

# A HISTORY OF DIGNITY/HOUSTON 1974-1982



## Beginnings:

Because whatever archives which may have existed are no longer available to us, the early times prior to chartering are rather sketchy. In 1972/73, a group of gays started meeting after the 11:00 Mass each Sunday at Holy Rosary Church. They settled on the name, "Dignity", but were later obliged to cease using the name as they were not a part of National Dignity which had started up in California about that time. The group then adopted Integrity/Houston as their name. This group, not affiliated with Episcopal/Integrity, is still in existence at this time and is now known as Interact/Houston, Inc. From within this group, a segment, not wanting to be strictly a political caucus, then petitioned National Dignity to become an active Houston Chapter of Dignity.

## 1974:

The first meeting of the Chapter was held **June 6, 1974**, with **Dennis Powers** as President, (the term of office was 6 months in those days), and **Fr. Mark Barron, O.P.**, as Chaplain. The June-July issue of the Dignity National Newsletter (Vol. V, No. 6-7) listed Dignity/Houston as a chapter-information, but by the August issue (Vol. V, No. 8) we were shown as an active chapter, numbered among the 21 then existing and the 5 in formation. The first Dignity/Houston Newsletter was published in November of that year with **Fr. Alcuin Greenburg** as Editor. On **December 19, 1974** elections were held and we acquired our first woman President, **Kera** by name. meetings were then being held at St. Anne's every other Thursday, 8:00 PM to 9:30 PM, with **Fr. John Robbins, CSB.**, as sponsor of the meeting site. **Fr. Mark Barron** had resigned as Chaplain due to health reasons, however we were blessed with having three priests to handle the counseling.

## 1975:

**Mike Nelson** assumed the duties of Treasurer in February and in March, the first retreat was held, with a great deal of success. Dignity was beginning to attract new people and the average attendance at the meetings was 24. In April, the first 'covered dish' social was held at **Mary Helen Pritchett's**, a good friend of **Bobby Mayhugh** and **Jon Bancroft**. The next month **Bob Heer** hosted another having joined the community in April. May brought elections and **Art Martin** became President and **Sterling Miller** took over the duties of Secretary and Editor of the Newsletter. In June, **Bobby Mayhugh** took over **Sterling's** duties since **Sterling** was

moving to Washington, D.C. In July, we held our first 'barefoot in the park' picnic in Memorial Park. That month also saw us trying out our first advertising in **TWT** which helped familiarize the gay community with our existence and meeting place. In August, **Frank Silver**, a newly ordained Deacon at St. Anne's, was named liaison between Dignity and the parish. Later that month **Art Martin** and **Don Kelly** of Beaumont attended the Second Biennial Convention of Dignity/National in Boston. **Fr. Robbins**, then was transferred to Rochester, N.Y. and the Chaplain duties were assumed by **Fr. Jim Gould, SJ**. On **November 16, 1975**, Dignity/Houston joined with all other chapters, nationwide, to celebrate the National Day of Reconciliation being observed during the meeting of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Mass that Sunday afternoon was concelebrated by **Fr. Jim Gould** and **Fr. Mike Corrigan**. Guests included members of MCCR and Episcopal Integrity. (An invitation was extended to the Chancery Office, but there was no representation). We continued our celebrations that month with a great pre-Thanksgiving dinner on the 22nd with over 40 in attendance, our biggest turnout to date. In December, the Newsletter was improved and at our last meeting for the year, **Fr. Jim**, our Chaplain, prepared a moving and beautiful celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. **Art Martin** resigned as President, due to business interests.

## 1976:

In January, it was election time again. Elected were **Mike Nelson**, Chairperson; **Bill Brown**, Co-Chairperson; **Ray Terry**, Treasurer; **Bobby Mayhugh**, Secretary. That month a series of three lectures on Transactional Analysis were chaired by **Travis Peterson** and **Ann Barnett**. **Fr. Jim** left Houston on a new assignment and **Fr. Mike Corrigan** stepped in as our Chaplain, as his duties would allow. In February, **Mike Nelson** took a leave of absence to work with the then-forming Montrose Activity Center, so **Bill Brown** took over the chair. In March, we started to get our act together again and formed several committees to stimulate our growth. **Bill Brown** headed the Liturgy group, **Bob Heer** the Social Activities group, **Mike Nelson** the Social Action group and **Bobby Mayhugh** the Newsletter group. In April, we were asked to leave St. Anne's on orders of the Bishop and at the insistence of the Parish Council. **Fr. Bill Coughlin**, Pastor of St. Anne's protested the action and asked the Bishop to name a Chaplain for us and to suggest a permanent meeting place before he would let us leave. By late May we left St. Anne's to accept the offer of the facilities of St. Basil's Byzantine Rite Center adjacent to the University of St. Thomas Campus. In

