

MCC & DIGNITY EDMONTON DIGNITÉ

Location 10086 MacDonald Drive NW
McDougall United Church Basement

www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



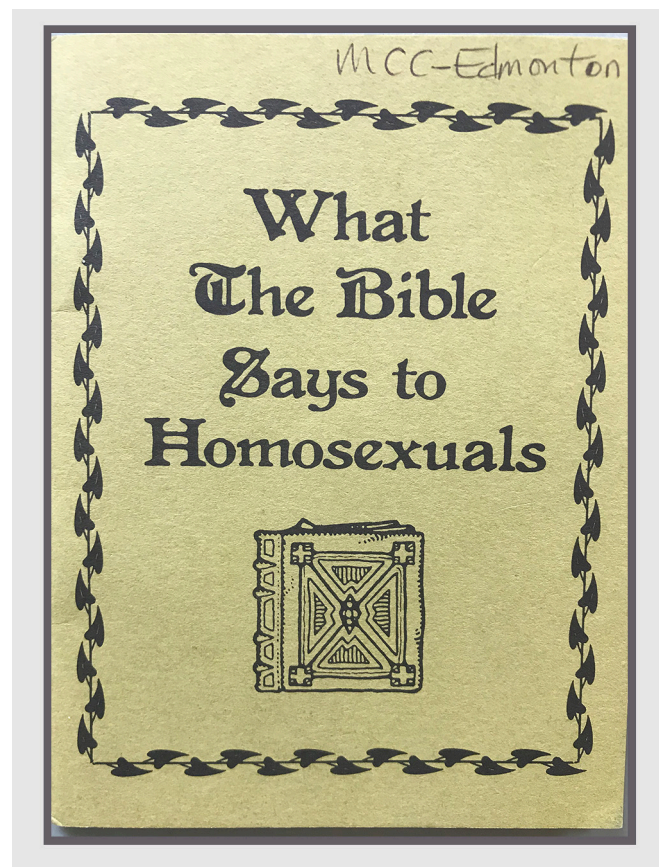
MCC Meetings in the 1970s were held on Sunday evenings at the Edmonton Unitarian Church: 12530 110 Avenue.

Dignity Edmonton Dignité meetings in the 1980s and 1990s were held in various community spaces and private members' homes.

The Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC) was founded in Los Angeles in 1968, one year before the infamous Stonewall Riots, and has grown to include 300 congregations represented in 22 countries.¹ Edmonton's chapter was established in 1977 by Reverend David Gunton, who was previously involved with MCC-Toronto. The Edmonton group held its first meetings in the Unitarian Church on 12530 110 avenue. While MCC-Edmonton had several different reverends and deacons throughout its over 20-year history, one of its longstanding members was Dr Charles Bidwell. He served as a reverend and worked in various capacities with MCC-Edmonton from 1978 onward.²

In 1978, former beauty queen, spokesperson for the Florida Orange Juice Commission, and born-again Christian singer Anita Bryant embarked on a six-month Canadian tour sponsored by Renaissance International, which was home to the Canadian-based evangelical movement.³ Her visit was billed as the "Canada Christian Liberation Crusade" and was designed to promote traditional family values and heterosexual marriage, all cloaked with a virulent anti-gay message.⁴ In each Canadian city, "Coalitions to Answer Anita Bryant" formed and organized protests, and undercover RCMP members surveilled some of the events to gather information on "militant homosexuals."⁵

Bryant's visit to Edmonton was incredibly controversial and polarizing, with over 6,000 people in attendance where she sang and spoke about Christian "love and acceptance."⁶ Bryant was widely known across North America for her



¹ MCC began when Pentecostal pastor Troy Perry was defrocked because of his sexuality. Pastor Perry had a spiritual awakening following a suicide attempt, which inspired him to host a spiritual service in his Los Angeles home for a small group of 12 people who had left or been rejected by their church communities. Perry's first sermon focused on being true to yourself, and interest and attendance grew quickly, with more than 200 people soon attending, and requests began to come from individuals in other cities to open new chapters. MCC services are ecumenical, open to everyone, and focused on helping people from all denominations, sexual orientations, and gender identities to feel at home in their faith. MCC reports that at least 20% of its congregants identify as heterosexual. See: "History of MCC," 2004, Metropolitan Community Churches, <https://www.mccchurch.org/overview/history-of-mcc/>.

