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Bishop: CCHD brings Gospel to struggling communities

by Michael Sean Winters

Washington — The chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the U.S. bishops' domestic anti-poverty program says that criticism of the program speaks to its success. The program, he added, gives the Gospel "flesh and blood."

"We find ourselves, with [the Catholic Campaign for Human Development], in a curious circumstance with attacks from both the left and the right," chairman Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif., told *NCR*. "I think we are victims of our own success. CCHD has been effective in these communities and that's why we are challenged in the public square."

In recent years, the campaign, chartered by the U.S. bishops in 1969, has been subject to harsh criticism by a politically conservative activist group called Reform CCHD Now. The group, which was formed by the American Life League in 2009, accused some campaign-funded organizations of working against the teachings of the church, primarily because of grant recipients' associations with other organizations.

The Reform CCHD Now group and its allies lobbied bishops to pull funding from some organizations, and some bishops have opted out of the campaign.

But a report released last month urged the U.S. bishops to "resist efforts ... to isolate Catholic-funded organizations from effective coalitions that are improving the lives of low-income citizens."

The report was published by Faith in Public Life, which bills itself as "a strategy center for the faith community advancing faith in the public square as a powerful force for justice, compassion and the common good."

The report also assailed the "witch hunt" tactics used by the campaign's opponents. It accused groups like the American Life League and Reform CCHD Now of "creating a culture of fear around community

organizing."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced June 17 that the campaign's subcommittee had approved grants totaling more than \$9 million "to empower poor and low-income persons to overcome poverty and injustice" in 2013.

"These grants represent the Catholic church and the bishops of the United States standing in solidarity with those determined not to give in to the despair caused by pervasive poverty in our country," said Ralph McCloud, director of the campaign. "CCHD is just as committed as ever to standing by those who want to create a better life for themselves, their families and their communities."

Speaking with *NCR*, Soto gave a strong defense of the anti-poverty program. "I think so much of what the church does here and throughout the world is making the Incarnation happen again," he said.

"All the church's work is about this -- how do we give the Gospel flesh and blood? CCHD has that same focus -- how do we bring the Gospel into the nitty-gritty of communities that are struggling and offer an antidote to the challenges of poverty and life at the margins?"

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The campaign's commitment to community organizing also needs to be seen in the proper perspective, he said. "For us, community organizing is not the inspiration for what we do. We do this because of *Gaudium et Spes*," the Second Vatican Council's 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

"That is the evangelical catalyst for what the church has to do in the modern world," he added. "For CCHD, the critical lens is the Gospel, and community organizing is a tool, like other things in our culture, that has to be at the service of the Gospel."

John Carr, who stepped down last year after 25 years at the bishops' conference, where his job included overseeing the campaign, told *NCR*, "The mission and work of CCHD is more essential than ever in light of the priorities and pastoral leadership of Pope Francis."

The campaign is "the best example in the U.S. of Pope Francis' vision of a church 'of and for the poor,'" Carr said. "CCHD puts into action every day Pope Francis' call for the church to get out of herself and bring our commitment to the poor 'to the streets.' Francis says, 'Getting out in the street runs the risk of an accident, but frankly I prefer a church that has accidents a thousand times to a church that gets sick' from being turned in on itself."

Carr oversaw a review of the campaign's grant processes, to make sure that they are not undermining the church's teaching in any way. Now, he has little use for the critics.

"CCHD's constant critics might consider spending less time on obscure Web searches and ideological accusations and more time working with those who are poor to protect their lives and dignity.

"The clear message of Francis is we need to work together to lift up 'the poorest, the weakest, the least important,' and not look for ways to divide or divert us. These overreaching and destructive attacks may be part of the 'sickness' the pope wants us to avoid as we seek to become a church 'of and for the poor.' "

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