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Springfield, Mass., diocese cuts 1/3 of its employees

by Catholic News Service

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. -- With Springfield Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell's approval, a reconfiguration plan for the Diocese of Springfield will take effect July 1.

Under the outline of the plan, 36 percent of the current workforce, or 49 positions, will be eliminated. A number of employees who will remain in their jobs will take on greater duties and still others will have their hours reduced. Some current departments and agencies will be eliminated entirely with any critical duties to be reassigned.

In total, the diocese is seeking to close a \$5 million projected deficit for the upcoming 2010-11 fiscal year. Diocesan officials have stated the changes will narrow that gap considerably but not entirely.

In a statement issued May 20, Bishop McDonnell said he and other diocesan officials and staff members were engaged in "some very difficult, very painful conversations" to reach a decision on the changes.

"This review has required that we evaluate everything we do in terms of three critical criteria: what is canonically or civilly required, what is best handled through a centralized diocesan operation, and finally what is best undertaken by parishes or groups of parishes with limited support from the diocese," he wrote.

Starting July 1, the diocesan central ministries and services will be realigned under three broad categories: Pastoral Ministries and Services, Evangelization, and Stewardship and Temporalities. Separately, the vicar general's office, the chancellor's office and the tribunal will continue to meet their obligations as required by canon law.

The diocese's situation, Bishop McDonnell stated, is the result of the "proverbial 'perfect storm'" caused by a downturn in the economic markets, the increased financial demands to subsidize Catholic schools in western Massachusetts, and some parishes' failure to meet their financial obligations."

The bishop said that contrary to the speculation of some, the settlements for abuse victims did not play a significant role in the diocese's financial crisis.

The reasons for the diocese's financial difficulties include the fact that each year since 2000, the amount parishes owe the diocese has increased for health and liability premiums, parish assessments and other items, Bishop McDonnell said. The amount owed is more than \$9 million, he said.

There is "little likelihood that payments will or can be made since so many parishes are operating at a deficit," he said. "The diocese used reserves to pay the insurance premiums so as to ensure the continuance of insurance at the parish level, and that diminished our savings."

He added that in addition to parish subsidies, the diocese has subsidized education in Catholic elementary and high schools by more than \$48 million, he said.

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In closing, Bishop McDonnell wrote, "I ask all to join me in praying for our co-workers who have lost their jobs. They have been true 'co-workers in the vineyard of the Lord.' I can't thank them enough for all they have done and all they have been to the diocese.

"With all my heart I hate to lose their services," the bishop wrote. "I ask God to bless and lead them on new pilgrim paths. I pray as well for our entire diocesan community as we grapple with these changes in the days, week and months to come," he said.

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