² Charles Bidwell, "A Brief History of Metropolitan Community Church of Edmonton," April 2015.

³ Canadian stops on the tour included Toronto/Peterborough (January), Edmonton and Winnipeg (April), and ended in Moose Jaw (July) to "celebrate" the city's 100th birthday. See: Valerie Korinek, *Prairie Fairies: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930-1985* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 283-287, 327.

⁴ Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 326-27.

⁵ Korinek, *Prairie Fairies*, 326-27.

⁶ "Police Guard Anita Bryant in Edmonton," *Globe and Mail*, May 1, 1978.

anti-gay sentiments and her attempts to block or overturn anti-discrimination ordinances for the gay and lesbian community in various US cities, including most notably in her home state of Florida. Her virulently homophobic "Save Our Children" crusade was based on the premise that since "homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they must recruit." Bryant's campaign material often compared homosexuality to child abuse, pornography, and pedophilia. Bryant proclaimed that anti-discrimination ordinances would force schools to "hire flaunting homosexuals to teach our children."⁷

The success of her campaign would give energy and impetus for the re-birth of the Religious Right, which made opposition to the LGBTQ2 community central to its platform and fundraising efforts all across North America. Ironically, Bryant's crusade against homosexuality also gave renewed energy to the growing gay and lesbian movement fueled by the belief that "gay is good" and the rise of protests and Pride parades across North America, which sought to not only counter Bryant's anti-gay message but also to organize.



Bryant's notoriety continued to increase when she actively campaigned for the California "Briggs Initiative" in 1978, which would have rendered positive statements about homosexuality by public school employees cause for termination. This rhetoric laid the foundation for many future "don't say gay" laws, including here in Alberta with Bill 44 and new legal requirements for parents to be notified anytime sexual orientation was discussed in schools.⁸ Thanks to the efforts of activists like Harvey Milk and Sally Gearheart, the Briggs Initiative was defeated. Tragically, Harvey Milk would be assassinated only a few short months later, on November 27, 1978.

Bryant's Christian revival tour arrived in Edmonton on April 29, 1978. It was met with significant opposition, including over 300 protestors from both Edmonton and Calgary.⁹ Media reports indicate how Bryant was provided with a heavy police escort to her event at the Edmonton Coliseum. At the concert,

one protestor chained himself to a hand railing, calling out, "You've got me in chains, Anita", for her entire three-hour performance. Meanwhile, another group of several hundred protestors, including a diverse coalition of members from MCC and Dignity Edmonton and various labour and women's groups, marched from the Alberta Legislature to downtown with various signs and placards which read, "God is a Lesbian" and "Anita: Get Out of My Gay Way."¹⁰ Footage of these protests is available through the Provincial Archives of Alberta.¹¹

Many of the protest coalitions that formed across Canada in response to the Anita Bryant tour were significant, as gay and lesbian activists organized in large numbers, which included some of the very first public gay rights protests in many Canadian cities. This community organizing would lay the foundation for future anti-right organizing in the 1980s to challenge the rising evangelical "family values" movement, which sought to block and roll back human rights protections and any progress towards LGBTQ2 equality.¹²

In the 1980s, groups like MCC and Dignity Edmonton would take an increasingly visible and vocal role in supporting Edmonton's gay and lesbian community while seeking to build a more inclusive faith. This would become particularly important with the impending arrival of the AIDS pandemic in Edmonton.