June, after three meetings, we were asked to leave that facility due to pressure being brought on the Pastor by the President of St. Thomas University. (There was some overlapping interest due to some Parish Council members being on the Board of Regents for the University). Not to be daunted, we continued regular meetings at members' homes and apartments. In July, the Officers requested and obtained a meeting with **Monsignor Fiorenzo**, Chancellor of the Diocese. Our August **Newsletter** reported. "The gist of the meeting was that due to the Bishop having received only bad publicity about us, especially how we and Dignity/National were advocating the overthrow of basic Catholic doctrine, a statement of purpose and beliefs from us could be advantageous." It was agreed that such a statement would be prepared by the Chapter and it would be presented to the Bishop through the Monsignor as soon as possible. As might be imagined, there was a drop in attendance due to not having a permanent place to meet. In late July, **Bill Brown** resigned to continue studies in France. In August, the approved Statement of Purpose of our Chapter, as well as that of Dignity/National, were presented to the Monsignor and he agreed to present it to the Bishop. We then waited --as if we weren't having enough reverses we ran into trouble with the National Office over membership dues. They had record of only three members who had joined through the National Office, then in Boston. They claimed not to have heard from us in over 18 months. The rest of the year was spent trying to resolve this mess. In the meantime **Ray Terry** had a meeting with the Chancellor, **Monsignor Fiorenzo**, who stated that the Bishop reconized the need for our ministry and we were referred to the Holy Name Retreat Center as a place to meet on Catholic property. The Center was interested in helping us, but they had no space available until **March, 1977**, almost six months in the future. We continued to meet in homes. All these events had a very cohesive effect on the membership and all worked long and hard for the survival of **Dignity/Houston**.

#### 1977:

During the early months of 1977, **Dignity/Houston** finally got off the ground in many ways. In January we were invited and accepted the invitation to meet at Holy Rosary Church where the original Dignity group started. Meeting dates were changed to the first and third Thursdays of the month and the meeting structure was changed to allow for having Mass first, then follow that with the meeting in the old Vestry. **Fr. Mark Barron** took on responsibility for our religious discussion topics. In April, **Bobby Mayhugh** resigned as Secretary due to the demands on his time settling in to the new house with **Jon. Bob Heer** stepped in as Secretary, temporarily. **Jim Hale** became Editor of the **Newsletter** at that time, also. At that point our mailing was to about 40 persons. May brought elections again with **Ray Terry**, Chairperson; **Bill Hirsch**, Co-Chairperson/Treasurer; **Bob Heer**, Secretary. In June, we had a retreat at Bolivar and had our first fund raiser in the form of a garage sale on lower Avondale. By July, our paid membership had grown from 13 to 25 and felt we were in hog heaven. In August, **Bill Hirsch** resigned due to a new job commitment. The Co-Chair position was eliminated and **Fred Murray** became Treasurer. In September, **Fr. Mike Corrigan** celebrated his final Liturgy with us, due to other commitments. **Fr. Roberto Flores, OFM.**, became our new Chaplain. Over the Labor Day weekend, the Third Biennial National Convention was held in Chicago and was attended by **Fr. Roberto** and **Charles Elstner**. **Dignity/Houston** appears for the first time in the Houston Organization section of **TWT**. The September **Newsletter** was mailed to all Dignity Chapters, in addition to the local membership. In October, we had Mass and our first house blessing at **Bobby** and **Jon's** new home. Another retreat took place at Bolivar. A Membership Committee was established with **Bobby Mayhugh** and **Charles Elstner** as members, as well as a Constitution and By-Laws Committee

with **Jay Jennings** and **Fr. Mark Barron**. Also that month we had our first Region VII conference in Dallas. **Ray Terry** and **Fred Murray** were our delegates and six other members also attended the conference. **Fr. Pat Hoffman** was elected Region Director and **David Payne** was elected Secretary/Treasurer. They both were from Dignity/Lubbock and would serve a two year term. Our third annual Thanksgiving dinner was held at **Dennis Smyth's** later that month. To round out the year we joined with the Lambda Group, Lutherans Concerned, Intergriety/Houston and Episcopal Integrity for an ecumenical Christmas party and dance held at Channing Hall, First Unitarian Church.

