

# How the Church is reaching out to LGBT Catholics

The mission statement of Affirmed reads like that of any other parish ministry.

The group at St. Clement Church in Chicago seeks to “cultivate a space” for fellowship and support where every person is welcomed, affirmed as being made in God’s image, called to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ and invited to share their gifts with the broader parish community.

What makes Affirmed different from most typical parish groups is that St. Clement parishioners formed the ministry in 2019 to welcome Catholics and others who identify as homosexual, same-sex-attracted, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer.

*Related reading: [The sensitive nature of pastoral outreach to those with same-sex attractions](#)*

“Broadly speaking, our members need a place where they feel safe to be open about their spirituality, a place where people will meet them where they are, because people have different levels of comfort with being part of the Church and also identifying as LGBTQ,” said Katherine Abel, a St. Clement Church parishioner who helps lead the Affirmed ministry.

“What we set out to do was create a space for the LGBT community, and we feel like we’re being successful in that,” Abel told Our Sunday Visitor.



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Affirmed's style of spiritual accompaniment for people who identify as LGBTQ appears to be increasingly common in Catholic parishes around the country. Instead of hosting groups like Courage, which focus on helping same sex-attracted Catholics cultivate chastity and live by Church teachings on sexual ethics, a growing number of parishes are offering ministries that encourage LGBTQ Catholics and allies to openly discuss the complicated intersections of faith, sexual orientation and gender identity with the understanding that nobody in those communities has to commit to the Church's moral teachings, or even agree with them, to participate and be welcomed.

"The primary aim of this ministry is to give them a space where they can talk about how they are trying to grow in their spirituality and not have to be afraid, where if they open up that they are gay in another setting, like a Bible study, that it is suddenly going to shut down productive conversation," said Michael Bayer, a former St. Clement's parishioner who helped found Affirmed.

Bayer said he and other parish leaders at St. Clement's wanted to create "a space of welcome" for gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

Said Bayer, "But also we wanted to ask, 'what would an LGBTQ ministry look like if it took as its starting point, in the

hierarchy of truths, that first and foremost, every single person is made in the image of God and that Jesus desires a personal relationship with each person?'"

*Note: We deliberately chose to use the term LGBTQ to refer to people who are same-sex attracted or experiencing gender discordance for simplicity and for the sake of clear communication within the story.*

## **Different experiences**

Some parishes have had similar ministries for decades. At the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, D.C., Always God's Children – a ministry for gay, lesbian and bisexual persons and their families – has been meeting since 1997.



Tushnet

"It's really about welcoming people and making sure that there's a place in the Church that's safe for them, wherever they're coming from," said Eve Tushnet, an author and practicing Catholic who identifies as a lesbian and serves as a co-director of Always God's Children.

Tushnet told Our Sunday Visitor that ministries like Always God's Children work well when someone who identifies as LGBTQ can walk into a faith setting and not be made to feel like they are a Trojan Horse or a problem that needs to be managed in the Church.

“I think people who haven’t experienced it often underestimate how rare it is for gay people to be welcomed unconditionally in the Church,” Tushnet said. “There is often a worry in the Church with anything to do with gay people, and that the important thing to do with them is to talk about sex and sexual ethics.

“That can be very dehumanizing,” Tushnet added. “It can make people feel like they’re being defined by their sexuality when they have a lot of spiritual needs.”



Father  
Bochanski

Father Philip Bochanski, the executive director of [Courage International](#), the apostolate for same-sex attracted Catholics who want to live by the Church’s teachings on chastity, told Our Sunday Visitor that he agrees that Catholics need to be conscious of and sensitive to people attracted to individuals of the same sex or who are confused about their gender identity as they seek guidance and support.

“It’s clear that there are people in the Church, including clergy, who are not good at talking about these issues, or have not provided a welcome to people who have come asking for the Church’s support, and who maybe are afraid to enter into those conversations. Clearly, people often speak of feeling unwelcome or misunderstood or being spoken to harshly,” Father Bochanski said.

“I think we have to distinguish that from people who feel unwelcome because they assume the Church’s teaching is harmful or comes from a place of bigotry or hatred, or is just wrong, and who feel unwelcome because they want the Church to teach the opposite of what it teaches,” Father Bochanski added. “That may be more the experience of a person’s discomfort with the teachings rather than anything that a member of the clergy or the Church has done to that person.”

## **Finding the balance**

In recent years, some Church leaders, especially Pope Francis, have tried to engage the LGBTQ community in a sensitive manner that expresses the unconditional love of Christ and an understanding of past injustices against people who identify as homosexual while not denying the Church’s teachings on the truth of the human person, sexuality and chastity.

