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47 Catholic leaders urge bishops to support CCHD's anti-poverty work

by Dennis Sadowski by Catholic News Service

Washington — The Catholic Campaign for Human Development deserves the full support of the U.S. bishops because of its success in fighting poverty, said a group of Catholics on the eve of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' fall general assembly Nov. 11-14 in Baltimore.

In a letter addressed to all of the bishops, 47 Catholic leaders, including three retired bishops and former USCCB staff members, urged the prelates to "redouble your commitment to social ministries that lift people out of poverty," especially CCHD.

The letter was to appear as a full-page ad Monday in the Baltimore *Sun* newspaper.

It was prompted by continuing criticisms of CCHD, the bishops' domestic anti-poverty arm, from a small number of organizations that claim local anti-poverty agencies funded by the program have worked in coalitions that include members that do not share church teaching on issues, such as its opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage.

The letter writers pointed to "well-funded groups" that "attack CCHD and pressure" the bishops to withdraw from such coalitions. They added that they do not believe that such collaborative efforts tarnish the church's reputation, but uphold biblical tenets upholding social justice.

Among those signing the letter were retired Bishops Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M., and Sylvester Ryan of Monterrey, Calif., and retired Auxiliary Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit.

The letter was the result of a joint effort among the letter writers and 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."

In June, Faith in Public Life issued a report charging CCHD's opponents with undertaking a "witch hunt." It accused groups such as the American Life League and the Reform CCHD Now Coalition of "creating a culture of fear around community organizing," based on interviews with community development experts, nonprofit directors and national philanthropic leaders.

Sabrina Burton Schultz, director of life ministry in the diocese of St. Petersburg, Fla., said she signed the letter because CCHD has been "unfairly persecuted."

"It's important to show support at a diocesan level," Schultz told Catholic News Service on Friday.

She said St. Petersburg Bishop Robert Lynch agreed to let her sign the letter.

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In August, the bishop offered strong support for CCHD and questioned the tactics of the program's critics in his blog, "For His Friends."

Two organizations in the St. Petersburg diocese received national CCHD grants in 2013. "We see the wonderful work they do and we want to life that up," she said.

Another CCHD supporter, Kim Bobo, executive director of Interfaith Worker Justice in Chicago, said she signed the letter because the program supports vital programs that empower low-income people to escape the trap of poverty.

"I think a lot of us signed it because we are such fans of CCHD, such fans of the core mission and the purpose and the work it's supported over the years," she said.

"CCHD has just been a really important player in supporting the expansion of worker centers and other efforts to help low-wage workers around the country," Bobo told CNS. "They've been instrumental in city after city supporting the worker."

Msgr. Marvin Mottet, a retired priest of the diocese of Davenport, Iowa, who once served as CCHD's executive director, also signed the letter. He said the work of local organizations funded by CCHD is more effective when accomplished in coalition.

In an interview with *The Catholic Messenger*, newspaper of the Davenport diocese, he said some CCHD opponents "do not think that poor people should organize."

"Doctors, lawyers and bankers can organize, but not poor people," Mottet said. "If organizing is so bad, why does the Tea Party do it? Why does (political consultant) Karl Rove do it? Why do the rich and powerful organize? Some of the same people don't want poor people to vote. Can you imagine Jesus ever saying anything like that?"

Others signing the letter include Timothy Collins, former CCHD executive director; Jesuit Fr. Stephen Privett, president of the University of San Francisco; Patricia McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University; Miguel Diaz, professor of faith and culture at the University of Dayton and former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See; Jesuit Fr. Michael Sheeran, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities; Sr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph, president of the Leadership Conference of Women

Religious; Mercy Sr. Pat McDermott, president of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas; and Kerry Robinson, executive director of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management.

The annual collection for CCHD is scheduled to take place in most parishes the weekend of Nov. 23-24.

[Barb Arland-Fye, editor of *The Catholic Messenger*, newspaper of the diocese of Davenport, Iowa, contributed to this story.]

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