#### 1978:

The results of a survey made late in 1977 were made known. About 40% answering first heard of Dignity through friends with gay publications being the next source. About half made their first contact with Dignity by phone and almost 3/4ths attended their first meeting alone. The most popular functions were Masses and Rap Sessions. Religious topics were first choice for the Rap Sessions and many indicated interest in group counseling sessions. In February, we hosted the second Region VII conference at which the main topic for discussion was the draft of the National Constitution and By-Laws. In March, **Ray Terry** resigned due to a new business venture and **Bob Heer** took over the Chairperson slot. We had a membership drive that month with the added incentive of a pledge by an anonymous donor to match the first ten \$15.00 membership dues if they joined by **July 1, 1978**. At that time we had 24 members and we did get the 10 new members and the donation. May brought elections with **Bob Heer**, Chairperson; **Phil Dyer**, Secretary; **Fred Murray**, Treasurer. **Charles Elstner** was appointed to head the Social Action Committee. June brought the 3rd Region VII Conference, this time in Dallas. It was held in conjunction with a meeting of Texas Gay Task Force V at which **Harvey Milk** and **Guy Amador** were speakers. Five **Dignity/Houston** members participated. During Gay Pride Week, later that month **Fr. Mark Barron** represented Dignity in a Memorial Service held in the chapel at University of Houston Central Campus. We also got around to printing some brochures for **Dignity/Houston**, many of which were passed out from our table at Town Meeting I held at the Astroarena. The July **Newsletter** took on a new look with the heading designed by **Frank Burgess**, our resident artist. Our mailout at that time was about 80. We also approved our very first set of By-Laws and Constitution. During August and September, our ranks continued to grow necessitating finding a new location in which to meet, due to our size. Through the good office of **Fr. Mark Barron** we moved to the Rice Catholic Student Center, on Bolsover, the director of which was **Fr. Gary Adams**, a recently ordained Dominican Father. In November, in conjunction with the National Day of Prayer, we held an agape with the theme of unity and thanksgiving with some of the other gay religious organizations. We were also privileged to have **Abbot Edwin** of St. Pius X Abbey with us to celebrate Mass during the month. The 4th Region VII conference was held in Lubbock on 17-19. Our box score for the year included 29 liturgies, 24 general meetings, 9 rap sessions, 2 guest speakers, 8 covered dish socials, 2 picnics and 12 other social events, not to mention 3 garage sales, a penitential service and a retreat.

#### 1979:

In January, we started to get an increased number of inquiries due to an informational ad in **Up Front**, a local weekly newspaper serving the gay community. A project was also started to make contact with parish priests. In February, we hosted the Dignity, Inc. Winter Executive Council. The meet-

ings and reception were held at the Ramada Inn - Greenway Plaza. The conference was a great success. We mailed out about 150 invitations to all Pastors and Religious' in the Diocese, however the response was practically nil, we did, however, gain **Fr. Pat Meister** as a Chaplain. In March, we started some Consciousness Raising groups. We also became a member of the local Gay Rights Coordinating Council. Our membership by then was 62. April brought the Region VII Conference, this time held in San Antonio with **George Wetzel**, **Bobby Mayhugh** and **Bob Heer** as our Chapter's voting delegates. We also had a return visit from **Abbot Edwin** who celebrated Mass with us. May brought election time again and the current officers were reelected for a second term. In June, we increased our **Newsletter** mailout to 225, to include all Chapters since this was our fifth anniversary issue. Our regular mailings at that time were about 125 copies. To celebrate our birthday, we had our first anniversary dinner at the Ramada Inn - Greenway Plaza and the event featured a 'roast' of **Fr. Mark Barron**. On **July 1, 1979**, we had our first entry in the annual Gay Pride Parade, consisting of a car-top construction with a religious theme. Among other activities that month were a Tiara glass party, a garage sale and a bike tour through Montrose. In August, we continued our spiritual education series with lectures by **Fr. Pat Meister** on 'The History of Worship'. The Region VII Conference was held in Dallas and two new chapters were chartered, Dignity Dallas Outreach and Dignity/Palo Alto, bringing our Regional total to 10 chapters. In early September, the third Dignity, Inc. Convention was held in San Diego. We were represented by **Fr. Roberto** and **John McCaffrey**.

Local Activities that month included a home Mass at Sal Ragusa's, a skating party at the Galleria, a picnic in Memorial Park (another one of those 'barefoot in the park' parties), a theatre party at M.A.C. to see "Women Behind Bars" and Gay Day at Astroworld. **Fr. Mark** continued our Spiritual Education Series in October. That month our dues were raised from \$15.00 to \$20.00 due to Dignity, Inc. increasing their dues from us. In November, we started Disco Night at the Copa each Friday evening. we had our annual pre-Thanksgiving Mass and agape. The Region Conference was held in Lubbock at which we had election of officers for the coming two years. **Fr. Pat Hoffman** was reelected Region Director and **Jim Leatherwood** was elected Secretary/Treasurer. In December, some of us trekked to Galveston to take in Dickens' Night on The Strand before which we had a wine and cheese social at **George Wetzel's** home there. We also had our traditional Advent Penitential Service and a pre-Christmas covered dish supper. Also of note was the fact that our t-shirts were put on sale that month.

