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Bishops dissolve ecclesial accreditation commission

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

BELLEVUE, Wash. -- The U.S. bishops have decided to move the responsibility for certifying Catholics for ecclesial ministry from a separate civil corporation in Milwaukee to the Washington headquarters of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Milwaukee-based Commission on Certification and Accreditation will be dissolved by Jan. 1 and become a subcommittee of the USCCB Committee on Catholic Education, following a 194-1 vote, with one abstention, June 15 at the bishops' spring general assembly near Seattle.

The new Subcommittee on Certification for Ecclesial Ministry also will work closely with the USCCB committees on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth and on Evangelization and Catechesis, Bishop George V. Murry of Youngstown, Ohio, reported to his fellow bishops before the vote.

As USCCB secretary, Bishop Murry chairs the conference's Committee on Priorities and Plans, which proposed the change following a review of the commission's work in light of the USCCB reorganization in 2007.

Bishop Murry said the USCCB had been contributing "an annual subsidy in excess of \$200,000" to support the work of the Commission on Certification and Accreditation in Milwaukee. The move will save about \$46,000 and eliminate one staff position, he said.

With the move, the USCCB will end its involvement in accrediting lay ministry formation programs, although the subcommittee will be available for consultations with dioceses and academic institutions about improving the quality of those programs, Bishop Murry said.

Accreditation is already being done by the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, an interfaith organization based in Decatur, Ga. Bishop Murry said the change will "eliminate duplication" in the

accreditation aspect of the commission's work.

David Lichter, executive director of the Milwaukee-based National Association of Catholic Chaplains, said the 46-year-old association "has worked very closely" with the USCCB and the commission over the years.

"We value that relationship and look forward to helping out with the transition," he said. "Our common goal is to ensure the highest professional quality of ministry."

Information distributed to the bishops about the new subcommittee said its "key mission responsibilities" would include:

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- Ensuring that "those who minister in the name of the Catholic Church, each according to his or her status in the church, are humanly and spiritually mature, well-prepared through education and formation, possess professional competence and pastoral skills, and adhere to the authentic teaching of the church."
- Reviewing and approving "sets of competency-based certification standards and certification procedures" for voluntary use by dioceses and national associations for those working as campus ministers, parish catechetical leaders, youth ministers, pastoral associates, music directors and hospital, prison or seafarer chaplains.
- Promoting the development and application of voluntary certification standards based on the U.S. bishops' 2005 statement on lay ecclesial ministry, "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord."

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