How best to provide that pastoral support has been a flashpoint in the Church’s ideological battles, perhaps most notably in the controversies that surround Jesuit Father James Martin’s “bridge-building” ministry to the LGBTQ community.

“My experience has been that there are too many priests and bishops who are afraid to talk about this publicly,” said Stephen Yoder, a co-director of the Always God’s Children ministry.

Though he commended Father Martin’s stated intention to create a welcoming space for LGBTQ people, Yoder said he sympathizes with Catholics who criticize Father Martin for glossing over or ignoring the Church’s teachings that homosexual acts are sinful.

“It’s difficult pastorally to know exactly where to draw the line,” said Yoder, who identifies as gay and is a practicing Catholic who accepts the Church’s moral teachings. He reconciled his faith with his sexual orientation over time

through the guidance of faithful priests and friends who loved him unconditionally and accompanied him on his journey.

“A lot of people feel the Church is just hostile to them if they identify as LGBTQ in any respect, so they’re afraid to even approach the Church,” said Yoder, who was involved with the Courage apostolate for a while.

Yoder described his involvement with Courage and reading “Story of a Soul,” the spiritual autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, as important grace-filled chapters in his personal faith journey.

Tushnet said a ministry like Always God’s Children is not meant to be a chastity support group, and added that someone seeking help with living in accord with the Church’s moral teachings would be better served by having a relationship with another group and a spiritual director.

“When they’re working well, ministries of this kind can really be a place where people like you welcome you and don’t see you as a problem to be managed in the Church,” Tushnet said, “but as someone who is like everyone else, and who can be guided in a lot of areas in your life to be closer to Jesus and to trust him.”

Yoder said a ministry like Always God’s Children is intended to be a safe portal for people to re-engage with the Church. He wants the group to be a setting where people can “test the waters” and bring up thorny, sensitive subjects without being silenced or shunned.

“When you’re dealing with someone one on one in a group like ours, the first thing they need to hear is not necessarily, ‘Remember, the Church teaches this,’” Yoder said. “No matter where they are, our first approach has to be, ‘Hi, we want to hear from you. What’s on your mind? What are those things most burning in your heart?’

“There will be a place and a time later to bring up the Church’s teaching and to go into that,” Yoder added.

Groups like Always God’s Children and Affirmed don’t “police” anyone’s language, so members can choose to say if they’re gay or have same-sex attraction. The ministries are open to Catholics and Christians of all denominations, age groups, races and ethnic backgrounds.

“We just wanted everyone to be committed to engage in respectful dialogue,” Yoder said. “The idea being that we’re all going to try to follow Jesus together, even if we don’t see eye-to-eye on all the details.”

Tushnet, who wrote about her spiritual journey in her 2014 book, “Gay and Catholic: Accepting my Sexuality, Finding Community, Living My Faith” (Ave Maria Press, \$15.95), said a ministry like Always God’s Children could have helped her as a young adult to ask better questions about the Catholic faith, about how to give and receive love, and to learn from the experiences of other Catholics who identify as LGBTQ.

“Too often, we approach gay people kind of backwards, where we want them to buy into the morality first,” Tushnet said. “But that’s not really the way that conversion happens.”

## **Diocesan initiatives**

While local pastors and parish lay staff for years have hosted LGBTQ ministries, some Church leaders in the United States in recent years have sought to engage the LGBTQ community at the diocesan level.

The Dioceses of Cleveland and Lexington, Kentucky, and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles are among those with official LGBTQ ministries. In recent years, the Archdiocese of Atlanta invited Fortunate and Faithful Families, a ministry for LGBTQ individuals and their families, to have an annual retreat in the chancery. Archbishop Wilton D. Gregory, when he was the

archbishop of Atlanta, celebrated Mass for the group. Last November, current Atlanta Archbishop Gregory Hartmayer attended Fortunate and Faithful Families' monthly virtual evening prayer service and delivered a message of inclusion, according to the group's website.

The Archdiocesan Gay and Lesbian Outreach in Chicago, a lay-lead initiative, enjoys a quasi-official status with the Archdiocese of Chicago. AGLO began in 1988 as a joint initiative between Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and Chicago's LGBT community leaders to provide an outreach ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics in the archdiocese.

"We're just about inclusion. We do our best to include everyone. It's a safe place for gay and lesbian and trans (Catholics) to come and worship," said Brian Smith, co-director of AGLO Chicago, which organizes a weekly 7 p.m. Sunday Mass for LGBTQ Catholics at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church in Chicago's East Lakeview neighborhood.