From the time of MCC-Edmonton's inception, the priorities of gay men and lesbian women remained central to their mandate, with a panel discussion taking place on male and female stereotypes in September 1979, for example, and a workshop dedicated to the issues that lesbians face in the Church at their annual conference in 1982.¹³ In 1984, MCC-Edmonton also supported the formation of the AIDS Network of Edmonton, holding grant money from the organization in trust until they could obtain charitable status. MCC-Edmonton also worked to support individuals with HIV/AIDS along with their friends and families by organizing memorial services for the deceased.¹⁴ Later in the 1980s, MCC members volunteered to serve as visibly gay and lesbian Christians in the community by participating in Pride week activities and often shared information on sexual orientation with religious groups, which mainly included United Churches.¹⁵

In 1990, MCC moved to McDougall United Church's basement in the downtown core as the Unitarian Church of Edmonton, where they had been regularly meeting, was sold. Several years later, in 1998, Rev. Bert and Evelyn Frey, from Garneau United Church, organized a Saturday conference on issues of spirituality and sexuality, which identified a critical community need. Members of the conference led by Rev. Charles Bidwell and Phyllis Fleming from MCC-Edmonton, went on to form the Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society (DCAS), which became an organization dedicated to working towards eliminating systemic discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender

7 Julia Pyryeskina, "A Remarkable Dense Historical and Political Juncture: Anita Bryant, The Body Politic, and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Community in January 1978," *Canadian Journal of History* 53, no. 1 (2018): 58-85.

8 "Alberta Passes Law Allowing Parents to Pull Kids Out of Class," June 2, 2009, CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/alberta-passes-law-allowing-parents-to-pull-kids-out-of-class-1.777604>.

9 Protests occurred at each stop of the Canadian tour. In Toronto, over 1,000 individuals came out to protest Bryant's visit, which represented the city's largest gay rights demonstration to date: See Pyryeskina.

10 "The Full Text of 'Body Politic, May 1978'", Internet Archives, https://archive.org/stream/bodypolitic43toro/bodypolitic43toro_djvu.txt.

11 "PR1983.0460.0512," produced by The Provincial Archives of Alberta, September 10, 2020, YouTube video, 9:34, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=GpIECKil4ZE&app=desktop>.

12 See the Pyryeskina article cited in note seven.

13 "Chapter Activities and Highlights," May 1979 to June 1980; Conference Program: Sixth Annual Dignity Canada Dignité Conference, Edmonton, Alberta, 1982. Both from MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

14 Bidwell, "A Brief History."

15 Bidwell, "A Brief History."

identity within faith communities.¹⁶ The Freys were unexpected allies who were very active in the United Church and worked for LGBTQ2 rights both within and outside the Church community from the 1970s onward.¹⁷

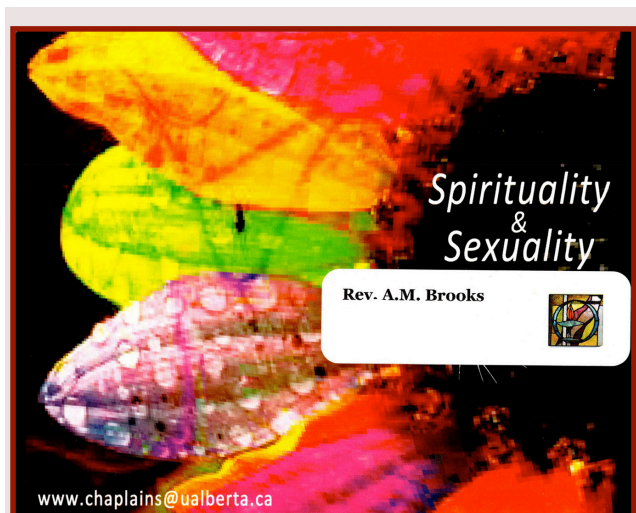
Beginning in 1998, DCAS started to grow and held several important conferences at MacEwan University (then Grant MacEwan Community College),¹⁸ with presentations ranging from Indigenous spirituality, internalized homophobia, coming out, suicide awareness, HIV/AIDS, laws on homosexuality, educational reforms, and spiritual pathways and journeys.¹⁹ DCAS strived to include the full spectrum of LGBTQ2 identities with featured sessions on bisexuality with Todd Janes and transgender issues featuring Reverend Mickey Wilson, who founded the Lambda Christian Community Church in Edmonton²⁰. Other presenters included Lyle Millang, a local member of Lutherans Concerned North America, and Lorna Murray, who was involved with both Womospace and Integrity, which promoted LGBTQ2 inclusion within the Anglican Church.

