News

Archbishop Jerome Listecki of Milwaukee speaks during a Nov. 16, 2021, session of the fall ge

Archbishop Jerome Listecki of Milwaukee speaks during a Nov. 16, 2021, session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (OSV News/CNS file, Bob Roller)



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After Jean's oldest grandchild turned 17, she learned from her daughter during a family gathering at their lake house that he had planned to come out as transgender, but was struggling with how to tell his family. Taking a moment to speak with him privately, she let him know she understood, and he finally shared his truth: He was a boy and had always felt that way.

When she asked if he was sure it wasn't a phase, he responded, "No, Grandma, I would not choose to be this way." Jean, who did not want to share her last name with National Catholic Reporter, then gathered the family so he could share his revelation. That day, his family embraced him without hesitation. Being a lifelong practicing Catholic, Jean told NCR that although she was happy with how her family had embraced her grandson's gender identity, she had felt the need to find a space

in the church where she could tell her story, vent and feel heard and understood.

She joined the Gay and Straight in Christ, or GASIC, ministry at St. Mary Parish in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, in the fall of 2022, seeking guidance on how to support her transgender grandson. She said the group provided her with a safe space to explore her faith while affirming her grandson's identity.

Initially hesitant to attend, Jean recalled her first meeting as unexpectedly welcoming. No one pressured her to share her story; instead, she observed the warmth of the group until she felt ready to speak. "I just started blurting out my struggles," she said, explaining that Gay and Straight in Christ offered a judgment-free environment where members could share or listen as they wished.



Franciscan friars of St. Francis of Assisi Church in New York City and members of the parish's LGBT+ ministry gather at a reception on June 26, 2021. In 2022, Catholic grandmother Jean joined the Gay and Straight in Christ ministry at St. Mary Parish in Hales Corners, Wisconsin, seeking guidance for supporting her transgender grandson. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

But in January 2024, according to the sources interviewed by NCR, St. Mary's pastor Fr. Aaron Laskiewicz decided to shut down the Gay and Straight in Christ ministry and meetings, citing directives from the Milwaukee Archdiocese to uphold traditional teachings on marriage and sexuality. He said he would replace the group with a chapter of Courage International, a Catholic organization approved by the Vatican in 1994, which emphasizes that LGBTQ+ Catholic individuals should live in chastity and celibacy.

Courage, which bases its work on "pro-chastity" grounds and does not accept any form of same-sex active sexual and romantic relationships, has been criticized multiple times by both Catholic and secular LGBTQ+ organizations. The platform openDemocracy reported that Courage has been accused of promoting "conversion therapy" in other countries.

Laskiewicz, who became pastor at St. Mary's, just outside Milwaukee, a few months prior to closing GASIC, did not make the decision public in the parish bulletin, nor did he directly notify any of the group's members, who were shocked to learn about it directly from Deacon Bill Goulding, a longtime spiritual assistant of the group.

After 22 years as a deacon in the parish, Goulding decided to leave it "out of disappointment" by the decision to close the group, and was then assigned to another parish.

This October, after months of prayer and reflection, three Catholic grandmothers of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee (including Jean) wrote and sent a letter to Laskiewicz, Fr. Nathan Reesman, the Courage/EnCourage chaplain for the archdiocese and Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki. They shared their stories of being Catholic grandmothers of LGBTQ+ grandchildren or allies of LGBTQ+ people, they asked for inclusion and allyship based on their stories, and they requested that Gay and Straight in Christ be reintroduced at the parish.

Read full document:
Document
Oct. 10, 2024 letter, public version provided to NCR.pdf

About a month later, on Nov. 6, Reesman responded in a letter to the grandmothers that the archdiocese remained firm in its decision, noting that while the group may have had "helpful points or aspects," it was ultimately not in alignment with "the

fullness of Christian anthropology and Catholic teachings." To date (Dec. 4), the Gay and Straight in Christ ministry at St. Mary's remains closed, and the about 20 LGBTQ+ Catholic and allied members who used to meet monthly to spiritually support each other decided to leave the parish, some going to other parishes, others leaving the church at large.

When NCR reached out for comments from Laskiewicz, the pastor of St. Mary's, Reesman, the Courage chaplain, and Listecki, the archbishop of Milwaukee, Laskiewicz said through Reesman's email address that "as the pastor of the parish I have the responsibility to ensure that all of our ministries faithfully present the teachings of the Church. I am acting in this situation with the full knowledge and support of the Archdiocese."

Listecki did not personally respond to a request for comment, allowing Reesman to speak for the archdiocese. "Father Aaron has kept the Archdiocese informed throughout his entire decision-making process regarding the status of this group in his parish," the Courage chaplain said.

Reesman also added that the Milwaukee archbishop "has been clear that ministries to those who experience same sex attraction that faithfully present the Church's teachings are the only ones that will have his full support. Courage and EnCourage do present our teachings faithfully."

St Mary, Hales Corners, WI. 53130
Archdioceses of Milwaukee, PO Box 070912, Milwaukee, WI. 53207
October 10, 2024

Dear Fr. Aaron Laskiewicz, Fr. Nathan Reesman, and Archbishop Jerome Listecki,

We begin at a common table with four Catholic women united by our belief in Christ's unconditional love for all God's children. We are gay or allies to people considered sexual and gender minorities (i.e., people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning [LGBTQ+]). We write about our distress with Fr. Laskiewicz, pastor St. Mary Hales Corners, WI, who abruptly closed St Mary's Gay ministry (GASIC) and replaced it with a Courage ministry. St. Mary Hales Corners' Gay Ministry served people who were queer and their allies for over 13 years. The former GASIC Ministry welcomed, listened to, and accepted LGBTQ+ and allies wherever they were with their spiritual, gender, and sexual identities.

