

Bishop Brandt of Greensburg, Pa., withdraws support for CCHD

WASHINGTON - Citing concerns that some groups funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development fail to follow church teaching, Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt of Greensburg, Pa., has withdrawn support for the U.S. bishops' nationwide anti-poverty program.

Instead, the bishop told the annual Communities of Salt and Light Awards Dinner April 22, the Greensburg Diocese would establish a separate fund to support basic services such as food, shelter and utility assistance for people in need.

Bishop Brandt's decision brings to eight the number of dioceses that have either temporarily or permanently stopped supporting CCHD since 2009. Four of the dioceses are in Pennsylvania and also include Allentown, Altoona-Johnstown and Harrisburg.

Elsewhere, the dioceses of Birmingham, Ala., St. Augustine, Fla., Green Bay, Wis., and Madison, Wis., also discontinued involvement with the CCHD collection traditionally taken on Christ the King Sunday in November.

"The self-help programs are important, but there are immediate needs that we're struggling to meet in many cases," Greensburg diocesan spokesman Jerry Zufelt told Catholic News Service.

The Greensburg Diocese, located east of Pittsburgh, continues to develop guidelines for the new effort, named the Diocesan Poverty Relief Fund, he said.

Zufelt was unable to cite specific complaints that Bishop Brandt received from several sources regarding CCHD-funded organizations nationally. He said concerns arose both within the diocese and among people outside of the diocese.

"A lot of those concerns were the same ones that were expressed throughout the country," he said.

Since August 2008, those concerns have arisen largely from self-proclaimed watchdog groups, which identified CCHD-funded agencies that supported same-sex marriage and abortion either directly or indirectly. In response, CCHD has rescinded and asked for the return of funding from four organizations found to be connected with campaigns contrary to church teaching. Overall, CCHD funded 250 groups during that period.

Ralph McCloud, CCHD's executive director in Washington, said the campaign was "deeply saddened" by Bishop Brandt's decision.

"We work hard to secure the trust of bishops," he said.

CCHD has undertaken efforts to strengthen its vetting process for awarding grants to organizations working to lift people out of poverty through community organizing efforts and campaigns designed to empower marginalized people to act on their own behalf.

In a March 24 interim report to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Administrative Committee from Bishop David A. Zubik of Pittsburgh, a member of the bishops' Subcommittee on CCHD, outlined steps being taken to strengthen the review process for grants. The report also explained how new efforts will be made to identify issues and responses that reflect Catholic teaching.

In two of the Pennsylvania dioceses, the decision to withdraw from CCHD stemmed from the severe budget crisis that forced state officials in 2009 to cut support for programs providing basic human needs.

In the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown, Bishop Joseph V. Adamec decided in the fall of 2009 to use funds collected for CCHD programs to support local Catholic Charities efforts, explained Tony DeGol, diocesan secretary for communications.

"When he made the decision he was not citing any specific concerns with CCHD," DeGol said. "Our local Catholic Charities was inundated (with requests for assistance). What it did for us it highlighted a need where we needed to help Catholic Charities in any way we could."

The same reasoning held true for Bishop Kevin C. Rhoades in Harrisburg before he

was appointed bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., said Joe Aponick, diocesan director of communications.

“We will be taking up a new collection called the Matthew 25 Collection,” he said. “That’s all going to remain local. The funds will be distributed on a grant basis similar to what we would do with CCHD funds. A committee is being formed and is finalizing criteria for that. Ninety percent of the money will go to that allocation and 10 percent will remain at the parish level for local needs.”

Both spokesmen said they were unsure if empowerment or self-help programs would be funded under the new programs.