

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 10, 2011 at 11:56am

Conference works to address LGBT issues in Catholic schools

by Alice Popovici



Jenny Betz, education manager for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), leads a discussion workshop Oct. 1 during a Union Theological Seminary conference designed to address LGBT issues in Catholic high schools. (Alice Popovici)

NEW YORK ? The invitations went out weeks ago to 45 parochial high schools in New York, inviting administrators, teachers and students to Union Theological Seminary, where, together with theologians, writers, activists and other attendees, they might have mapped out the challenges LGBT students face in Catholic schools, looked at alternatives and tried to find solutions.

The "Pro-Queer Life: Youth Suicide Crisis, Catholic Education, and the Souls of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) People," held Oct. 1, was the second of the "More Than a Monologue" series of four talks meant to broaden the conversation on LGBT issues within the Catholic church.

One of the goals of the conference was to have a frank discussion about teen suicide.

But by the afternoon of the conference, Kelby Harrison, head of the organizing committee, told about 150 people gathered in the seminary's upstairs dining hall that neither the administrators of the Catholic schools that were invited nor any students, the subjects of the daylong conversation, would be attending.

Harrison, a post-doctoral fellow in social ethics at the seminary, said she had hoped to have "not just an abstract conversation, but maybe make some practical changes."

She rearranged the afternoon workshops with GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) and activist and filmmaker Brendan Fay to provide a forum for discussion and problem-solving for students and administrators.

Approximately 30 people attended the workshop with GLSEN, including college students, members of Dignity (a nationwide organization of LGBT Catholics) and educators, and spent the afternoon talking about their personal experiences with bullying, learning the nationwide statistics and making new contacts.



A couple of people who work in Catholic schools did attend the conference ? and organizers said their schools had been among the ones invited to the event ? but at the afternoon training session with GLSEN, they did not want to speak on the record because of the controversial nature of the topic being discussed.

One woman, who would identify herself only as someone who works in Catholic education in New York City, said she came on her own and not to represent her job, adding that in her experience, Catholic school administrators are not comfortable even organizing a training session such as the one she was attending.

Jenny Betz, an education manager at GLSEN who travels across the country delivering presentations and leading training on bullying and LGBT issues, started the presentation by asking the group to find a discussion partner for a couple of exercises.

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"We're going to talk a little bit about messages and messages we receive when we're young," including messages from friends and family, church, media and the government, Betz told the group.

"I want you to think of your earliest messages that you received ? and they could have been positive, negative or neutral ? about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people," she said. She then asked the group to talk about the biggest challenges for addressing LGBT issues or supporting LGBT people.

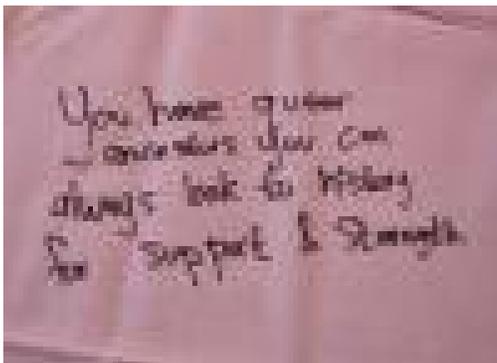
When it was time to share the experiences as a group, some people mentioned feeling isolated growing up, or sensing an uncomfortable silence surrounding the issue of their sexual orientation. Others said their families were accepting and supportive.

Betz went on to talk about statistics, anti-bullying campaigns and about how the expression "that's so gay," which gives the word "gay" a negative connotation, can be damaging even as a passing comment. She also spoke about the challenges of training school administrators at the elementary, middle school and high school levels, as each group seems to think fixing the problem of bullying is "someone else's job."

According to GLSEN's "2009 National School Climate Survey" Betz shared with the group, almost nine out of 10 LGBT students reported having been harassed at school in the last year, based on responses from more than 7,000 young adults from every part of the country.

The survey reports that in the past year, 84.6 percent of LGBT students polled said they were verbally harassed, 40.1 percent said they were physically harassed and 18.8 percent said they were physically assaulted at school because of their sexual orientation. The survey says 3.8 percent of students polled attended religious schools; the majority of those schools were Catholic, according to Betz.

When conference attendees reconvened in the dining hall, organizers encouraged them to step up on the podium and write messages for the absent high school students on a white cloth draped over a dining room table.



"Gay is a gift of God!" read one message, while another said:

"Jesus is moving in and for you in exactly the places of yourself that others reject or shame." Another message read, "Look at history to understand sometimes people, e.g. homophobes, have got it all wrong." And another, punctuated with a smiley face: "When considering the voice of the 'church,' do not forget to listen to the most important one: the voice of the Christ within. (You'll know him by his whisper!)"

After writing his own message of encouragement, Allen Rose, the president of Dignity in Washington, D.C., said the issues brought up in the morning panel discussion need more exploration, especially the connection between gay bullying and some of the Catholic teachings.

"It would have been good if there could have been some students from Catholic schools," Rose added. "They're on both sides of this issue ? they're the ones who are being bullied and they're the ones doing the bullying."

Harrison said she did receive letters from Catholic school representatives expressing regret they could not attend, and said she wanted to give people the benefit of the doubt.

"Maybe people had other things to do," she said. "Some people wanted to be here but didn't want to get themselves in trouble."

"Part of me is not surprised, and part of me is sad," she added.

As for the tablecloth filled with words of advice and encouragement, Harrison said the organizing committee was considering different options, but wasn't yet sure how to get the messages out to area teens.

For more information, go to www.morethanamonologue.org.

More

- Coverage from the first "More Than a Monologue" conference.

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