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

Cleanup of Bridgeport, Conn., diocese begins in earnest

Tom Gallagher | May. 15, 2013 NCR Today

The bishop-free and oft-scandal-ridden Bridgeport, Conn., diocese announced it has offered retirement buyouts to 60 members of its 130-person staff.

According to the *Connecticut Post* [1]:

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Bridgeport is offering an early retirement incentive to almost half of the 130-person staff at its nerve center on Jewett Avenue because of financial pressures.

"We're in the process of belt-tightening, trying to be fair to everyone, including the people in the pews," said diocese spokesman Brian Wallace.

The diocese is in the middle of the "Bishop's Annual Appeal," its annual fundraiser asking parishes and parishioners to add to the diocesan coffers in addition to the diocesan tax on the offertory each week.

Wallace blamed health care and pension costs for the budget duress.

The previous bishop, now Archbishop William Lori of the Baltimore archdiocese, could have undertaken these dramatic workforce reductions and parish and school closures himself, as the financial and poorly performing diocesan operations have been a problem for years. Of course, when looking for an archdiocese to run, appearing to be a poor administrator and fundraiser usually doesn't help one's ambitions.

While in Bridgeport, then-Bishop Lori promoted the success of the inner-city schools and a "clustering" model of the schools to help them thrive.

According to Catholic News Service [2] in January 2012:

Margaret Dames, superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Bridgeport, Conn., has been keen on tapping into outside resources not just to restore schools but to help them thrive. In 2004, Bridgeport Bishop William E. Lori created a cluster of inner-city schools which was given financial support from patrons and foundations to repair structures and get schools up to speed with modern technology.

Here's Lori in his own words [3] describing the work of Madeline Lacovara, an aide who worked on the Bridgeport inner-city Catholic schools:

[Lacovara's] focus is the six elementary schools in Bridgeport, known as the "Cathedral Cluster." The Cluster was started about nine months ago, with Larry Bossidy, former CEO of Honeywell and Allied Signal, as chair of the board, and with Madeline as its president. Among many other qualifications, Madeline is the retired president of Classroom, Inc., a non-profit group that develops educational tools for urban schools. Sensing that opportunity was knocking, principals of the Cluster schools have stepped up to the plate as efforts have developed to upgrade the physical plants of these schools, to improve instruction, to enhance technology, and to provide more, much-needed, scholarship assistance.

Lacovara's husband, Philip, has long served as Lori's primary litigator, representing him and the Bridgeport diocese as its appeal to keep sex abuse files secret went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court -- they lost [4] -- and now advises Lori and the U.S. bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty [5].

Back to Margaret Dames.

Dames recently left the Bridgeport diocese last month to become the new superintendent of Catholic schools in the Newark, N.J., archdiocese. Dames, like her former boss, keeps telling the same story: The Bridgeport diocese clustering model is a successful financial model for Catholic schools.

Here is one of Dames' answers to an April 7 interview with the *Star-Ledger* [6]:

Q: How will your experience in Bridgeport influence your work in New Jersey?

A. In Bridgeport, we invested in children, not buildings. Many of our facilities needed a great deal of repair, and some had low enrollment. To save money, we consolidated our curriculum across the schools and created a financial model that works. With the help of marketing and development, we increased enrollment by up to 5 percent and got people to invest in the schools.

The back story, according to one person familiar with the finances of the Bridgeport diocese, is that the Catholic inner-city schools were simply not paying into the lay teachers' pension fund, therefore creating a serious underfunding problem for the lay pension fund. This put at risk all of the laypeople the pension fund covered.

The diocese, attempting to ward off larger debt problems, subsequently changed the lay pension fund to a 401(k)-style structure.

It's the common practice in the Bridgeport diocese that if the chancery officials keep repeating their version of a story, eventually the people and the media will believe it, irrespective of the facts.

Today, the invitation extended to 50 percent of the diocesan payroll to exit the building begins to reconcile the advertising with reality. The diocesan administrator, Msgr. Jerald Doyle, has decided to clean up the mess now as a professional courtesy to the next bishop appointed to lead the diocese.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/12/2016 - 06:12*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/cleanup-bridgeport-conn-diocese-begins-earnest

Links:
[1] http://www.ctpost.com/local/article/Diocese-offers-buyouts-to-60-4515320.php
[2] http://ncronline.org/news/people/catholic-schools-are-looking-new-ways-keep-afloat-thrive
[3] http://www.bridgeportdiocese.com/index.php/ourbishop/article/soundings_2005_06
[4] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/06/nyregion/06abuse.html
[5] http://www.usccb.org/news/2011/11-222.cfm

[6] http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2013/04/margaret_dames_plans_to_increa.html