

State Catholic Conference directors leave Annapolis with ideas, perspective

ANNAPOLIS - State Catholic Conference directors from 36 states, including Alaska and Hawaii, gathered July 31-Aug. 2 in Maryland's capital city to discuss a variety of common concerns to those who assist local bishops with public policy.

The meetings of the National Association of State Catholic Conference Directors covered topics such as health care, education, Catholic schools and immigration. Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, which hosted the 2017 summer meeting, said the directors looked at issues at the state and national levels.

Richard Barnes, NASCCD president, said some of the issues the group deals with migrate from state to state. "We share best practices on how to address these issues in the public policy arena."

Barnes, whose full-time job is executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference, based in Albany, said Catholic conference directors try to address issues from a social and pastoral perspective. "The church structure works best when we work across state lines."

Some conferences have a larger staff - Maryland and New York each have nine staffers - but others are much smaller. He said the twice-a-year meetings help the various states share ideas, allowing both smaller and larger conferences to hear the same information.

Often smaller staffs don't have the resources to do as much research as larger staffs. On the other hand, "Sometimes the larger staffs benefit from hearing from the smaller conferences because they may be more creative" in their methods, Barnes said.

Regardless of size or structure, all have the same goal. "We do the same work for

the bishops. We take the church's position and advocate in the public arenas," he said.

In a homily for the group at St. Mary's Church in Annapolis Aug. 1, Bishop Denis J. Madden, auxiliary bishop emeritus of Baltimore, praised the work of the Maryland Catholic Conference and other conferences.

Noting that more than 2,500 bills were introduced in the Maryland General Assembly's 2017 session, the bishop said, "Without the expert and dedicated guidance of the MCC, we bishops would have been at a great loss in knowing how best to respond to this overwhelming number of bills.

"Knowing the substance of the bills, their possibility of passing, who was introducing the bill, who and how many were supporting the bill, how the bill related to church teaching and many other aspects of this legislative season made up the day and night activities of our (MCC) team that enabled them to point us in a direction which would serve the church and society at large," Bishop Madden said.

He added that while he was "bragging about the MCC," which serves the Archdioceses of Baltimore and Washington and the Diocese of Wilmington, Del., he was sure that a homilist from any of the other states represented would say the same. "So not only do I thank our team for all these and so much more that they do but I, from the bottom of my heart, want to extend that same heartfelt thanks to each of you."

He said the task of a state Catholic conference is not to be a lobby or a think tank. "The privileged work of the state Catholic conferences is to uphold the teachings of Jesus Christ and the church that he founded, and to have a special concern for the poor and marginalized, the refugee and immigrant and all whom the Lord Jesus would turn His face to were he walking the streets of our cities today."

He said the topics addressed at the summer meeting - immigration, health care reform and education reform - "form the fabric of our humanity and of great concern to our church. Your actions awaken the faithful of your dioceses to so many issues that could easily be missed."

He also noted, "We are not lobbyists, rather we are those who enter into dialogue with lawmakers and those members of society who feel a keen sense of urgency and seek some direction and information with regard to political affairs."

Reflecting on the day's readings, in which Jesus explained the parable of the good seed and the weeds, Bishop Madden told the group, "You indeed help goodness to spring all around."

The summer NASCCD meeting also gives the conference directors the opportunity to bring their families with them.

Russell said, "There is a very strong bond between the executive directors because of the unique work that we do, which is both challenging and very rewarding."

The group had the chance to tour the state capitol and the State House, and a walking tour of the Naval Academy grounds.

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