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Canadian church?s aid agency puts fall campaign on hold

Michael Swan | Oct. 8, 2012
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Canada's Catholic development aid organization had to put on hold its traditional fall education campaign after some bishops criticized the planned campaign as too political.

In early October, volunteers and staff of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace were scrambling to develop a campaign with less political material that would gain the backing of all of Canada's bishops.

On Sept. 5, Archbishop Richard Smith of Edmonton, president of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the conference general secretary Msgr. Pat Powers informed Development and Peace that several bishops objected to the fall campaign and did not want the material distributed in their dioceses.

It is the first time in the 45-year history of the Catholic development agency that an education campaign has been altered in this way.

Media reports saying the bishops intervened, blocked or stopped the fall program are inaccurate, Smith told Canadian Catholic News Oct. 1.

For the fall campaign, Development and Peace, which is similar to the U.S. church's Catholic Relief Services, departed from its plan of focusing on environmental themes to raise questions about Canada's international aid policies, following substantial reductions in government grants to the agency over the next five years.

"Some of the material was becoming a little more direct political lobbying than we're accustomed to," Smith said. Some bishops, Smith included, expressed concern the materials might cause divisiveness in parishes and among donors.

The bishops must ensure "whatever's done fosters the unity of the church and is in no way divisive," he said.

Smith said he spoke to the leadership of Development and Peace about the concerns, which they received graciously, openly and with a "readiness to understand." The agency's leadership agreed to "adjust their literature to reflect [the bishops'] concerns."

The original campaign included the distribution of postcards, which had already been printed. Parishioners throughout Canada would have been encouraged to send the pre-addressed postcards to Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

A copy of a postcard was obtained by the Toronto-based *Catholic Register*. It asks Harper to "launch a national consultation on the future of Canadian development assistance." The card also urges a "Special Parliamentary Committee to examine the new direction of Canadian assistance."

"The trend in how Canada's foreign aid programs are administered has changed quite dramatically,"

Development and Peace executive director Michael Casey told *The Catholic Register*. "The role for civil society organizations like us is becoming less apparent. More of the money is going to multilateral institutions, private sector development. ... We wanted to see if a constructive critique of this policy from our perspective could get a hearing."

The campaign did not mention the $35 million in Canadian currency cut over five years in government international aid funding to the Catholic agency, Casey said, and is not an attempt to revisit the funding decision.

Neither the bishops' conference nor Development and Peace could say how many bishops objected to campaign materials. Bishops on the conference's Standing Committee on Development and Peace said they were not consulted on the move to halt the campaign and have not seen the materials.

"I haven't had it explained to me, so I can't really comment," Toronto's Bishop John Boissonneau, chair of the committee, said in late September. "I was aware that the president of the conference sent out a letter, but there's been no follow-up with me directly."

"I kind of feel out in the cold on this," said committee member Bishop Richard Grecco of Charlottetown.

The last time the bishops' committee met was May 31 for a consultation with the Development and Peace Liaison Committee for relations with the bishops. Meanwhile, work on the fall education campaign had been delayed until June while the organization dealt with major restructuring to accommodate a drastic cut in Canadian International Development Agency funding.

Ronald Breau, Development and Peace national council president, wrote to the organization's membership Sept. 17 to explain the change in

plans. "We are fully aware that our decision will disappoint many of our active and engaged members."

"Concerns were expressed regarding the nature and methodology of the campaign with respect that it could create some divisiveness within the Church community and that perhaps there should be some more consultations within D&P and also with the broader Church," Breau said.

"The bishops are concerned that ongoing dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Government of Canada on some important, timely and sensitive issues might be compromised by our approach at this time."

Parish Development and Peace leader Greg Kennedy is left wondering what his group will do while it waits for the campaign to launch.

"Traditionally, Development and Peace at the parish level operates basically two times a year -- one in the fall with the education campaign and then the Share Lent or ShareLife in [the Toronto archdiocese]," said the Jesuit seminarian, who is studying for the priesthood and helping out at Our Lady of Lourdes in downtown Toronto. "Without those bookends, really there's not much to do until Lent."

The appearance that the bishops are divided or opposed to Development and Peace has become a challenge for parish groups, Kennedy said. And the idea that the bishops' conference did not inform its own standing committee will be even more confusing.

"The bishops set up these avenues through which both they and Development and Peace would work and all of a sudden that gets overridden. That's disturbing," he said. "What's the point of having them if they're not going to be used?"

But lobbying the government on policy does not amount to education, Grecco said.

"We can have that dialogue [on Canadian development policy]. I just don't think it should be a campaign. That's not what D&P should be about."

[Michael Swan is a staff reporter for *The Catholic Register*, Canada's national Catholic weekly newspaper. Deborah Gyapong contributed to this report from Ottawa, Canada.]

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