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In 1996, Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz, then serving as the bishop of Lincoln, Nebraska, issued a blanket decree excommunicating all Call to Action members in his diocese.

The impact that this decision has had on CTA members in Lincoln has been profound. For over two decades, they have been barred from beloved lay ministry positions and denied the sacraments including: Communion, the sacrament of the sick, reconciliation, marriage, or even a Catholic burial. One rash political decision by a bishop has had lasting impact on their lives.

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Over the last 22 years, members repeatedly tried to reach out to their bishop, but Bruskewitz remained unmoved. Two years ago, his successor, Bishop James Conley, finally agreed to meet with CTA members.

The bridge built by Conley and members of Call to Action's Nebraska Chapter is truly remarkable. For 16 months, they prayed, shared stories and discussed common values. They also spoke honestly about the ways those values had occasionally led them to different conclusions about issues such as LGBTQ equality or women's ordination.

In a time of unprecedented division and vitriol in both our church and nation, these meetings between Conley and CTA members serve as a visible sign of the potential for Christ's reconciliation and peace in our world.

[**Related:** Lincoln bishop offers way to lift excommunication of Call to Action members](#)

Sadly, Conley's [proposed solution](#) fails to reflect the spirit of reconciliation and healing which was so present in those private meetings. He recently announced that individual members of Call to Action in the Lincoln diocese may have their excommunication rescinded *if* they attend a special event where they will recite the Nicene Creed and the Easter Vigil profession of faith with him. Otherwise, the blanket excommunication on Call to Action members would still stand.

This proposed solution only further complicates an already vague situation. The excommunication placed on CTA members in Lincoln has been canonically questionable from the beginning, and the grounds for their excommunication have never been made clear. It is true that CTA members were following their conscience by speaking out for women's rights, LGBTQ equality and lay empowerment. But to simply hold these beliefs is not an excommunicable offense. In fact, most U.S. Catholics [disagree with their bishops on these issues](#). Why were CTA members excommunicated for holding the same beliefs as most faithful U.S. Catholics?

Conley's proposal also does nothing to clarify CTA members' relationship with the larger church. If CTA members were only excommunicated in the Diocese of Lincoln, what happens when they travel to a neighboring diocese for Mass? Does an Omaha member of Call to Action somehow become excommunicated as soon as they travel to the Lincoln Diocese only to regain their standing in the Catholic Church after returning home? CTA members in Lincoln had hoped that their communication with Conley would offer much needed clarity to this situation. By proposing a special ritual to lift individual excommunications — while keeping the blanket excommunication in place — Conley has only added more confusion to an already confusing situation.

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One can't help but feel that Conley is trying to hold contradictory positions. He seems to quietly acknowledge that the excommunication is an unjust, unpastoral and ultimately embarrassing legacy handed to him by his predecessor. But the male leaders of the Catholic Church are not in the habit of acknowledging their mistakes. And so, an unjust decision is allowed to remain.

For 22 years, CTA members in Lincoln have lived lives in fidelity to a church that has not been faithful to them. They should be commended for their devotion to our Catholic faith, not asked to jump through hoops to further prove their loyalty. They deserve an apology from their diocese, and the gratitude and support of justice-seeking Catholics across the United States.

Call To Action members in Lincoln have suffered for far too long because of one bishop's mistake. Now is the time for that mistake to be corrected — not further complicated. Let's hope that Conley has the courage to do so. Only then will healing and reconciliation truly begin for the Diocese of Lincoln.

[Zach Johnson is executive director of Call to Action.]