, AGLO was created by Joseph Cardinal Bernadin following a disassociation from the local chapter of Dignity by the Archdiocese because of a perceived conflict with official Church teaching regarding homosexuality. Ministry leaders estimate that about 90 percent of those attending Dignity transferred over to AGLO, with the remaining 10 percent staying in Dignity. AGLO is located in the Office of Special Ministries, which is under the direction of an Archdiocesan Auxiliary Bishop. It is made up of a Board of Directors and reports to a Pastoral Moderator appointed by the Cardinal. Its leaders are volunteers. AGLO offers faith sharing groups, opportunities for participating in the Sacrament of

Reconciliation, days of reflection throughout the year, information for priests and parishes, and priests who offer spiritual direction and/or counseling and who visit the ill and homebound.

These diocesan ministries both have an active communal life that centers around a weekly liturgy. The liturgies each take place at a single parish church. However, there are numerous celebrants from around the diocese who preside on a rotating basis. In addition to fostering community, these liturgies create a “safe” environment for gay and lesbian Catholics who have not been regular Mass attenders to return to participation in Church life. For some, the community becomes their spiritual home and they stay to welcome other newcomers. Others find a celebrant with whom they feel comfortable and then become parishioners at his regular parish.

### ST. BERNADETTE PARISH

The experience of St. Bernadette provides insight into establishing a successful ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics in a territorial parish without an especially large or visible gay and lesbian population. Located in Severn, Maryland, about half way between Baltimore and Annapolis, St. Bernadette is a mostly white suburban parish with about 1,200 registered households. Because of its location, a gay and lesbian-themed newspaper from Washington, DC remarked that it hardly seemed a likely location for a thriving ministry with gay and lesbian parishioners when the

TABLE 4: PARISH RESPONDENT RATINGS OF THE PROGRAMS AND SERVICES OFFERED BY THEIR PARISHES

Percentage who rate each as “Excellent”	
Days of recollection for gays and lesbians	70%
Social services	56
Support group for lesbians	46
Gay and lesbian support group (English)	45
Referrals to counselors, spiritual directors, or confessors	39
Support group for gay men	36
Support group for parents of gays and lesbians	32
Outreach to gay and lesbian people in the community	29
Support group for friends and families of gays and lesbians	27
Support group for gay and lesbian parents and children	20

**TABLE 5: PARISH RESPONDENTS' VIEWS OF MINISTRY WITH GAY AND LESBIAN CATHOLICS IN THEIR PARISHES**

	Agree "Somewhat" or "Strongly"	Agree "Strongly" Only
Parishioners who are not gay or lesbian feel welcomed in this parish	100%	92%
Gay and lesbian Catholics feel welcomed in the parish	92	59
Our parish's gay and lesbian ministry is sensitive to diverse ethnic cultures	91	41
Gay and lesbian parishioners have leadership roles in the parish	90	58
Our parish does a good job in ministering to gay and lesbian people	84	31
Our parish does a good job ministering to the families of gay and lesbian people	84	22
The diocese supports the parish's ministry to gay and lesbian people and their families	59	29
The parish does not dedicate enough of its financial resources to gay and lesbian ministry	42	19
The parish does not dedicate enough of its personnel resources to gay and lesbian ministry	34	14

ministry was initiated in 1997. The impetus for the ministry was a series of separate inquiries from parishioners asking about programs available for gay and lesbian Catholics or their family members. St. Bernadette has long had an active and visible social justice ministry, and leaders of this ministry decided a formal ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics was needed.

Despite the inquiries prompting this decision, the leaders found that they needed to practice a great deal of patience before gay and lesbian parishioners actively participated. Pastoral Associate Ann McDonald, one of those involved in the initiation of the ministry, remembers: "We kept publicizing the ministry and it had been going on for a while, and we kept asking 'Are we crazy? Why don't we have any gay or lesbian participants? Why won't they get involved?'" McDonald and other leaders kept the faith. Eventually, a lesbian parishioner came to a meeting, and it marked a turning point. "We started to have gay and lesbian folks talk to

us, dialogue began, and we had the chance to ask, 'Now, is this what we need to be doing? What is it that you need?'"

Today, the ministry has a number of specific programs. The most central one is "Reclaim," a seven-week program structured in a support group format. The purpose of the program is to enable participants to explore and affirm what it means to be both Catholic and gay or lesbian. Approximately 180 people have taken part since it began. A group called "Beginnings" for parents of lesbian and gay people has taken various forms as needed: structured support, mentoring, and pastoral counseling. Beginnings has recently expanded its focus to include other family members and friends of gay and lesbian people. Other programs include a support group for gay and lesbian parents and their children and "Teen Haven," a program in which adults provide one-on-one mentoring to high school age youth struggling with issues of sexual identity.

