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Petition to reinstate fired KC pantry director met by security guards

by Brian Roewe

NCR Today

Kansas City, Mo. — A group seeking to deliver a petition to Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert Finn on behalf of a fired gay foot pantry coordinator met resistance Wednesday afternoon as they attempted to enter the downtown chancery offices.

A group of about 30 people carried a copy of an online petition with more than 32,000 signatures asking that Finn apologize to Colleen Simon -- a woman dismissed from her parish position after her same-sex marriage was inadvertently made public by a local newspaper -- and to give her job back.

The group made their way into the first set of doors at the chancery before two security guards for the building blocked them from entering farther.

According to Georgia Walker, organizer of the Faithful America petition, the group prayed and sang in the lobby as they waited for a representative from the diocese to receive the petition. After calling several offices, she said a summer intern came to collect the petition. Walker said in an email to *NCR* that as she left police arrived, reportedly at the diocese's request, to break up an "unauthorized protest."

On July 17, Simon filed a lawsuit against Finn and the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese. She claimed she was fired because of her same-sex marriage, despite disclosing the relationship to the parish priests, who told her it would not play a factor. Simon is married to the Rev. Donna Simon of St. Mark Hope and Peace Lutheran Church; the couple's marriage was disclosed in a *Kansas City Star 816* magazine article exploring inter-city revitalization efforts.

Colleen Simon worked at St. Francis Xavier Church, a Jesuit parish, from July 2013 until her May

dismissal as its director of social ministry (later titled pastoral associate for life and justice). The role primarily had her working in the parish food pantry.

The suit also alleges the diocese failed to provide a complete service letter, which details job history including reason for dismissal, as required by state law. Simon is seeking monetary damages and her job returned to her.

In a letter to Finn accompanying the petition, Walker said area Catholics "yearn to have a bishop-shepherd who leads with compassion, understanding, dialogue and peace" and that they are "weary of actions that reflect inflexible church rules."

"Colleen Simon is a gracious and loving person with many talents who was putting those God-given talents to work in service to the poor. Wouldn't it be better to sit down with her, share your concerns and hear her perspective?" she said.

Walker called Simon's dismissal a "discriminatory firing" that impacts the Kansas City LGBT community "and makes many of them feel unwelcome in the church." She also questioned why the diocese does not pay into unemployment insurance "a move few dioceses do -- and noted that as a cancer survivor, Simon still requires medical treatment.

Diocesan spokesman Jack Smith told a local TV station that Faithful America is "a progressive online petition mill with no guarantee that its signatories are local or Catholic."

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[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

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