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Community organizing celebrated as Catholic action

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WASHINGTON -- In a 40th anniversary seminar at The Catholic University of America April 6, speakers celebrated the focus of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development on community organizing as a major contribution of the U.S. church to Catholic teaching on social justice.

The CCHD ? under intensive attack in recent years by the American Life League and other ultraconservative Catholic social, political and ecclesiastical groups ? is fulfilling the Gospel mandate of bringing justice to the poor and freedom to the oppressed through its funding of community organizing groups, speaker after speaker said.

Msgr. Robert McDermott, pastor of St. Joseph Co-cathedral in Camden, N.J. -- rated the second-poorest city in the nation although it is in the country?s richest state -- said that with CCHD funds the interfaith project CCOP (Camden Churches Organized for People) has been able to organize people in poverty-plagued neighborhoods to help regain control of their streets from drug gangs, obtain state funding to rebuild neighborhoods and help improve homes and home ownership in poor areas.

McDermott, who was one of the founders of CCOP shortly after he became pastor of St. Joseph?s in 1985, said the political, social and financial successes of CCOP over the past quarter-century are rather modest, but what is perhaps more important is that ?we?ve learned how to create power by the people. We?ve been able to have people have a feeling of accomplishment? ? a goal of self-worth and dignity that often is more important in community organizing than the more financial and political aims of its projects.

In sharp contrast to the claims of critics that community organizing is not an effective or appropriate expression of Catholic social teaching -- helping people help themselves, in contrast to charitable activities that simply provide necessities to those lacking adequate food, clothing, shelter, health care -- Aaron Dorfman said that studies show the funding of community organizing efforts regularly show ?an incredible return on investments ? 90-1, 100-1, 120-1? in terms of the economic impact on the people helped by those projects.

Dorfman is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a watchdog organization that monitors the effectiveness of philanthropic activities across their entire spectrum.

As he cited data on the high levels of economic return for the poor in community organizing, Dorfman lamented the low level of philanthropic investment in community organizing groups, saying other philanthropic organizations would do well to emulate CCHD in their grant-making programs.

?When funding goes to community organizing, you get tremendous returns on investments,? he said. Those philanthropic organizations that are doing some community organizing grants need to advertise and promote their work in this area among fellow philanthropists, he added.

?Nine out of 10 grant makers grant less than 10 percent to [projects dealing with issues of] policy,? he said. ?A tiny percentage of that goes to community organizing.?

?Now is the time to challenge grant makers? to allocate more of their social change funding to community organizing groups such as those funded by the CCHD, he said.

The Catholic Campaign for Human Development was founded by the U.S. Catholic bishops by a vote at their annual fall meeting in November 1969, on a motion filed by the then bishop of Brooklyn, N.Y., Francis J. Mugavero. The first national collection took place in November of the following year, and last November?s collection marked the start of the campaign?s 40th anniversary. Apart from the much more recent annual collection for retired women religious ? and despite recent efforts by conservative critics to derail it ? it has been by far the most successful annual collection sponsored by the U.S. bishops.

[Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.]

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