

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 Listecky,

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- our challenge to integrate our Catholic faith with the harmful and outdated statements of Church doctrine and policies on sexuality and gender.

We hope you understand that our letter is longer than the average letter, however our experiences are complicated. We pray you listen with hearts rich in Christ's love for all people. *If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*

### **Jean's Story.**

I write to share my story about having a transgender grandchild and being a lifelong Catholic with a deep faith in the love of Jesus Christ and in Catholic Social Justice teachings. These teachings were rooted in me by my parents through their faith. Throughout my life I looked to my parish priest for counsel when I needed guidance with an issue I struggled with instead of a therapist. I valued the advice and security I received knowing that the church would help me in a loving way. This deep feeling of security is why, when my grandchild came out as transgender, I looked to my Church for guidance on accepting my grandchild as Christ would. It is also why I sought out the Gay Ministry group at St. Mary Hales Corners. The GASIC community supported me as I navigated my grandchild's identity personally and with my family. I would like to share my story as a faithful member of the body of Christ and as a grandmother who wants to love and accept all God's children.

As you can imagine, the love of a first grandchild is special, and mine was no different. My grandson is smart, thoughtful, brave, and kind to everyone, especially his siblings. As the oldest of three children, he impressed me with how mature and level-headed he was. Knowing right from wrong was instilled by his family and the teachings of the Church. My grandchildren would regularly have sleepovers at our home and my grandson always

made sure to help Grandma with his two younger siblings. I say this because my grandson has never been a silly, foolish, misguided, “follow the crowd” kind of child. He is a child who has always been respectful of others and is deeply loved by his family and friends.

During one of our regular sleepovers when my grandson was about 12, I mentioned something to him about the changes our bodies go through during this time of life and if he needed anything to let me know. He started sobbing unconsolably in my arms, and I didn’t understand why or know what to do to comfort him. This was the moment I began to worry that something was wrong. When his dad came to take the kids home that day the sobbing started all over again. I was so worried that I had said or done something wrong, that it was my fault that my beautiful, loving grandchild was hurting. I was crushed and emotionally distressed.

Looking back on this time, I now understand that my grandson was overwhelmed with the reality that puberty was about to put his body at odds with his identity and he didn’t yet have words for this troubling experience.

About a year later at our Mother’s Day celebration at our home, another troubling, emotionally fraught event occurred. My husband, my grandson’s grandpa, offered our grandson the first place in line at our celebration honoring all the mothers and mothers-to-be someday. My grandson immediately put his plate down and walked out. Thankfully Grandpa followed to invite my grandson to rejoin us, telling him that he loved him and was sorry if he said something wrong. He told grandpa that he would not be a mother someday.

Over the next three years there was a notable change in my grandson. One might think it was just “the teenage years”. However, having raised three of our own children, we began to worry that something much bigger than normal teenage changes was causing him so much distress. My grandson went from being an ‘A’ student and being accepted into a scholarship program at UW Madison to being a student who struggled with any school responsibilities. In family life I saw him withdraw from family conversations and gatherings. The change was palpable. The signs of depression and isolation frightened us to the point of researching reasons for suicide in young adults. We were seeking any way to help my grandson. We prayed to find a way to help him.

Every year our entire family, 13 of us, spends time together at our lake home. On one of these occasions, when my grandson was 17 years old, I noticed that he was totally unengaged in the family fun. I asked my daughter, his mom, what was going on. She told me that he planned on telling everyone that he was transgender, but obviously was afraid and didn’t know how to make the announcement. While everyone except my grandson and I were down by the lake, I sat down and told him that I knew of his plan to tell the family what he had been struggling with for so long. Through his sobbing he told me that he was a boy and that he has felt like this his whole life. I asked him, “Are you sure this isn’t a phase you’re going through?,” and he replied, “No, Grandma, I would not choose to be this way.” We then walked down to the lake together and I told our family that my grandson had something to say. He explained to everyone he was a boy, he always believed he was a boy and told us his new name. From that day on our family has accepted his gender identity unconditionally as our faith has taught us that Jesus wants us to love everyone unconditionally.

Since that day at the lake three years ago, I have witnessed a transformation in my grandson. The joyful and loving grandchild that I’ve always known slowly came back and my fears that something or someone would harm him have lessened. My prayers that his distress would be lifted were answered. While I’m happy that my grandson is returning to his happy, loving, confident self, I mourn for the years that he struggled with so much pain, distress and fear because his core identity did not fit with society’s “norm”.