Due to declining attendance, MCC-Edmonton finally closed its doors in 2001. However, many former members began attending a new and growing group of affirming United Churches spread throughout the city and surrounding area.²¹

Another essential local LGBTQ2 faith group was Dignity Edmonton Dignité, which was incorporated in 1980 and became part of the Dignity Canada Dignité national network.²² Dignity Edmonton was founded with the belief that "gay Catholics are members of Christ's mystical body, numbered among the people of God."²³ Objectives included working for the development of sexual theology in the Catholic Church, striving for social justice and acceptance in society, and reinforcing gay Catholics' sense of self and dignity as members of both the gay/lesbian community and the Catholic Church. Dignity's main areas of activity included spiritual development, education, social involvement, feminist issues, and hosting social events.²⁴ Membership, which included a subscription to a local and national newsletter, was \$25.00 a year for students, seniors, and unemployed persons, and \$35.00 a year for others.

In the 1980s and 1990s, 20 to 30 Dignity members would regularly meet on Tuesdays to attend Mass at St. Joseph's Basilica and would often gather afterwards for dinner at various neighbourhood restaurants, including Tom's Deli on Jasper Avenue and The Gas Pump on 114 Street, which frequently

included a trip to Boots N' Saddle to end the night.²⁵ Sunday brunches were also popular and regularly held at members' homes as a social activity and fundraiser. Dignity members were encouraged to bring at least one guest to meetings and events.²⁶ Monthly chapter meetings were held at the Catholic Social Services building on 99 Street, which generally included guest speakers such as politicians, healthcare professionals, artists, theologians, and ordinary folks sharing their personal stories.²⁷



Once a month, on a Sunday evening, Dignity members would organize a liturgical service presided over by an invited priest at Paul Kane House in Oliver. However, this became more difficult when the Vatican released its infamous 1986 Halloween letter on the pastoral care of homosexual persons.²⁸

Dignity Edmonton frequently sponsored larger events around Christmas and New Year's, which typically involved a church service and shared meal, attracting 80 to 100 participants²⁹. These events were often held at the Westwood Unitarian Congregation. Once or twice a year, during Lent, Dignity would host a one-day retreat held at the Ursuline Convent or their cottage on Lac Ste. Anne, just west of the city.

¹⁶ "Mission Statement," Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society [DCAS], <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/DCAS/>.

¹⁷ David Staples, "Gay-Rights Supporters Fuelled by Simple Love," Edmonton Journal, March 8, 1998, A6.

¹⁸ Bidwell, "A Brief History."

¹⁹ "Mission Statement," Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society [DCAS], <https://sites.ualberta.ca/~cbidwell/DCAS/>.

²⁰ Emil Tiedemann, "A few minutes with Mickey Wilson," I Heart Edmonton, <http://www.iheartedmonton.ca/2015/07/a-few-minutes-with-mickey-wilson.html>.

²¹ Bidwell, "A Brief History."

²² Dignity Canada Dignité was founded in April 1981 with chapters in Edmonton, Calgary, Vancouver, Regina, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Toronto, London, and Montreal (with two French and English chapters). Dignity Edmonton Dignité was also a chapter of Region 11 of Dignity USA. For more information on Dignity Edmonton see, "Application for Incorporation as a Society under the Societies Act Being Chapter 347 of the Revised Statutes of Alberta, 1970, and Amendments Thereof," 6 May, 1980, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

²³ "Statement of Position and Purpose," n.d., MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

²⁴ "Statement of Position and Purpose."

²⁵ "Dignity Edmonton Calendar of Events," October/November 1984; "Dignity Schedule – Edmonton," January 1988. Both from MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

²⁶ Bernard Dousse, "Letter to Members and Friends, Dignity–Edmonton–Dignité," 10 September 1987, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

²⁷ Dignity was invited to host meetings at Catholic Social Services with support from the CEO, Father Bill Irwin, who also helped to establish Kairos House, which supports persons living with HIV/AIDS. Father Bill also endorsed Michael Phair's 1992 inaugural election campaign.

