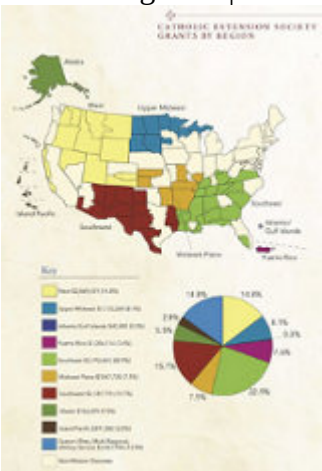
NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Bringing resources to US dioceses in need

Tom Gallagher | Oct. 1, 2010



Poverty in the United States is at a 15-year high, according to the Census Bureau. It is expected to get worse. Forty-four million people -- one in seven residents -- are living on less than $10,830 as a single person or $22,050 as a family of four. Households inside major cities experienced a 1.9 percent increase in income, whereas households outside major cities experienced a 1.9 percent decline. Most poverty can be found in the South and West regions in the United States.

How does the Catholic faith take root in places with so few resources? And who develops and sustains the faith in such places?

For over 100 years, the Chicago-based Catholic Church Extension Society has been building faith, inspiring hope and fostering self-sustaining Catholic communities across the United States.

In the early 1900s, a young Michigan priest, Fr. Francis Kelley, took a tour of the Midwestern frontier and discovered destitute priests and churches in severe disrepair. He was impelled to seek permission of the Chicago archbishop to raise funds for such communities.

The Chicago archbishop then applied to the Vatican on Catholic Extension?s behalf to become a papal society. This designation created a process, still operational today, whereby the Chicago archbishop, who is the chancellor of the Catholic Extension Society?s board of directors, has the authority to recommend to the Vatican a priest to serve as president of the society. The Vatican approves the recommendation; however, no one in an official capacity with the Vatican is designated to play a role in the society?s operations or policy decisions.

Donations are used solely in the United States. To date, it has awarded almost $500 million in grants to more than 80 ?mission dioceses? that cannot sustain themselves without support. (There are 194 dioceses in the United States.) Fr. Jack Wall of Chicago currently heads the organization.

?We exist solely to support under-resourced or isolated faith communities in order to help them experience excellence in church life and ministry,? said Joseph Boland, the society?s senior director of grants management.

?The good news is that in small places the Catholic faith communities are thriving,? said Boland.

Most know of the society because it builds churches, and distributes calendars at Christmastime through parishes or by its magazine.

The society relies on the support of some 40,000-50,000 donors. It has $193 million in assets, and in 2009, it provided more than $14 million to mission areas.

In addition to direct donations, the society sells over 3 million calendars a year. The 2011 calendars focus on the saints, vocations, stewardship, and Hispanic churches and saints.

Calendars cost approximately $1 and usually a local sponsor such as a funeral home will underwrite a parish?s free distribution of the calendars.

?We are the only seller of calendars who gives 100 percent of the net proceeds directly back to Catholic communities to sustain themselves,? said Tom Finnegan, calendar director.

In fiscal year 2009-2010, the Catholic Extension Society awarded $1 million to 59 dioceses and their parishes to increase self-sustainability initiatives.

?The lack of resources creates a vibrant spirit of innovation,? said Boland. ?Our sustainability program helps to build capacity and capitalize on innovation.?

In the Jefferson City, Mo., diocese, a $55,000 three-year grant has allowed a major gifts program and planned-giving program to be created. The grant ?allows us to strategically expand our long-term development efforts,? said Jane Rutter, director of the diocese?s stewardship office. A new quarterly newsletter is mailed to 12,000 donor households and special events are now part of fundraising programs. Over 60 families were invited to become long-term donors and 50 have already agreed to do so.

?We are greatly appreciative to CES for its support,? said Rutter.

Some isolated faith communities lack people with expertise in numerous aspects of facilities management. To address this, the Catholic Extension Society partnered with another Chicago-based organization, the Conference for Catholic Facility Management, an organization of professionals working for the Catholic church in matters of real estate, construction and facility management.

Catholic Extension made a $20,000 grant to the Conference for Catholic Facility Management that allowed 17 mission dioceses to attend the organization?s recent annual gathering. In return, the conference agreed to waive its annual dues of $200 for these dioceses.

The gathering offered leaders from isolated faith communities the opportunity to meet colleagues with valuable expertise and to attend educational seminars.

?We received wonderful stories of gratitude from the mission dioceses? attendees,? said Roger Hughes, executive director of the Conference for Catholic Facility Management. ?The feedback was remarkable.?

In addition to the annual meeting, the Conference for Catholic Facility Management has created a support group of experts from around the country who have made themselves available to offer technical advice to mission faith communities. Calls to the conference get directed to experts from dioceses like Chicago, New Orleans, and Albany, N.Y.

Many of the 17 mission dioceses have decided to become dues-paying members. Efforts are underway to enable the Conference for Catholic Facility Management to expose more of the 80 mission dioceses to its work.

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*?s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online resources

Catholic Extension Society
www.catholicextension.org
Conference for Catholic Facilities Management
www.ccfm.net

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