Ministry leaders have worked hard to increase awareness of gay and lesbian issues among the parish community as whole. One way has been the annual celebration of Solidarity Sunday on the first weekend of October. Beginning in 1998, GLM members have passed out rainbow ribbons and prayer cards before and after each weekend Mass. Announcements are made on preceding weekends, reminding the community that Solidarity Sunday is a time to pray for an end to violence and discrimination, especially against those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Over the years, more and more parishioners have chosen to wear the rainbow ribbon. Some liturgical ministers wear the rainbow ribbon year-round at Mass to show support for those who have suffered discrimination.

## "Always Our Children" as a Ministry Guide and Resource

A common theme arising from the interviews is that the leaders draw on the Bishops' statement "Always Our Children" in many different ways for their ministry. The document allows leaders to reach out to gay and lesbian Catholics who feel frustrated with their Church and provide them with affirmation while adhering to Church teaching on homosexuality. Leaders also use the document as a tool in raising awareness among Catholics who are not

familiar with gay and lesbian issues. The leaders find that it helps promote dignity of, compassion toward, and unity with gay and lesbian Catholics. Finally, “Always Our Children,” which is addressed to Catholic parents of gay and lesbian children, provides a theological basis for building family relationships. Terrie Iacino, a leader of the San Jose ministry says:

*“Always Our Children” has generated the most positive response of any document [on this issue] that has come out from the United States Church administration. Even those people who find it hard to accept or believe the Church teaching about homosexuality are more inclined to listen to the message of “Always Our Children.” This document also gave a new enthusiasm to the people in the ministry because they have always known that family is one of the critical pieces. No one is in isolation. They are in a relationship somehow, in a family system . . . and we have known the fact that people in their lives also need ministry. And that has made [ministry] plausible in some places where we probably didn’t have as much inroad as we do now.*

## Advice from Leaders

In addition to the topics discussed above, these diocesan and parish leaders offer advice for others initiating or leading leading ministry with gay and lesbian Catholics and their loved ones. Mark Avery of AGLO offers the following suggestions:

*Listen! Listen! Listen! Honest and open dialogue is vitally important when forming a ministry such as this. The ability to adjust the ministry to serve the spiritual needs of different people is also extremely important. People enter the process with very different expectations. Stressing the pastoral nature of the ministry is important. I would suggest using “Always Our Children” as a working educational component of the ministry. Lastly, I would encourage you to keep in mind that a ministry for*

FOR ADDITIONAL COPIES OF THIS SPECIAL REPORT CONTACT



### NACDLGM

1647 Willow Pass Road #421, Concord, CA 94520  
Phone: 925-680-8139 • E-mail: [office@nacdlgm.org](mailto:office@nacdlgm.org)  
Website: [www.nacdlgm.org](http://www.nacdlgm.org)

NACDLGM MISSION STATEMENT: Inspired by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and grounded in the Catholic moral and social justice tradition, the National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries, as a resource and network, encourages pastoral care with lesbian and gay persons and their families. We urge those in ministry to: reflect on Sacred Scripture, reflect on Church teaching and pastoral practice, study the social and physical sciences, and listen to and ponder the lived experience on lesbian and gay persons and their families. This ministry respects the human dignity and human rights of lesbian and gay persons, and affirms that all who are baptized are called to full participation in the life, worship and mission of the church.

*gay and lesbian Catholics has a very different look than a ministry for family members and friends of lesbians and gays. It is, in my opinion, critically important that the two not be lumped into one.*

Ann McDonald of St. Bernadette Parish offers the following summary of the lessons she has gleaned from involvement in this ministry:

*I think that you have to educate, educate, educate within the parish. I don’t think that ever stops. You have to publicize. Stay positive. You cannot be afraid. . . just act on your convictions and do what the Gospel calls you to do. People ask, ‘How do you get away with this?’ I don’t think we are getting away with anything. . . . We are living the Gospel message, and we are clear about that. This is not about twisting teaching. It is about being consistent with the Gospel message.*



### CENTER FOR APPLIED RESEARCH IN THE APOSTOLATE GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

CARA was founded by Catholic leaders in 1964 to put social science research tools at the service of the Catholic Church in the United States. For information on CARA and its mission of research, analysis, and planning, contact: CARA at 2300 Wisconsin Avenue, NW, Suite 400, Washington, D.C. 20007 • Phone: 202-687-8080 • Fax: 202-687-8083 • [CARA@georgetown.edu](mailto:CARA@georgetown.edu) • <http://cara.georgetown.edu>

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