It took me over a year to get the courage to come to a GASIC meeting. I was afraid that I wouldn’t be accepted or would be judged. I was most afraid the Church, which had always been a source of refuge for me, would reject and isolate me from my faith community. I also feared the church would tell me to reject my grandson’s understanding of his transgender identity, thus rejecting him.

While I was attending the GASIC meetings for the last 1 1/2 years, I found a safe place to share my experiences with people who accepted and supported me. GASIC helps me be a more loving grandmother and a better Catholic. Most importantly, GASIC accepts and loves me and encourages me to love and accept my grandchild with the same unconditional love that Jesus has for all of us.

This is why I am very confused about Fr. Aaron Laskiewicz's decision to close St Mary Hales Corners' doors to the GASIC community. I asked myself, "How could my parish close its doors to a community that provides me with so much love and support, that reaches out to those on the margins and teaches acceptance of all God's children?" I am distraught to see the doors of my church closed to GASIC because I thought my Church would always support me on my life's journey. How can my grandson believe that he is loved and accepted when GASIC communities are banned and replaced with groups that teach him and his family that we must reject who he is to be worthy of our Church's sacraments, to be worthy of Christ's love? I am disheartened to experience my Church's mistreatment of people who are transgender and their allies. I believe that the church Jesus Christ created 2,000 years ago should accept all who believe in him, wherever they are in their gender identity journey.

### **Anita's Story**

I am writing about being blessed with thirteen grandchildren and six great grandchildren. Within this wonderful group there are children who are both gay and straight. Given the world today, I worry about all of them, but most of all I worry about the ones who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community because of the way the Catholic Church and society judge them. Jesus is still waiting for us to heed his words, "Love one another"!

I grew up in an era of prejudice. Neighbors used the "n" word; people who were gay were "fairies," and the Catholic Church prayed for the "pagans." My folks literally "taught" us to be bigoted and prejudiced. It was served up like dinner.

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. 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.

I was a young mother with 4 children when he became very ill. Every weekend I drove from Milwaukee to Chicago to be with him for a day. Through that time, I became aware of his "close friend." When my uncle died, my mother banned his "close friend" from the wake and funeral and would not allow him to pick out any remembrances of my uncle. How could my mother, who preached love for others, keep my uncle's closest friend away from the funeral?

I do not want this for any of my grandchildren. The Catholic Church I am a part of still sees my grandkids as "disordered"--somehow fundamentally broken in a way that separates them from the community of their faith. I remain Catholic because of my deep belief in Christ's command to love one another as he loves us -- unconditionally. I want my grandchildren to know that Granny sees them and loves them for who they are. I want to reflect Christ's love for them-- to pass on the gift of kindness and love that my uncle showed me. This is my vocation as a parent, grandparent, and Christian. I am part of the group that writes this letter because I feel strongly that we need to accept everyone as they are rather than ask them to reject themselves so that they might be worthy of the church's love.

### **Rebekah's Story**

I have been invited to tell my story as a Catholic gay woman. I was raised as an Evangelical Christian. My father was a preacher. I was very involved in his church growing up. As I grew into my teen years I began to study the Bible in earnest and started to see that the way I was being raised did not seem to fit with the message of Jesus-loving everyone unconditionally.

I was a teen/young adult at the height of the AIDS crisis. My father's church preached that all gay people were sinners, and that AIDS was a punishment from God for their wicked ways. Rather than reaching out to those suffering, his church condemned them. I could not remain in my father's denomination and began a search for a Christ-filled community. My search ended when I was a freshman in college and attended my first Mass. There I heard the message of love and acceptance so missing from my previous experience. Through RCIA, I learned about social justice, the preference for the poor and about religious communities of Sisters and Brothers caring for AIDS patients, feeding the poor, housing the homeless-offering compassion and love to those no one else would. Easter season of my sophomore year I was received into the Church. That Church, and the love and community I experienced in it, changed my life. Unfortunately, I would find that my experience at that church was rare.

When I graduated and moved to a new state I sought out a new parish and what I found distressed me. Every Catholic parish I attended preached the same message about HIV/AIDS that my father's church had, and I experienced a crisis of faith. Not only was I distressed that my gay brothers were being condemned, but I was coming to realize that I was a lesbian. Faced with the same condemnation that I faced in my father's church, distressed over the lack of compassion for suffering people, I left the Church for some time. I could not reconcile receiving communion and my anger. Still, I kept searching for a parish where I would be welcome, and my suffering brothers would be comforted instead of condemned.

I spent many years quietly attending Mass and leaving immediately after, consciously avoiding interactions with people out of fear I would be condemned for being as God created me. While my desire to receive Eucharist was met, any sense of community felt out of reach. I hid who I was, and I came and went to Mass as silently as I could. For nearly 30 years I searched for a community where Communion would help me feel connected to the community with whom I worshipped. Finally, in 2019, I found such a community. I found a listing for a local church that had a Gay Ministry. I decided to attend a Mass to see what I would find.

