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Bill to alter parish structures draws bishops' ire

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Bishop William Lori

Legislation that would restructure the way parishes are organized in Connecticut has spurred opposition from church officials there, who charge that the measure is unconstitutional and, according to Bridgeport Bishop William Lori "a thinly-veiled attempt to silence the Catholic church on the important issues of the day, such as same-sex marriage."

The bill, which would amend the state?s "Religious Corporation Act," will be heard March 11 by the legislature?s Judiciary Committee. The measure is needed, say the bill?s proponents, to prevent the high-profile embezzlements and mismanagement that have plagued Connecticut parishes in recent years.

Connecticut Bishops react vigorously to proposal, legislators explain, defend move [1]

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"The pastors of our diocese are dong an exemplary job of sound stewardship and financial accountability, in full cooperation with their parishioners," said Lori.

From pulpits throughout the state yesterday mass-goers were urged to contact state lawmakers in opposition to the bill. In his statement, Lori said bus transportation to the state capitol would be provided to parishioners who want to make their opposition to the bill known at the hearing.

"It is time for us to defend our church!" said the Lori statement.

Under current state law, Connecticut Catholic churches are governed by a parish corporation whose officers include the bishop, the diocesan vicar general, the parish pastor and two lay trustees. The legislation would expand parish boards to include between 7-13 members "elected from among the lay members of the

congregation" with the bishop serving as a non-voting ex-officio member.

The bill deals with administrative matters of a parish and does not limit a "bishop or pastor in matters pertaining exclusively to religious tenents and practices," according to the text.

Among those spearheading the revisions to parish governance is Tom Gallagher, a Bridgeport Diocese Catholic and contributor to NCR. "We as Catholics can do better as co-fiduciaries of our parishes," said Gallagher. "This is a pro-priest proposal because it spreads the legal responsibility for a parish to lay members rather than putting it largely on the shoulders of the pastor and also the bishop."

In a March 2007 *NCR* column, Gallagher spelled-out the rationale for a new approach to parish governance. "A governance structure is needed that protects the bishops, pastors and priests from overreaching laity, while the laity need a structure that makes room for real participation and protection from overreaching bishops, pastors and priests," wrote Gallagher.

Still, said Gallagher, the legislation under consideration goes too far by limiting the voting rights of the bishop and pastor in their roles as members of the parish corporation. "Catholic parishes need to be connected more closely to their bishops and pastors ? it?s part of who we are as a church," he said.

But the church hierarchy?s problems with the bill appear to run much deeper.
"We reject this irrational, unlawful, and bigoted bill that jeopardizes the religious liberty of the church," wrote Lori.

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