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Resisting the annual diocesan appeal

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

Last month, the supporters of Ruth Kolpack (who was fired earlier this year from St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Beloit, Wis., for reasons her supporters have termed unjust) urged members of the Madison diocese to withhold funds from the annual diocesan appeal. The diocese is engaged in a massive capital campaign to help rebuild the downtown cathedral, among other efforts. The diocese raised only \$1 million of its \$3.7 million goal, according to the June 6, 2009, *Wisconsin State Journal* article, citing the vicar general Msgr. Daniel Ganshert.

Of course, missing a \$3.7 million capital campaign goal can't be attributed solely to the efforts Kolpack's supporters to redirect funds. In this down economy, every charity has trouble raising money, and I'm sure the diocese lost money on investments in the stock market (as many have).

The diocese also attempted to balance its budget by the start of its July 1 fiscal year and found it necessary to lay off 19 fulltime employees and four part-time employees from a diocesan staff of 65. Included in these layoffs are those who worked at the Catholic Multicultural Center on Madison's south side, one of the more vulnerable parts of town. It provided much-needed social services, including a food pantry, high school diploma classes and English as a second language classes. The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported that the center had a \$350,000 annual budget (the Diocese pegged it to over \$500,000).

To reopen the center, Michelle Horton at Our Lady Queen of Peace Parish, which has about 2,700 families, began a fundraising effort. More than 100 local social service agencies (some of them Catholic) met at United Way headquarters earlier this month to discuss how to keep the center open. Even the City of Madison has decided to commit funds to the reopening of the center.

In February, I met Tom Nelson, the Rural Life Coordinator for the Madison diocese, at an educational event in Iowa. We had a great chat about the social service needs of Catholics in rural parts of the diocese

and how they differ from urban needs. He talked about the various projects he was involved with to make local food more accessible through the parishes. We traded phone calls for weeks to schedule a get-together and share some ideas. He called me May 29 -- the day it turned out that he was laid off -- to warn me that our meeting might be a waste of time.

Now I have no idea how to reach Tom, and I simply feel bad for him and all the others who didn't see this coming and weren't given time to put closure on their projects.

When the neighboring Milwaukee archdiocese had to make budget cuts and lay off staff, all were given about six months to transition. The archdiocese tried to give staff leads for new jobs, and there was a special Mass to celebrate their work. What I am hearing from the Madison diocesan employees is that there was a Mass of remembrance for laid off employees, but they had already been locked out of the diocesan offices and essentially were not allowed to attend. They were to be paid through the end June, and the diocese promised to help them find new jobs.

Some here are wondering how long the Madison diocese knew that the cuts would be made. My concern is that employees were given 24-hours notice, and the budget projections were made only one month in advance. I'm not an expert on analyzing budgets, but it seems if you have the right people on staff, you can project at least a quarter in advance, if not six months. Couldn't the employees and Catholics in general been given more notice? I also wonder if decisions like these were made in the public eye, would they be made so quickly?

Critics point out that according to the audited financial statements on the diocesan web site, travel went up by \$31,000 in 2008; miscellaneous expenditures went up by an enormous \$607,000.

The diocese had a feasibility study done on the Catholic Multicultural Center and claims that it wasn't meeting its potential for vibrancy in the community; however, it seems that the community views it as something worth saving, and they are making it a priority. I'm impressed with the efforts of Michelle Horton at Queen of Peace, and the former staff of the Catholic Multicultural Center, to get things running again so that the people in our community who are most in need don't go too long without essential services. Andy Russell, the former director of the center, estimates that it will be at least a month before it could open again. The staffing will probably have to be revised, and I believe there are also questions about how best to sustain the center. I'm glad the diocese has allowed for this grass-roots fundraising effort. I hope the diocese will also allow someone else to run the center -- with the meeting at the United Way, the City of Madison, and the efforts of parishes like Queen of Peace, there are certainly people committed to keeping the center open, even if it doesn't fit into the diocesan budget line items.

I hope everyone who withheld money from the diocese to make a statement against some of Bishop Robert Morlino's decisions will at least consider this as a giving option. Of course, some are waiting to see who will run the center before they give any financial support. It seems prudent to see who will take the reins and what priority will be given to the center. What should not get lost is that the people who struggle the most during tough economic times are those who struggle most at all times -- the most vulnerable and poor in our society.

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his Master of Divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology. He works at a statewide loan fund for nonprofits that serve low-income people in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com.

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