

National Pastoral Life Center to close Nov. 30; key programs continue

WASHINGTON - A gradual decline in funding in recent years is forcing the National Pastoral Life Center to close Nov. 30.

The home of numerous pioneering programs to help diocesan and parish workers in their ministries for 26 years since its founding by the late Monsignor Philip J. Murnion, the center also has had to face the rapid growth of similar training efforts sponsored by Catholic colleges and universities and other institutes nationwide, said Peter Denio, the center's acting director.

"The pastoral services are continuing in so many different ways," Denio told Catholic News Service Nov. 24. "Particularly at this time with the economy and similar organizations seeking funding from a relatively small pool ... we could not sustain ourselves in that."

Monsignor Murnion, who died of colon cancer in 2003, established the center at the urging of the U.S. bishops after he became known among diocesan and parish workers for his efforts to help them find ways of conducting local ministries despite cultural pressures and the challenges of change in the church.

"The center was originally created with the vision of Vatican II in mind and helping implement the vision of Vatican II for the Catholic Church in the United States," Denio explained. "The center was one of the first organizations to try to move that along in different creative ways."

The New York offices of the National Pastoral Life Center also was the home of the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, the Council for Pastoral Planning and Council Development, and Roundtable, the national association of diocesan social action directors. Each of the three programs will continue in new locales.

Church magazine, the pastoral center's flagship quarterly on church management,

ceased publication with its fall issue.

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative, founded in 1996 by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago to promote dialogue among Catholics with differing perspectives on contemporary Catholic issues, has relocated to the Bernardin Center for Theology and Ministry at the Catholic Theological Union of Chicago.

"We're thrilled to have the initiative coming here. It fits so beautifully with our mission of carrying forward Cardinal Bernardin's vision," Sheila McLaughlin, the center's director, told CNS.

The initiative's board of trustees and staff completed a strategic planning process in June. Its resulting long-term plan, extending through 2014, calls for the continuation of programs that foster "community and understanding" among Catholics while maintaining fidelity to church teaching.

The Roundtable is relocating to the Baltimore-Washington area, according to Barbara Budde, director of the social action office in the Diocese of Austin, Texas, and chairwoman of the organization's board.

"Because the Roundtable does so much of its work in a virtual world, we're not as concerned about where the desk is," Budde told CNS. "We're happy to relocate in the Washington-Baltimore area because of our close relations with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities USA and the other social ministry partners located there."

Planning for the Roundtable's usual summer institute and its annual symposium at the Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in February in Washington is continuing, she added.

As a separate nonprofit corporation, the Council for Pastoral Planning and Council Development will continue as well. Robert Choiniere, director of pastoral planning in the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., and chairman of the council's board, could not be reached for comment.

Denio, who took over as acting director of the National Pastoral Life Center in June when Paulist Father John E. Hurley stepped down, said three staff members -

himself and two administrative assistants - will be laid off with the closing. He will become a consultant to the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management's Standards for Excellence initiative.

"What I'm most satisfied about is that Monsignor Murnion, from what I understand, when he knew he was going to die, he wanted to ensure that the center if it had to close would close responsibly and that the people who served the center over the years had been taken care of," Denio said. "The good news for us is that the projects are able to continue and still have a significant contribution."

Files and records documenting the pastoral center's history are being transferred to the University of Notre Dame archives, Denio added.