²⁸ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Pastoral Care to Homosexual Persons," October 1, 1986, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

²⁹ "Dignity Edmonton Calendar of Events," November/December 1985, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Dignity also promoted active involvement in other LGBTQ2 community events in the city, such as dances hosted by Womospace and events organized by the Gay Alliance Toward Equality (GATE).³⁰ Dignity was also very involved in early Pride Week events, including hosting an ecumenical service with MCC on the Sunday of Pride Week, which would often be held at Rundle Park or occasionally at Victoria Park. Dignity members would frequently help post Pride Week posters around the city on light poles and hand out copies of the GATE newsletter at local LGBTQ2 bars and clubs around town.

In May 1982, Dignity Edmonton hosted the first Dignity Canada Dignité national convention at the Hotel MacDonald. The convention featured several workshops, assemblies, and a special Mass, which addressed topics such as gay freedom and gospel values, being a woman in the Church, sexual ethics, and freedom and authority in the Church.³¹

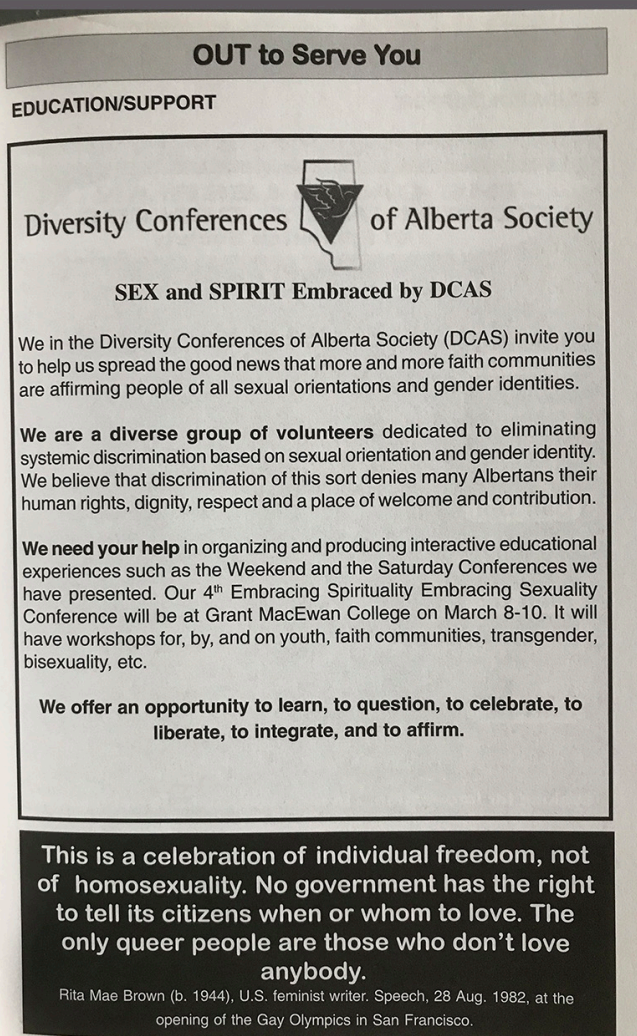
However, reports from the conference highlighted the difficulties that members faced in finding a unified stance on homosexuality within the Catholic Church. Father Thomas Gallagher, from St. Joseph's College in Edmonton, stated that it would most likely not be possible for groups such as Dignity to receive formal acceptance from the Church since it believed homosexuality to be inherently disordered and "wrong." The endorsement of organizations such as Dignity would mean the Church would essentially condone homosexuality, which it was unwilling to do.³² Such comments and reactions from the Catholic community were common. To help raise awareness and visibility, Dignity Edmonton sought to take out an advertisement in the Western Catholic Standard published by the Archdiocese of Edmonton. The ad was rejected and described as a "moral matter" that "wasn't appropriate for [their] readership". Dignity would frequently write to Archbishop Joseph MacNeil, with no response, and to local parish priests asking them to share information about Dignity and their events.³³

Bill Curtin, who was the vice-chair of the Edmonton chapter of Dignity at the time, said that clergy would frequently encourage gay people to try to train themselves to be heterosexual, including by marrying someone of the opposite gender. Those, like Curtin, who chose to live openly gay, were often outcast by their parish.³⁴ A letter to the editor of the Western Catholic Reporter written in response to Curtin's remarks highlighted the marginalization of gay Catholics as it stressed how homosexuality was just as much a sin as fornication and that clergy who had counselled Curtin in the past were correct to suggest prayer and redemption.