We are troubled with Fr. Laskiewicz's replacement ministry Courage, a 12-step program based on the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous. Step 1 of the 12 steps is based on the false assumption that people who are LGBTQ+ were created with a disordered identity. To fix their vice, the program calls on LGBTQ people to admit their powerlessness over how God created them and pray for healing. In fact, being LGBTQ does not require recovery; it is not a pathology, addiction, or mental illness. Second, Courage requires all LGBTQ people to live a celibate life. This is an inhumane demand on those who do not have the gift of celibacy or called to live a single life. Other ministries take a more positive approach by celebrating God's gift of sexuality among all people, gay or straight, and recognizing the good in healthy, same-sex relationships.

We are distressed. Three of our concerns are,

- the harm caused by closure of St. Mary Hales Corners Gay and Straight in Christ (GASIC) Ministry.
- our desire for all children to develop their full potential, regardless of their sexual and gender identities.
- our challenge to integrate our Catholic faith with the harmful and outdated statements of Church doctrine

Three Catholic grandmothers, including Jean, wrote and sent a letter to St. Mary Parish pastor Fr. Aaron Laskiewicz; Fr. Nathan Reesman, the Courage/EnCourage chaplain for the archdiocese; and Milwaukee Archbishop Jerome Listecki. Pictured here is the top of the first page. (NCR screengrab)

This November, Pope Francis accepted Listecki's resignation, submitted when he turned 75. Chicago Auxiliary Bishop Jeffrey Grob has been named as his successor.

One of the letter writers to Listecki and archdiocesan priests was Anita Kowalski, an 86-year-old woman who has worked for 35 years as a pastoral associate in four different Milwaukee parishes. She said her commitment to inclusivity took on new urgency when she discovered that three of her grandchildren identified as LGBTQ+. "They're my grandkids, whoever they are is who they are," she said to NCR.

"My faith experience comes from my uncle back in the '80s, because he's the one that I emulated. But when my mother refused to let his partner come to his funeral, I was appalled. I just knew it wasn't right. I don't want that for my grandkids," she

said.

"Homophobia stood out glaringly in the way my family treated my uncle, who was gay but never could be open about it, even with his family. It simply was not talked about. Here was a man who dedicated his life to helping others," she wrote in the letter. "College educated, he helped young people with their homework and coached basketball and baseball. It was from this man that I learned what it meant to be a Christian. He was a wonderful Christ-like example, yet not allowed to be who he really was."

Kowalski said she felt heartbroken when Laskiewicz and the archdiocese shut down Gay and Straight in Christ and redirected members to the Courage program. "I thought, how can you repent for who you are?" she said, recalling her dismay upon learning about Courage's core message.

> 'They're my grandkids, whoever they are is who they are.'
>
> —Anita Kowalski, 86
>
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For Julie Behrman, 61, St. Mary's in Milwaukee was more than just a church. It was a home where she and her wife, Tracy, were fully embraced. "I grew up Catholic, and St. Mary's felt like the place where I could bring all of myself to church," Behrman said to NCR.

A speech-language pathologist and active church musician, she had always been open about her identity. Her wife, who grew up Lutheran, was drawn to the welcoming atmosphere of St. Mary's and eventually converted to Catholicism. The couple felt fully accepted in the community and were involved in every aspect of parish life, especially in the music ministry.

When Behrman discovered Gay and Straight in Christ, it felt like a blessing. "'This is what I've been looking for,'" she recalled thinking that day. "Because of GASIC, I felt like I could bring all of me to the church. There weren't any walls or barriers up. And isn't that what we're supposed to be for each other? Ourselves," she said.

Losing Gay and Straight in Christ felt to her like a personal loss. She described the group as a "lifeline" that allowed her to live fully in her faith without hiding. She and

her wife eventually transferred their membership to another LGBTQ+ ministry in another parish, but the transition hasn't been easy, because of the shift from in-person to remote meetings.

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Larry White, a former member of the ministry at St. Mary's, didn't join the letter-writing group but he was also disappointed in the group's closure. His own journey to Gay and Straight in Christ wasn't typical. Growing up on a Michigan farm, his family only attended an Episcopalian church sporadically. Later, he found professional success in Florida as a designer, working with high-profile wealthy clients and living what he describes as a "high life."

Yet, as he grew older, Florida's humid climate and a dwindling social circle prompted him to move to Milwaukee, where he met new friends — "the only gay friends I have here" — who introduced him to Gay and Straight in Christ at St. Mary's. There, he found a support network that transcended religious labels — a place where both gay and straight members could talk openly and feel valued, he said.

The abrupt closure of Gay and Straight in Christ left White feeling "betrayed." In a Zoom interview with NCR, he recalled thinking about the disbelief in the room when Goulding announced that the group could no longer meet at St. Mary's. "It was our last meeting," he said. "The church just told us, 'You're out.' No explanation. Nothing." White personally wrote a letter to the archbishop of Milwaukee expressing his disappointment, but never received a response.

Rebekah Dubrosky, a co-author of the grandmothers' letter and a member of a LGBTQ+ ministry in another parish in Milwaukee that welcomed those who left St. Mary's, said to NCR she felt "angry and sad" when she heard about the pastor's decision.

"When I was converting to Catholicism, the sister who did the RCIA with me, told me: 'When you're baptized, you belong to the people of God, you are part of the church. The people are the church, and the church has a bunch of different people, backgrounds, but everybody gets to stay,' " she said. "No one can say you are not worthy enough to be here."

A version of this story appeared in the **Dec. 20, 2024-Jan. 16, 2025** print issue under the headline: Grandmothers protest closure of parish's LGBTQ+ ministry.