

Speakers suggest ways to join pro-life, social justice efforts

WASHINGTON - At a Feb. 25 workshop during the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington, speakers asked for a show of hands from those who worked in pro-life ministries for their diocese or parish. A majority of workshop participants raised their hands.

Next came a request for a show of hands of how many worked in social justice ministries for their parish or diocese. Again, a majority of participants raised their hands.

The group was asked a third question: How many were responsible for both pro-life and social justice ministries? Another majority of hands, nearly as many who responded the first two times, went up.

It seemed, then, that most of those at the workshop, "Promoting Human Life and Dignity: Working Together for Families at Risk," were already integrating their pro-life and social justice efforts.

But they recognized shortcomings in their work and ministry that they wanted the U.S. bishops to address.

John Carr, executive director of the bishops' Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, established the linkages at the workshop's start. "Without life, we can't have dignity," he said. "Without dignity, our life isn't truly human."

Deirdre A. McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications for the bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, detailed her efforts as a young volunteer

working at a pro-life pregnancy center in South Bend, Ind.

Noting the need to support a pregnant woman throughout her pregnancy, Ms. McQuade said, “You just can’t say, ‘Go to town, girl, you can choose life now.’ ” What they need help with, she said, ranges from big things, like getting a high school diploma, to seemingly little things, like transportation to prenatal appointments.

While at the center, “my appreciation for people who were working on all these issues skyrocketed,” Ms. McQuade said.

She listed the “four pillars” of the bishops’ pastoral plan for pro-life activities: public information and education, public policy, pastoral care and prayer. “If building a culture of life is weak in one of those four areas, it won’t have the strength it needs,” she said.

Participants then voiced dozens of suggestions for the bishops’ Task Force on Human Life and Dignity to consider when they meet later this year.

Among them were:

- Creating diocesan advisory boards to acquire a consistent voice on life issues.
- Halting criticism of social justice ministries that are trying to do good. One example cited was criticism of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for its past ties with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, known as ACORN. Last year CCHD cut off grant funding to ACORN, citing ACORN’s financial irregularities.
- Working together instead of fighting for scarce dollars, an effort one participant called “co-branding.”

- Coordinating legislative advocacy.
- Changing diocesan personnel policies that offer little in the way of paid maternity leave and charge high sums for family members to be part of an employee's insurance coverage.

One participant called for the creation of a "Catholic Party" to challenge the Democrats and Republicans.

Saying he was "sick of talking about working together," Mr. Carr exhorted people to really work together instead.

"Hold up the consistent life ethic, but don't use it as a weapon," he added. "If you use it as a test, test yourself first."

The Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, which drew 550 participants, was co-sponsored by 18 agencies, including five agencies of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops: CCHD, the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, Migration and Refugee Services, and the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

Other co-sponsors were the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Daughters of the Americas, the Catholic Health Association, Catholic Relief Services, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, JustFaith, the Ladies of Charity, the National Catholic Partnership on Disability, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Pastoral Life Center, the Roundtable Association of Diocesan Social Action Directors, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.