#### 1980:

January brought our first 'Gourmet Dinner' catered by **Norman Salvato** and **Jay Jennings**. **Fr. Pat Meister** had the first annual Shrimp Festival for us at his rectory in Freeport and we ended the month with an ecumenical Prayer Service for Christian Unity. In February, the regular column, 'Good News' was started in our **Newsletter** written by **Ray S.** In March, we hosted the Region Conference at the Newman Center near the University of Houston Central Campus. **Fr. Gary**, **Ray S.** and **Sr. Ginger** were the principal convenors of the workshops. To end the month we had a Seder Supper at the Student Center. After Easter, in April, we had a skating party in Bellaire, a garage sale and a police program on security. May brought Chapter election time. Elected were **Sheila Green**, Chairperson; **Bill Jones**, Secretary; **Jack Drapela**, Treasurer. Other activities were going on the Historical Homes Tour in Galveston with the traditional wine and cheese at **George's** and another garage sale. The Region Spring Conference was held in Austin in June with 15 of us attending. Later that month we participated in Gay Pride Week activities during the National Day of Remembrance and the Gay Pride Parade where we had a hand-carried float designed by **Randy Ruhlman**. In August, Dignity/Dallas hosted a Region Retreat convened by **Fr. Francis Thompson, OFM.**, we had our first commitment Service between **Jack** and **Tom**, we

sponsored the world premier of "Cleopatra", a play by **Max Pearson**, starring **Norman Salvato**, at the Inside/Outside, a Montrose bar which had stage facilities in the patio. Another series of consciousness raising groups were formed in September. In October, we joined with our Lutheran friends to have a penitential service to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the founding of the Lutheran Church. The Fall Region Conference was held in Lubbock and **Fr. John McNeill, SJ.**, was the principal speaker. We also instituted a chapter survey to get a better understanding of what was expected from Dignity by the members. In December, we again had our annual Advent Penitential Service to round out the year's activities.

#### 1981:

January brought our annual Christian Unity Service with MCCR, Lutherans Concerned, Church of Christian Faith and the Montrose Church of Christ joining us. In February, we instituted the First Sunday of the month mass to replace the first Thursday Mass. This was done as a result of many requests for a weekend service. To celebrate St. Patrick's Day we held our covered dish at the Loaves and Fishes Soup Kitchen, operated by the Magnificat Houses. The houses were our community outreach and continue to be so. **George Wetzel** started our lending library that month, also. In April, we had our Lenten Penitential Service and in May we bade goodbye to **Fr. Gary**, who was leaving on a new assignment. In June, our new officers took over, **Bob Heer** as Chairperson; **Bobby Mayhugh** as Secretary; **Dale Wahl** as Treasurer. We celebrated our seventh anniversary with a covered dish supper at the Student Center. Later in the month the Region Conference was held in San Antonio. Our Chapter was represented by **Sheila Green**, **Bobby Mayhugh** and **Bob Heer**. In August, **Camilla Kelly** took over as the Newsletter Editor duties and **David Decker** volunteered to do the printing, using our new logo. New Region officers were also elected that month, **Peter Laverty** as Region Director and **Jim Leatherwood** as Secretary/Treasurer. Both were members of Dignity/Lubbock. Labor Day weekend, in September, the fifth Dignity, Inc. Convention was held in Philadelphia. We were represented by **George Wetzel**, **David Decker** and **Gabriel Clark**. Our new banner was initiated at that convention. The same weekend the Texas Gay Conference VIII was held here at the First Unitarian Church. Several of our members attended and we had an information booth in the lobby. The principal speakers were **Patricia Nell Warren** and **Jack Nichols**. In October, **Sal Ragusa** started a mini-series on the Gospel According to St. John and we had our first ecumenical picnic near the Wortham Fountain with Episcopal Integrity and Montrose Church of Christ participating. November brought a one-day Region Business Conference, held in Austin. **David Decker**, **Bobby Mayhugh** and **Bob Heer** were our delegates. In December, we had our annual Penitential Service to end our year's activities again.

#### 1982:

On New Year's Day we started off the year with an open house at **Hopie** and **Kelly's** with members of T-BAG. Our regular meetings were changed from Thursdays to Saturdays due to the student scheduling at the Center. Masses were held the first and third Saturdays. We had District 79 State Representative, **Debra Danburg**, as a speaker during the month and on the 30th we had the annual Christian Unity Service. February brought our first annual 'dessert pig-out' after Mass and the third annual Shrove Tuesday pancake supper. In March, we hosted the Region VII Spring Conference, again using the Newman Center at University of Houston. Later we were a cosponsor of a lecture by **Rev. Dr. Norman Pittenger** at Autry House. We had our annual Penitential Service before Easter and we had election of officers with **David Decker** as Chairperson, **Bobby Mayhugh** as Secretary and **Bob Heer** as Treasurer. Also elected to the Board were **Paul Herzog**, **Bob Palmer** and **Chip Kerrigan**.