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Why one bishop dropped out of CCHD

Jerry Filteau | Jul. 7, 2010

Robert J. Baker of Birmingham, Ala. (CNS file photo)

Reporter's Notebook

WASHINGTON ? When you're calling people for a story and writing on deadline, sometimes you don't get a hoped-for call-back until after your paper has gone to press.

After I finished a story July 1 for NCR about dioceses that have decided to stop or suspend their participation in the annual Catholic Campaign for Human Development collection, Bishop Robert J. Baker of Birmingham, Ala., called back Friday, July 2, when that week's NCR had already gone to the printer.

See the main story: **10 dioceses quit bishops? antipoverty campaign** [1]

Baker had asked his people to shift last November's CCHD collection to the Church in Latin America, another yearly national collection, and he told me in future years he will replace it with a locally oriented Beacons of Hope collection "to save our center-city schools."

In the story I had only noted that he redirected last year's collection to the Church in Latin America. I didn't know he had a different agenda for the future or why he did.

He cited a study in the March 2010 issue of the Notre Dame Law Review, "Catholic Schools, Urban Neighborhoods and Education Reform," that persuaded him that one of the most important social priorities he had in his diocese was to preserve and strengthen the five predominantly black center-city schools in Birmingham and possibly the one in Huntsville.

The Notre Dame article was based on a study of inner-city schools in the Chicago archdiocese, but Baker said its findings easily apply to center-city Catholic schools educating minorities all across the country.

He said the article found that Catholic center-city schools "mean a great deal" to their neighborhoods. He quoted from the article: "We find that Catholic schools are important sources of neighborhood social capital in poorer urban communities that arguably need it the most. They appear to suppress social disorder, increase social

cohesion and bolster collective efficacy in these neighborhoods -- all findings strongly suggesting that residents' quality of life decreases when a school closes (regardless of whether they have children enrolled in the closed school)."

Baker said center-city Catholic schools are an "endangered species" whose loss will harm already poor and vulnerable minorities in those neighborhoods.

"I believe strongly that the Catholic church should go that route" of saving those schools, he said.

He added that the Notre Dame Law Review called on the U.S. church to "reconsider the direction that the Catholic Church in the United States is going" in its practical application of Catholic social teachings to current socio-economic issues.

His argument made eminent sense to this reporter, who has long reported on -- and personally lamented -- the growing disappearance of Catholic schools from center-city neighborhoods across the nation. I need only think locally of the Washington archdiocese's decision in 2007 to turn eight center-city schools into nondenominational charter schools in the wake of a long series of federal decisions to provide tuition funding only to nondenominational charter schools in the District of Columbia, or of the Baltimore archdiocese's decision this spring to close more than a dozen schools for similar reasons.

When I asked Baker what role questionable CCHD grants of recent years played in his decisions to transfer last year's collection to the Church in Latin America and to create a new "Beacons of Hope" collection for future years, he said, "My concern is more where the dollars should be going."

"I think the U.S. bishops should really reconsider where we're going ? in poverty neighborhoods. ? We can't do everything," he said. "I can't do everything. I want to keep our Catholic schools going. I want to be one of the few dioceses that are doing that."

"I'm not opposed to the desire of the American bishops to have" a broader antipoverty collection, he said, "but I think we should reconsider where we're going with Catholic schools" in that effort.

"I'm at the point where I can keep my schools going," he said. "I don't want to sound critical of CCHD, because I am not."

"Can we carry water on our shoulders on all these issues?" he asked, in reference to the CCHD focus on community organizing and local economic development, the two key areas of CCHD grants.

I sincerely regretted Baker's withdrawal from CCHD while fully understanding the reasons he presented. What his and other bishops' attitudes toward the national collection signify for the CCHD is currently a major open question.

In another phone call shortly after I filed my original story -- but soon enough to let me file a short insert before publication -- John Carr, the bishops' executive director for justice, peace and human development, promised me a follow-up interview in the next month on the CCHD's efforts to deal with the issues raised by critics who have been trying to boycott or undermine the campaign. I'll be on vacation in the next couple of weeks, but look for that story in late July or early August. I'm sure you will find it interesting.

How and why several bishops have decided in the past year to abandon the 40-year CCHD collection are undoubtedly major issues in the direction of the U.S. church today. NCR will try to provide nuanced answers that explore both issues of practicality and ideology in their decisions.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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