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## USCCB president's spokesperson leaves less than a year after her hiring

by Brian Roewe

Hired less than a year ago, Kim Daniels has left her post as the spokeswoman for the president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The conference confirmed the departure Wednesday, saying Daniels, the first to hold such a position, left by her own choice earlier this year.

"Kim left in January to be at home fulltime with her family," Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the conference, wrote in an email Wednesday.

Daniels, a mother of six, confirmed she left for family reasons but declined further comment.

Walsh said she could not elaborate further on Daniels' exit because of a policy not to discuss internal personnel matters. As for whether the conference will seek a replacement for the position created just 11 months ago, Walsh said the conference president "will continue to be served by staff to assist with media issues and messaging, building on the successful work of Mrs. Daniels."

The hiring of Daniels, a religious liberties lawyer, was announced April 29 as part of a projected revamping of the conference's communications strategy, with Daniels speaking for the president and the media relations office speaking for the bishops as a whole. At that time, Walsh clarified that Daniels did not fall under the communications department umbrella but would work under general secretary Msgr. Ronny Jenkins.

The timing of her hiring came on the heels of several high-profile media bouts, notably the bishops' opposition to the Obama administration's health care reform because of its mandated contraceptive

coverage and several unsuccessful state-based campaigns over the definition of marriage.

Looking at ways to use media more effectively led to conversations among bishops about the merits of a spokesperson. Some questioned how one person could speak for the full assembly, and observers wondered what the role would require, particularly for then-president Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, who already had an active media presence with his blog, weekly Sirius Radio show and frequent TV appearances.

Daniels, 45, described her duties in May to the *National Catholic Register* as drafting messages for the bishops "on priority issues," responding to press inquiries and drafting op-eds and other communications. As it turned out, that meant less time in front of cameras and more time behind the scenes. She mainly worked in the background as part of a team focused on communicating the message of the church.

Although no press releases from the conference included her name, it did come up several times in media outlets. She wrote several op-ed pieces, one in favor of immigration reform and another on the traditional definition of marriage. She also spoke to *NCR* in June about marriage and the second Fortnight for Freedom, and she appeared on a panel at Georgetown University in October discussing "The Francis Factor."

Daniels came to the conference from Catholic Voices USA, an organization she helped found in 2010 that seeks to bring the church's message into the public square in a civil manner. She cited the group's approach to discourse as a reason for her hiring, telling the *Register* that the bishops appreciated her preference of "shedding light and not heat" on hot-button issues, being less Marines and more Peace Corps.

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But it was her work prior to Catholic Voices that drew scrutiny upon her hiring.

Numerous new outlets pointed out her de facto title as "personal domestic policy czar" for Sarah Palin following the former Alaska governor's unsuccessful vice presidential bid in 2008. Daniels worked for Palin from September 2009 to April 2010, and her duties included daily briefings and writing speeches.

Before that, Daniels spent nine years with the Thomas More Law Center, a pro-bono conservative legal group that focuses on issues of religious liberty, family values and life but has also drawn criticism for anti-Islam rhetoric. In light of these connections, colleagues of Daniels came to her defense after her USSCB appointment, fending off accusations of her being an ideologue or neoconservative.

She arrived at the bishops' conference as Dolan's three-year term as president was drawing to a close. In November, the bishops elected Louisville, Ky., Archbishop Joseph Kurtz as his successor.

In the past, Dolan had been outspoken in his support for the need in the conference for a lay spokesperson to engage pressing issues in the public sphere.

Addressing New York Catholics on the importance of political engagement before an annual church lobbying day in March 2012, the cardinal called the bishops' decision to hire an "attractive, articulate, intelligent" laywoman to speak on abortion issues as "the best thing we ever did." In the early 1990s, the conference named Helen Alvarez as director of public information for its Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

Three months after those comments, Dolan again voiced his support when the topic of a spokesperson

came up during the bishops' June 2012 meetings, leading to the longest discussion of the sessions.

Wrote David Gibson of Religion News Service at the time, "The debate reflected a tension between the historic reluctance of individual bishops to cede their own pulpits and the recognition that the bishops have been losing the media war in recent high-profile controversies."

Dolan quickly seconded the idea of hiring a chief spokesperson for the conference after it was first suggested by Salt Lake City Bishop John Wester, chair of the bishops' communications committee.

Wester noted the serious problem that came without a singular spokesperson capable of issuing statements on issues in real time without requiring clearance from the bishops.

"We cannot afford to allow critically precious hours or days to slip by without speaking out," he said at the conference.

But several bishops expressed concerns, most notably how a singular spokesperson would infringe upon the teaching authority of individual bishops.

"In most organizations our size, these kinds of changes would make half of us redundant within five years," Bishop Timothy Doherty of the Lafayette, Ind., diocese said.

Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta said such a hire would only work if the person "will not be shot down" by bishops interested in promoting their own viewpoint.

Ten months later, the conference selected Daniels as the first spokesperson for its president.

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