

Russell joins archdiocese as community affairs director

Archbishop William E. Lori appointed Mary Ellen Russell, currently executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, to a new position with the Archdiocese of Baltimore as director of community affairs.

The archbishop said he created the new position “to assist the archdiocese in building partnerships within and beyond the Catholic Church in Maryland to strengthen the Church’s service to local communities.”

The appointment was announced June 4. Russell will begin her position July 2.

Archbishop Lori noted that the Catholic church, most notably through Catholic Charities, is the largest nongovernmental provider of social services in the state providing health care, education, safety-net programs, counseling and spiritual support.

“The church already provides tremendous assistance to the communities served by the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Together with the implementation of our new parish and school planning initiative, I believe we can do even more by investing in a position dedicated solely to working strategically to strengthen our partnerships wherever possible, especially in communities where the needs are greatest,” he said.

Russell has spent more than 20 years representing the Catholic dioceses that serve Maryland – the Baltimore and Washington archdioceses and the Diocese of Wilmington, Del. – working on behalf of people in the state.

In her new role as director of community affairs for the archdiocese, she will oversee outreach to local elected officials, business leaders, clergy, nonprofits and other community partners.

“I am honored to be asked to serve the archdiocese in this capacity and thrilled to have the opportunity to support the good work of the church,” Russell said. “There are so many impressive programs operated by the church and other organizations in

the archdiocese. It's exciting to contemplate how much more we can accomplish by enhancing our opportunities to work even more collaboratively."

The administrative board of the MCC had previously announced that Russell would leave her post as executive director at the end of June, tapping Jennifer Briemann, current deputy director for Respect Life, to succeed her.

In an interview after the end of the 2009 legislative session, Russell called her time at the MCC an incredible blessing. "I don't think there are a whole lot of people who get to have their profession also be so closely aligned with what they care about so deeply and their values and their faith," she said.

She said working with committed colleagues who are passionate about their faith and professional in their work was also a blessing. She appreciated the support from the bishops, who cared about the MCC's work and were committed to the church having a presence before the state Legislature.

"I think frankly, people have such a dismal view of politics these days," Russell said, "but I really don't find that at the state level you are really looking at the same kind of acrimony or stalemates that you may find at the congressional level."

She said those who work in Annapolis care about the issues and want to listen to both sides. "You'd just be amazed at the relationships and the camaraderie that exists - not only among the legislators but the lobbying corps and the people down here. I would like to think the church has played a really active role in bringing people together in Annapolis."

The church's stance on various issues is not partisan - neither red, nor blue. "We call ourselves the 'purple' organization," she said a few days after the session ended. "It gives us a real advantage over other groups because we have relationships throughout the Legislature because of one issue or another where we work hand in hand with either the Republicans or the Democrats."

Asked what she says to those who say bishops and the church should stay out of politics, she laughed and said, "It would be a dreadful world if the church stayed out of politics," noting that the Catholic conference reviewed every single proposed bill

and sometimes works to help halt some legislation before it even comes to a committee vote.

“We often say that people have no idea how many bad bills are stopped by the fact that the Catholic Conference is reading every one of these 3,000 bills that’s been introduced, figuring out what we need to do on them and then making sure that we are vigilant about things that don’t get through that people never hear about.”

Reflecting on her service at the state level and looking toward her new position, she said in April, “I’m very proud of the voice that the church has in the public square and the respect people have for the church and what we stand for.”

After her new appointment was announced, Russell said she is “excited to be working with the team at the archdiocese, for whom I have great admiration. I feel strongly drawn to working more closely to addressing the significant needs of Baltimore City and I hope I can make some small difference in doing so.”

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