In June 1984, Michael Phair appealed to Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community for help in establishing a local AIDS organization³⁵. Three Dignity Edmonton members, which included Barry Breau, Tom Gale, and Bernard Dousse, joined with Michael and others to help set up the new organization, which would become known as the AIDS Network of Edmonton. Barry later became its first Executive Director, and Tom and Bernard were among the first volunteers to organize activities and support for persons with AIDS.

Dignity also collaborated with Integrity Edmonton and hosted combined church services and seder meals at All Saints Anglican Cathedral. Over the years, Dignity amassed what they called "the largest and best Gay Issue Library in the City" at member Roger's house, with members encouraged to call him to schedule a visit to peruse and borrow books.³⁶

Through all of its many efforts, Dignity Edmonton continued to argue that the Church needed to accept members of the gay and lesbian community and treat them with love and respect. This advocacy frequently included preparing submissions and writing briefs to the provincial legislature and federal parliamentary committees, which sought input into human rights legislation.



OUT to Serve You

EDUCATION/SUPPORT

Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society

SEX and SPIRIT Embraced by DCAS

We in the Diversity Conferences of Alberta Society (DCAS) invite you to help us spread the good news that more and more faith communities are affirming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

We are a diverse group of volunteers dedicated to eliminating systemic discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. We believe that discrimination of this sort denies many Albertans their human rights, dignity, respect and a place of welcome and contribution.

We need your help in organizing and producing interactive educational experiences such as the Weekend and the Saturday Conferences we have presented. Our 4th Embracing Spirituality Embracing Sexuality Conference will be at Grant MacEwan College on March 8-10. It will have workshops for, by, and on youth, faith communities, transgender, bisexuality, etc.

We offer an opportunity to learn, to question, to celebrate, to liberate, to integrate, and to affirm.

This is a celebration of individual freedom, not of homosexuality. No government has the right to tell its citizens when or whom to love. The only queer people are those who don't love anybody.

Rita Mae Brown (b. 1944), U.S. feminist writer. Speech, 28 Aug. 1982, at the opening of the Gay Olympics in San Francisco.

30 "Dignity Edmonton Calendar of Events."

31 Conference Program: Sixth Annual Dignity Canada Dignité Conference. Edmonton, AB, 1982, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.


32 Stephen Weatherbe, "The Error of their Ways," Alberta Report, June 7, 1982, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

33 Joe Sornberger, "Gay Catholics struggle for Dignity," Edmonton Journal, January 9, 1982, F11.

34 Roma de Robertis, "Local Gay Says Church Persecutes," Western Catholic Reporter, 31 May, 1982, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

35 Leslie Goldstone, Around the Kitchen Table: 25 Years of AIDS in Edmonton (Edmonton, AB: HIV Network of Edmonton Society, 2010).

36 "Synopsis of the November 9, 1982 Meeting," 1982, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. By 1984, this library was held at member Dennis' house ("Dignity Edmonton Calendar of Events," October/November 1984, MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada). It is unclear how often or how many times the location of the library moved.



Typically, Dignity's position was at odds with those of the Alberta Catholic hierarchy and the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. As a persecuted minority, Dignity members argued, Christians have a duty to take special care to include and protect marginalized members of society, including gay and lesbian people.³⁷ Over many years, Dignity Edmonton developed a collective voice and a strong sense that they were representing the beliefs of most Catholics—whether straight or LGBTQ2—and that the Catholic bishops were the ones out of touch with their members.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Learn more about Dignity Canada Dignité: <http://dignitycanada.org>

Learn more about the history of Metropolitan Community Churches: <https://insidemcc.org/about-mcc/mcc-history/>

Read about the history of Affirm United and the United Church of Canada: <https://affirmunited.ause.ca/history/>

Listen to this podcast about how Anita Bryant launched an anti-gay movement, and the activists who fought back: <https://slate.com/podcasts/one-year/s1/1977/e1/anita-bryant-gay-rights-1977>

³⁷ "The Church and the Gay Catholics of 'Dignity'", n.d., MS-595, GALA, Series 12, Box 37, File 81, Edmonton City Archives, Prince of Wales Armouries Heritage Centre, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.