Chapter 5

Laborare est Orare: Starting a Gay–Straight Alliance at a Rural, Private, Catholic College

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ABSTRACT

Despite regional, religious, and political conservatism and fears of donor alienation and diocesan disapproval, a small group of faculty, staff, and avowed sisters at the private Catholic institution described in this article successfully achieved approval for the development of a gay-straight alliance. Using documents from official Church doctrine, researching benchmarks from Catholic institutions across the region, and demonstrating unmet student needs of the mostly closeted LGBTQ student population, the committee successfully obtained approval to host a discussion series examining the intersections and confrontations of LGBTQ lived experiences with spiritual practices and religious teaching. This chapter not only tells that story but provides a tactical model for others seeking to overcome barriers of institutional religious-based heterosexism to carve out a safe space for LGBTQ students while respecting the religious views students and employees of private, religious institutions have agreed to uphold.

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks into a new job at a private Catholic institution in rural Kentucky, a young, pink-haired, self-identified lesbian student announced after class, “I googled you, and I want to start a gay-straight alliance.” The connection there stemmed from her web search discovery of the author’s mentorship of an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual,
transgender, and queer/questioning) student organization at a previous university, a large public institution in the Midwest. Though the author admits some reservation about entering into controversial terrain during her first month on the job, she felt a gay-straight alliance was needed and told the student, “It never hurts to ask.” But rejection and homophobia do hurt, and a “No” was what was expected. The author did not want the student to experience that disappointment. Eighteen months and many meetings later, the decision was announced. It was mostly a “Yes”! Despite regional, religious, and political conservatism and fears of donor alienation and diocesan disapproval, a small group of faculty, staff, and sisters at their private Catholic institution successfully achieved approval for the development of the LGBTQSA Safe Space Discussion Series. Using documents from official Church doctrine, particularly “Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message To Parents Of Homosexual Children And Suggestions For Pastoral Ministers” (1997) by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, researching benchmarks from Catholic institutions across the region, and demonstrating unmet student needs of the institution’s mostly closeted LGBTQ student population, the group successfully obtained administrative approval to host a discussion series examining the intersections and confrontations of LGBTQ lived experiences with spiritual practices and religious teaching. This chapter not only tells that story but also provides a tactical model for others seeking to overcome barriers of institutional religious-based heterosexism to carve out a safe space for LGBTQ students while respecting the religious views students and employees of private, religious institutions have agreed to uphold.

Religiously affiliated institutions are not autonomous; they operate within the boundaries of larger entities like dioceses and orders and are subject to many of their rules and doctrines. These institutions may face grave financial and social consequences if they appear to violate the norms set by the leaders of those larger entities. Just as employees agree to adhere to the institutional values, the institutions agree to adhere to the larger body of which they are part. Violations of these agreements may result in severance or sanction. Regional and political concerns affect policies and procedures as well. In a context of deeply held convictions about the sacredness of heterosexuality, the proposal of a gay-straight alliance still may be perceived as radical despite the expansion of support for LGBTQ equality initiatives nationwide. Such a proposal may be viewed as contradicting Church teaching, which is not without personal and professional risk. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1997), “the Church has the right to deny public roles of service and leadership to persons, whether homosexual or heterosexual, whose public behavior openly violates its teachings” (para. 40).

Regardless of those strictures, faculty and staff at private, religiously affiliated institutions have a commitment to serving students of diverse backgrounds and identities. The college described in this article, like all colleges, has LGBTQ
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