Our Lady of Mount Carmel's pastor, Father Patrick J. Lee, is the archdiocesan liaison to AGLO. Other archdiocesan priests and local religious order clergy serve as chaplains and preside at the ministry's liturgies.

"The archdiocese has approved us having a gay and lesbian Mass," Smith said. "It's an outreach program for them, but in a way for us, it's also a way to build hope and a space for the gay, lesbian, transgender and (bisexual) community."

The late cardinals Bernardin and Francis George celebrated Mass for AGLO, according to the group's website. In June 2016, Cardinal Blase Cupich, the current archbishop of Chicago, wrote a letter to the group to express his support for the local LGBTQ community after a gunman killed 49 people and wounded 53 others in an Orlando gay nightclub.

"It's very healing for me to be a part of this group," said Smith, who is gay and was looking for a spiritual refuge in



1991 when he first attended AGLO's liturgy. "I knew I was home, so to speak, and I've been coming ever since," Smith told Our Sunday Visitor.

In addition to the weekly Mass and social events, AGLO's leaders have organized monthly Holy Hours. During Lent, members pray the Stations of the Cross before Sunday Mass. AGLO also has a young adult group that meets regularly for faith-sharing, social outings and service projects such as an AIDS Walk/Run.

"We don't do anything differently from any other Catholic parish," said Joppan Joseph, an AGLO co-director who found the community through an online search in 2006. Joseph told Our Sunday Visitor that having a reverent liturgy is what kept him coming back to AGLO.

"Having Mass in a traditional, beautiful space makes the group unique," said Joseph, who grew up in a Catholic family in India. When he moved to the United States as a young adult, Joseph said he struggled to reconcile his faith with his understanding of himself as a gay man.

"Yet at the same time, I didn't want to leave the Church. That's where AGLO came into my life," said Joseph, who remembered walking into the group's Mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church for the first time and seeing hundreds of people worshipping and singing together.

Said Joseph, "I thought there's no way God can throw all these people into hell just because of their orientation."

## **What the Church teaches**

The Catholic Church's moral teachings do not say that people who are attracted to members of the same sex, or are confused about their gender identity, will be damned. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says people with "deep-seated homosexual tendencies" should be "accepted with respect, compassion, and

sensitivity,” and that unjust discrimination against them should be avoided (No. 2358).



Worshippers pray during an annual “Pre-Pride Festive Mass” at St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York City June 29, 2019. The liturgy, hosted by the parish’s LGBT outreach ministry, is traditionally celebrated on the eve of the city’s Pride March. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz

At the same time, the Catechism makes it clear that the Church, drawing on sacred Scripture and Tradition, has always taught that homosexual acts are “acts of grave depravity,” “intrinsically disordered” and sins that are “gravely contrary to chastity” and “contrary to the natural law” (No. 2357).

Again in Paragraph 2358, the Catechism describes the homosexual inclination as “objectively disordered.” It says same-sex acts “close the sexual act to the gift of life” and “do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity,” concluding that “under no circumstances can they be approved,” referring to same-sex acts (No. 2357).

In March, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith responded to queries from Church leaders about the

possibility of blessing same-sex unions with a firm no, declaring that God “does not and cannot bless sin.” Blessing a same-sex couple’s union, [the CDF said](#), would “approve and encourage a choice and a way of life that cannot be recognized as objectively ordered to the revealed plans of God.”

But over the last four decades, modern society in general has become more aware and supportive of the LGBTQ community. Church leaders recognized the pastoral impacts of that societal shift as far back as 1986, when the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued its document, “On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons.” Written by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, who was then the prefect of the CDF, the document said homosexuality was a “proper focus for the Church’s pastoral care” given the complexity of the phenomenon and its “many consequences for society and ecclesial life.”

Providing pastoral ministry to gay people, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, required of her ministers “attentive study, active concern and honest, theologically well-balanced counsel.” He asked bishops to develop “appropriate forms” of pastoral care for homosexual persons and to assist them at all levels of the spiritual life.

“In such a way, the entire Christian community can come to recognize its own call to assist its brothers and sisters, without deluding them or isolating them,” wrote the-then cardinal, who added that departing from or being silent about Church teachings on sexual morality would neither be caring nor pastoral.

“Only what is true can ultimately be pastoral,” Cardinal Ratzinger wrote. “The neglect of the Church’s position prevents homosexual men and women from receiving the care they need and deserve.”

Father Bochanski, of Courage, said the CDF’s 1986 document

makes “really very clear” the Church’s intent of pastoral care for homosexual persons.

“It doesn’t mean you have to make T-shirts or posters with the Sixth Commandment on them and beat people over the head with it,” he said. “But it does mean that the goal of getting together has to be, for all of us, to respond to the call that comes from God through the Gospel, through the Church, to live chaste lives.”

