

'They are at the center of the church'

Thomas C. Fox | Sep. 1, 2009



Sister of Mercy Donna Ryan

Ministries

'I think the culture wars have been won,' says Mercy Sr. Donna Ryan. In the 13 years she has served as chaplain to a group of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Catholics, she has seen growing acceptance of this community by society at large. 'It is kind of like the church is becoming the last group in our culture to face this reality,' says Ryan. HOPE, the organization she serves in the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese, was recently asked to leave its meeting place in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, but the group carries on, she says, because its members 'care about the church and they care for one another.'

Ryan has worked in various ministries within the diocese, most recently as education resource coordinator at the cathedral. As the cofounder of the Center for Spirit at Work, she serves working people who wish to integrate spirituality, ethics and values in their work environments.

NCR recently spoke with Ryan about her work as chaplain to HOPE.

NCR: Tell me about your HOPE ministry.

Ryan: The diocese's ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics has been going on since the 1960s, with few tensions. At first the group was called Dignity and at one point it was told it couldn't use that name. So they simply began to call refer to themselves as 'gay and lesbian Catholics.' They met in different parishes. When I came to the diocese 13 years ago, I was asked to be the group's chaplain. We invited them to the cathedral. We thought the cathedral should be an umbrella for many different ministries. Soon after the group decided to call itself HOPE. We wanted a better symbol to represent ourselves. We designed a logo and picked a scripture reading from Romans about hope. At that time we worked very closely with the official diocesan structure. Former Bishop [Raymond] Boland was very supportive. We met regularly at the cathedral once a month and had speakers and retreats. After Bishop [Robert] Finn came we were asked to leave the cathedral. So now we meet at a local Jesuit parish.

Why were you asked to leave the cathedral?

I'm not really sure. I think Bishop Finn has a different vision of what a cathedral should be. Perhaps he prefers

that the cathedral be more doctrinally correct, whatever that means.

Did Bishop Finn feel you were not upholding certain church teachings?

At one point he met with me and encouraged me to have the group belong to a national [gay and lesbian] group called Courage. I think that group asks its members to be celibate and even to pray to change their sexual orientations. So members of our HOPE group gathered with the rector of the cathedral and we decided we would rewrite our mission statement and send it to Bishop Finn. We did, but we never got a response. So we stayed at the cathedral for two years. Just this year, however, we received a letter stating it would be better if we no longer met at the cathedral. So we left.

How large is the group?

We have about a hundred people on our list. When we meet every month we typically have 30 or 40 people at a gathering.

What are the ages?

It's the whole spectrum. We have college-age students, although most of the colleges now have their own support groups. Most in the group are in their 40s or 50s with a few older people too.

What has your ministry taught you?

Well, first of all it is very bittersweet that the group has a need to meet separate from the rest of the organized church. Yes, there are parishes that are very welcoming. However, I think many members of the group feel more comfortable just being together and talking about their own concerns. Our HOPE group's members are longing to be full members of the church. Sacramental-wise, this is very important to them. They are loyal to the church.

Why do they feel pushed to the fringe of the church?

Frequently members of the group hear something like "You are intrinsically evil." This is very offensive to them. As a minister I do wonder. I think the beauty of our Catholic tradition is that our sacramental life involves the blessing of the ordinary with rituals and with communal support. I think that anytime two people want to make a commitment to one another, and be faithful and fruitful, and to live generous lives of service, they should be able to. I yearn for a time when we can bless them and support them. In some ways, however, we already do. The beautiful thing about our church's sacramental life is that we have a book of blessings. One of the blessings is for the blending of families. I think there is also a blessing for friendships. Sometimes we have used these prayers to bless and support couples who want to make a commitment. These are very adult people. They are not dependent upon on any particular statements by our church for their identity. But because they love the church, some of its statements have been especially hurtful.

Do you find attitudes toward the gay and lesbian community changing?

I see a gradual acceptance of that segment of the population in our culture. In fact, I think the culture wars have been won. For example, most members of this wonderful community feel more comfortable now coming out. People realize their next door neighbor, or their dentist, or the people surrounding them are part of that community. Parents and grandparents now are proud of their daughters and sons, regardless of their sexual orientations. It is kind of like the church is becoming the last group in our culture to face this reality.

What does the HOPE group offer the wider community?

I am overwhelmed by their love and faithfulness to the church. We meet every month. I keep asking, "What other group of people would regularly spend a Sunday afternoon in a church basement?" They do it because they care about the church and they care for one another. I've found their witness very meaningful in my own life. In the end, they struggle with the same things that any couples do; to be faithful in their relationships.

How do you see yourself as a minister?

I am a chaplain and that simply means being there, together. Bishop Finn asked me once what I teach to the HOPE group. I responded that chaplains are not allowed to teach. The role of a chaplain is to be with, to support, to anoint, to offer words of comfort and to share spirituality. That really is my role. In the end, it's to be a listener.

As a listener, what are you hearing?

Frequently we will have people come who are struggling with wanting to come out to their families. I heard the pain of that. I hear the pain of people sometimes losing their jobs because of their orientation. I hear the pain of that. Then there's the inner pain of shame that often our members are struggling with, a pain that somehow has developed in their lives.

What do you mean by that?

They receive messages from society and the church that somehow they are not normal. When you feel that year after year after year, it is often difficult to break free. So as a chaplain I deal with that. Often we have parents who come to the group. Their child is someplace else in the country and they're struggling to accept this piece of their family's life. I am so proud that we have this group for parents and children and brothers and sisters to come together. We have these conversations of acceptance.

How has your ministry changed you?

I have learned the power of accepting who you are. I have learned the strength of living with joy -- even though you might have been pushed to the edge of society. I have been overwhelmed by the witness of the HOPE community, their faith in the church, their love of worship, and love of service.

And the lesson you'd like to share?

I have learned to respect and honor groups that somehow get pushed to the edge of the earth. Here's the insight. I've learned that because of their faithfulness, their prayer life and their witness that they are at the center of the church, not the edge of the church. Sometimes I think it's the institutional church is more on the edge. Groups like HOPE are at the center.

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