NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

An uphill battle

Jerry Filteau | Oct. 14, 2009

In a photo that is part of a traveling exhibit to raise awareness about poverty in the United States, a minister in Chicago's South Side is moved to tears by the troubles in his impoverished neighborhood. (Steve Liss/AmericanPoverty.org)

PORTLAND, ORE. -- Facing a poverty crisis ?at levels we haven?t seen since the 1930s,? Catholic Charities USA president Fr. Larry Snyder welcomed 450 Catholic Charities leaders to their annual national meeting Sept. 24-26 in Portland.

?Last September, when Wall Street collapsed, we could not have known what we were about to face: the jobs lost, the growing number of unemployed,? he said. ?Within weeks the faces of the people you have worked with for years changed dramatically. ? Their numbers continue to grow.?

?Last year the number of people Catholic Charities agencies across the country served grew by 10.2 percent,? he said. ?That doesn?t include the first nine months of 2009,? when the numbers of unemployed, poor and hungry continued to grow dramatically.

?By any measure, this has been a difficult year,? he said. ?Our agencies are serving and turning people away in record numbers, even as they themselves have to make difficult decisions about reducing overhead and infrastructure and trying to serve more with less.?

Attendance figures at the Portland gathering indicated the severe financial pinch diocesan Catholic Charities agencies are facing. The 450 at this year?s meeting was down considerably from the plus-500, sometimes up to 600, who have attended other recent national conventions, said Patricia A. Hvidston, senior vice president for development and communication at Catholic Charities USA.

Catholic Charities of the Chicago archdiocese, which usually sends about 20 people to the annual gathering, sent only three this year.

Traveling farthest to the Portland gathering were three Catholic Charities officials from the diocese of Pago Pago, American Samoa: lay leader Cecilia Solofa and Dominican Srs. Elsa Sintilias and Evangeline Castillo. Castillo told *NCR* the trio traveled 35 hours to reach Portland for the three-day gathering.

In his keynote address Sept. 24 Snyder alluded several times to the recently released results of an annual survey on Catholic Charities activities in 2008 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University in Washington.

The nation?s diocesan Catholic Charities offices and their more than 1,700 agencies or affiliates spent more than $3.9 billion serving more than 10 million poor people, many of them in multiple capacities.

With about 18,500 parishes currently in the United States, according to CARA researcher Mary Gautier, that works out to roughly $210,000 per parish in services to the poor provided by the country?s Catholic Charities agencies.

Snyder said the 2008 and 2009 increases in services are ?not a cause for celebration. Unlike McDonald?s our goal is not to increase the number of people we serve. We want to serve fewer people -- for the reason that they would no longer need our services.?

President Obama?s health care reform campaign and the Catholic Charities project to cut poverty in America in half by 2020, launched in January 2007, formed major thematic frameworks for the Portland meeting.

David Gergen, a CNN political commentator and former advisor to four presidents, encouraged Catholic Charities leaders to continue their fight for a major reduction in poverty -- which he called a ?moral imperative? -- but warned that it will probably be a difficult uphill battle that could take not just years but decades.

?The poverty rate is scandalously high,? Gergen said, and he described Catholic Charities? goal of cutting it in half by 2020 as ?a wonderful thing if that could occur.?

He said those seeking major reductions in U.S. poverty currently have a federal administration and a Congress more favorable to their goal than they have had for many years, but the nation?s financial crisis inherited from the Bush administration and Obama?s efforts to implement major reforms in health care have effectively sidetracked any new war on poverty.

?The president?s heart is in the right place, his convictions are in the right place, but he doesn?t have the money,? Gergen said.

Yet he urged Catholic Charities leaders to ?keep the heat on? in their antipoverty campaign. He suggested that while the federal money may not be available, they should seek to draw on other resources, especially innovative solutions that do not require new expenditures, and tapping in to the idealism and passion for change emerging among young adults in recent years.

Candy S. Hill, Catholic Charities? senior vice president of social policy and government liaison, challenged participants at the gathering to kick off the second century of the national organization with a new drive for ?21st century solutions to poverty.?

The agency was born in 1910 as the National Conference of Catholic Charities, then a membership organization of five diocesan Catholic Charities organizations. It changed its name in 1986 to Catholic Charities USA, and today it represents more than 170 diocesan offices and some 1,700 related organizations and affiliates.

With the 2009 convention, Catholic Charities USA kicked off a yearlong national poverty awareness campaign, based in part on a photo gallery exhibit on poverty in America led by Steve Liss, an award-winning former *TIME* magazine photographer.

The photo gallery, with contributions from numerous photojournalists dedicated to using their photography to illustrate social justice issues in the United States, was unveiled at a Catholic Charities reception the evening of Sept. 24. It is to travel across the nation over the next year, with a final exhibition in Washington next September at the centenary meeting of Catholic Charities USA.

Liss, now a professor at Northwestern University in Chicago, said at a workshop that he regards the photo exhibit as only the first stage of a consciousness-raising process that he envisions as energizing Americans, especially the younger Americans known as the millennium generation, to combat endemic poverty in the world?s richest nation.

He said publicizing success stories in combating poverty is equally necessary because Americans confronted with the obvious challenges of poverty can be intimidated by the problem unless they also see ways that they can make a difference.

During the meeting in Portland, Catholic Charities honored several people who have made a difference over the years in how the church meets the needs of the poor and needy.

It gave its Vision Award to Sr. Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity sister who is currently president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, and who has worked for more than 35 years in administrative and governance positions in Catholic hospitals, most notably as head of Providence Hospital in Washington, D.C.

The organization?s Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan Award -- its highest award for excellence in Catholic Charities work -- went to Harold Smith, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Baltimore archdiocese for the past 33 years. Smith transformed the Baltimore agency from a small charity with 21 employees into the major charity in Maryland, a significant force not only in services rendered, but in establishing the direction and scope of state funding for such services.

Sullivan, now-retired auxiliary bishop of the Brooklyn, N.Y., diocese, presented Smith with the award named after him. Before his retirement he built the Brooklyn Catholic Charities network into the nation?s largest social service agency for the poor -- a position it still holds, even though several other U.S. archdioceses are much larger.

A panelist at one of the meeting?s sessions on poverty, Smith highlighted the ?need for a [new] social contract? in American society.

?We?re not going to get where we need to be in health care, in poverty, until we care for each other,? he said, arguing that resolving those problems depends on ?getting back to a sense of this is our responsibility.?

Snyder, in his keynote speech, urged Catholic Charities leaders to ?step up and seize the moment? without regard for the current financial crisis that makes poverty reduction not a particularly popular current political concern.

?We have an opportunity to make poverty in America morally unacceptable,? he said.

Jerry Filteau is NCR *Washington correspondent.*

Source URL (retrieved on *09/24/2014 - 01:06*): http://ncronline.org/news/peace-justice/uphill-battle