In terms of what an authentic Christian welcome would look like for LGBTQ or same-sex attracted people, Father Bochanski drew on the Bread of Life Discourse from the Gospel of John, where Christ says he will not reject anyone who the Father sends to him, that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father, and that the prophets wrote they shall all be taught by God.

“The welcome is absolute; Please come in. You’re welcome. You will not be rejected,” Father Bochanski said. “It also has a purpose; Come close, because we have something to talk about. That welcome means welcoming people in, meeting them where they are and then sharing God’s word with them, sharing the expectations that the Church has with them.

“I would just be concerned about giving a welcome without saying, ‘Here’s where we’re walking together to,’” Father Bochanski added. “That is only doing half of what the Lord is asking us to do.”

## **‘Leading with love’**

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops tried to strike that delicate balance in its 1997 pastoral letter “Always Our Children,” where the bishops wrote that “homogenital behavior is objectively immoral” while emphasizing that “all homosexual persons have a right to be welcomed into the [Christian] community, to hear the word of God, and to receive pastoral

care.”

“Nothing in the Bible or in Catholic teaching can be used to justify prejudicial or discriminatory attitudes and behaviors,” said the bishops, who called on Christians to “confront their own fears about homosexuality and to curb the humor and discrimination that offend homosexual persons.”



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Noting then that some homosexual people wanted to be known publicly as gay or lesbian, the bishops urged parents to be sensitive about how their same-sex-attracted children used those terms and to not let language become a barrier to building trust and honest communication.

“These terms often express a person’s level of self-awareness and self-acceptance within society,” wrote the bishops, who also urged the Catholic faithful to recall “one basic truth.” Wrote the bishops: “God loves every person as a unique individual. Sexual identity helps to define the unique persons we are, and one component of our sexual identity is sexual orientation. Thus, our total personhood is more encompassing than sexual orientation. Human beings see the appearance, but the Lord looks into the heart.”

Almost two decades before Father James Martin drew protests for his LGBTQ ministry, the 1997 pastoral letter generated its

own share of controversy. Critics at the time argued that the document muddled the Church's traditional teaching on homosexuality and offered spiritually dangerous advice to parents of same-sex-attracted young people.

In response to "Always God's Children," nearly two-dozen leading Catholic laymen and laywomen in the United States signed an appeal to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in which they argued, "In sum, what these times call for is a ringing reaffirmation of the teachings of Jesus and St. Paul, and an emphatic rejection of the pernicious notion that homosexual inclinations should be 'accepted.'"

To many who work with LGBTQ people today, the arguments from 1997 have a similar feel to the criticisms they still hear now – namely, that Catholics who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered have to always be told that there is something wrong with them.

"When we bring heterosexual people together, we don't always remind them of the Church's teachings on fornication, and we don't wonder if we're watering down those teachings if we don't say it every time we gather," said Bayer, the co-founder of St. Clement Church's Affirmed ministry.

"Yet for some reason, many parishes and ministries think they need to put the teaching front and center when it comes to LGBT persons," said Bayer, who suggests that Christ's saving message is usually not what is first proclaimed to Catholics who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered.

"What they hear is, 'There's something wrong with you' or, 'You're sinful,'" Bayer said. "No, the starting point has to be, 'You're welcome here.'"

Abel, the Affirmed ministry leader, also said she sees a "double standard" in how Catholics perceive ministry to LGBTQ persons and the Church's outreach efforts for people who are divorced, imprisoned or struggling with substance abuse.

“We never tell those people, ‘You know exactly how we feel about this, right?’” Abel said. “That’s never the approach that’s taken. Instead, it’s always an approach of compassion, understanding and meeting people where they are.”

Abel, who is active in St. Clement’s young adult community, said she and other parishioners approached their pastor a couple of years ago after noticing that some young adults were inquiring about a parish LGBTQ ministry that had lapsed years earlier. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, anywhere from 30 to 40 people, ranging from their early 20s to late 70s, were attending Affirmed’s monthly gatherings from all over the archdiocese. One person drove from Indiana.

Abel said she understands that some of her fellow Catholics have concerns about her ministry, but she believes they want the same things as her, Bayer and the LGBTQ persons who gather every month virtually or in-person at St. Clement’s parish center.

“In the end, I think we all want to bring people closer to God,” Abel said. “We want to have a thriving community where people are spiritually fulfilled. We may have very different ways of approaching ministry, and there will be disagreements, but our biggest concern has to be leading with love in everything we do and having the best hopes and intentions for the people in this ministry.”

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