That Sunday morning, I drove to the church and sat for a moment in my car. My purse had a rainbow strap on it and the word LOVE printed in rainbow colors on it. I'd heard of people being refused communion, being confronted for having rainbows on their clothing. I decided that I would leave it in the car, hidden under the seat so that no one would see it. I entered that church as I had so many others, hiding my whole self. What I found was a community that was truly welcoming! I cried when I heard the words from the pulpit that God loves everyone and that as disciples we are called to welcome all those at the margins, including the LGBT community. At last, I had found a parish where I would not have to hide in the shadows!

This parish has been a great gift to me and many others. Through their Gay ministry I have grown closer to God and my spirituality has deepened. Most importantly, I have reconnected communion and community. I am contributing to this letter because I fear that supportive groups like the one at my parish will disappear and force myself and others back into the margins, into the shadows of our communities. I do not want to spend another 30 years looking for a church that seeks to welcome and love all as Christ did. I fear the pain of once again experiencing the disconnect between communion and community. More than that, I fear for those growing into young adulthood now being forced to choose between the comfort of Christ's community and the comfort of being loved unconditionally.

### **Marge's Story**

Marge is last to share her experience as a Catholic, ally, parent/grandparent, and retired nurse. I speak from life experiences of sharing my faith with my children and grandchildren, caring for diverse populations as a nurse, and teaching nurses about health disparities created by social determinants (i.e., race, income, religion, sexual/gender identity). I experienced sadness when some of my children stopped identifying as Catholics because of the Church's outdated teachings that stigmatize friends, families, and our wider sexual and gender minority population. Catholics, queer and straight, leave the Church due to these outdated policies.

A greater harm is the social sin of violence and victimization toward people considered sexual and gender minorities. This social sin causes physical, mental and spiritual trauma to our queer siblings as well as their families who are asked to reject their queer family member's identity. Violence contributes to this population's increased risks for addiction, poor health, depression and suicide. To end this social sin, our churches and communities must recognize and listen to God's children who identify as queer, and not pass judgment on the identity which s/he is born with.

We are grateful for your vocations and ask that you consider the following in parish ministry to people who are LGBTQ+ and allies:

1. Support current Parish Gay ministries for LGBTQ+ individuals and families, that focus on the gifts that LGBTQ+ individuals and families bring to our church.
2. Reinstate the GASIC community at St. Mary Hales Corners.
3. Strive to be a church where all are welcomed by clergy without fear of judgement, exclusion or being socially marginalized because of gender and sexual identities which s/he is born with.
4. Understand the present-day challenges of Catholics who desire to integrate our love of family members and our love of our faith community.
5. Consider current theological and human-scientific findings related to the LGBTQ+ community (see references).
6. Listen to parishioners who speak honestly about their experiences. Do not require people who are LGBTQ+ to accept a gender identity or sexual orientation that lessens their human dignity.

Please don't hesitate to contact Marge ([grand36piano@gmail.com](mailto:grand36piano@gmail.com)) with your questions or thoughts.

With gratitude for diversity in Creation,

Rebekah Dubrosky (She/her)  
Member of a Gay & Ally Ministry in another parish

Anita Kowalski (She/her)  
Member of a Gay & Ally Ministry in another parish

Jean (She/her)  
Prior Member of St Mary Hales Corners GASIC  
Current member of a Gay & Ally Ministry in  
another parish

Marge Sebern (She/her)  
Member of Gay & Ally Ministry in another parish  
St Paul the Apostle Church NYC  
[Grand36piano@gmail.com](mailto:Grand36piano@gmail.com)

### References

Butler, Judith (2024). *Who's Afraid of Gender?* New York, NY. Farrar. Straus and Giroux.

Hafeez, H. et al., (2017). *Health Care Disparities Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: A Literature Review. Cureus, 9,(4). PMID: PMC5478215 PMID: 28638747.*  
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28638747/>

Henry, Keith (2020). *Is the Courage Model Appropriate as LGBTQ Ministry?* New Ways Ministry. Retrieved 8/7/2024.  
<https://www.newwaysministry.org/2020/09/28/is-the-courage-model-an-appropriate-lgbtq-ministry/>

National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, (2020). Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQI+ Populations. Retrieved 7/9/2024. <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/25877/LGBT>

National Institute of Health (NIH), Sexual & Gender Research Office (2016) retrieved 7/9/24. <https://dpcpsi.nih.gov/sgmro>