

## Lack of funding causes lay-run RCIA ministry organization to dissolve

Megan O'Neil | May. 8, 2013

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The North American Forum on the Catechumenate, a lay-run organization that formed the backbone of diocesan- and parish-based Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults programs by providing workshops and resources across the United States and Canada for more than three decades, will be dissolved.

The announcement rippled through the lay ministry community, with some describing it as the latest in a disturbing trend of eroding professional programming for lay Catholic leaders.

Steve Janco, chair of the board of directors of Forum, as the organization is known, said Tuesday the decision was financial. The nonprofit suffered a one-year, 50 percent decline in bookings for its workshops, or institutes, he noted.

"Forum's 2013 budget projected 38 institutes, a number based on recent years," Janco said. "But only 17 institutes have been booked for 2013, and one institute has already been canceled. Forum cannot continue to operate with such an immediate and significant drop in income, and Forum's limited reserves do not afford us the option to keep going and hope things will get better next year."

Janco described the decision as "heartbreaking,"

The organization has struggled in recent years to balance its books, in part because many partner dioceses have been forced to consolidate operations, shrink staff and otherwise reduce expenditures. In 2012, Forum had revenues of \$561,437 and expenditures of \$575,550, according to board treasurer Sandra Dooley.

The organization, headquartered in Washington, D.C., will cease operations by June 30 to avoid bankruptcy, Janco said. Webinars and institutes scheduled for June will proceed as planned. All programming thereafter will be the responsibility of the host dioceses or canceled. The forum's three full-time staff members will be laid off.

North American Forum on the Catechumenate is one of a number of lay-focused organizations and educational programs to be discontinued in recent years, according to professionals in the field. Others include Education for Parish Services at Trinity Washington University, which closed in 2011 after 33 years, and Washington Theological Union, a seminary with a significant lay ministry formation program that celebrated its final graduation May 4.

"We are seeing national lay organizations close due to lack of funds, among other things," said Marti Jewell, assistant professor at the University of Dallas' School of Ministry. "This is a concern as we are in an era when lay ministry is the lifeblood of our dioceses."

Lay ministries are less valued than clerical ministries and receive less diocesan support, said Christopher Anderson, executive director of the Washington, D.C.-based National Association for Lay Ministry. Formerly standalone parish offices such as lay formation, religious education and youth ministry are now being consolidated. Many parishes and dioceses have implemented no-travel rules, meaning lay leaders can no longer

attend conferences that were once routine.

"We use to be able to gather among ourselves and do programming for ourselves and meet people across the country and talk about the ministry, but that is really undermined by the lack of funding," Anderson said.

Since its founding in 1981, the North American Forum on the Catechumenate has played a starring role in shaping formation ministries across the United States and Canada. Central to its mission is an immersive, experiential approach to Christian initiation.

Institutes emphasize not only catechesis and liturgical ritual, but also community life and pastoral service. The vision is for leaders to mentor people in Christian life, teaching them to act and serve in the example of Jesus.

"It isn't only head knowledge," said Vicky Tufano, a pastoral associate at Ascension Catholic Church in the Chicago suburb of Oak Park who has helped lead Forum institutes since 1987. "It is about the whole person coming into a relationship with God."

Institutes take place across North America, frequently sponsored by dioceses wanting to provide professional-grade training for lay parish leaders charged with leading RCIA programs. They often focus on specific themes within the ministry. Forum officials draw on a team of about 75 lay ministers from across the country to staff institutes based on their areas of expertise.

"I can safely say that hundred of thousands of people have participated in institutes over the last 31 years," Janco said. "In the early years, sometimes Forum had 50 to 75 institutes a year. Some institutes had 150 participants. There could be 7,500 to 10,000 people a year that would participate in forum institutes."

Forum's biggest legacy is the thousands of lay ministers it helped train to lead the church, those involved said. Many past participants now work in dioceses and parishes across North America where they are living out its mission.

"I think Forum helped create in this country a really strong understanding of what Christian initiation is about, and people who have that vision will continue to pass that on," Tufano said.

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