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

Schools entrust religious mission to lay boards, trustees

| Jul. 20, 2012

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Auxiliary Bishop Robert McElroy (CNS)

SAN FRANCISCO -- San Francisco Auxiliary Bishop Robert McElroy, opening a four-day conference here, July 19-22, on the role of trustees in U.S. Catholic high schools and colleges, said the strong sense of mission, developed and maintained so ably by religious women and men over the past two centuries, is now the prime responsibility of lay boards in most schools, and he urged trustees to fully embrace their role in sustaining it.

?Every Catholic school has its own mission statement, but there is only one universal mission for Catholic education ? to point students, families, faculties, administrators and staffs constantly towards the order of grace,? he told top administrators and board members of 28 high schools, colleges and universities attending the University of San Francisco?s Institute for Catholic Educational Leadership (ICEL)conference, ?Making Decisions to Sustain Your Mission.?

This order of grace, he said, means living for others instead of oneself through love, friendship, forgiveness, sacrifice, devotion and hope, manifested in the here and now.

Noting that Catholic educational institutions are in a ?moment of transition,? Bishop McElroy counseled the lay trustees to take full responsibility for carrying their school?s mission forward.

He also identified five pitfalls he believes militate against effective leadership by trustees:

1. Deferring the stewardship of mission to the school?s administrators because they are full-time employees. Such an attitude, he said, can prevent the infusion of new ideas and constructive critiques.
2. Seeing their trustee role as filing a specific niche (finance, marketing, communication) rather than recognizing that the responsibility for mission belongs to everyone on the board. ?We must build a culture where everyone on the board believes this and acts on it,? he said.
3. Treating the mission as an artifact that ceases to be living and renewable. While acknowledging the inheritance of great traditions, the mission cannot remain rooted in the last century, he said.
4. Using the mission as a surrogate for one?s one agenda.
5. Employing the mission as a kind of weapon against innovative decisions.

Bishop McElroy said the claim by some trustees that ?the mission would not permit this? can keep the mission from being a life-giving source in the community.

Conference participants will also hear from Father Dennis Holtschneider, president of DePaul University in Chicago; Patrick Bassett, president of the National Association of Independent Schools; and Geoff Boisi, former

board chair of Boston College and founder of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management.

Additionally, they will receive a customized report of their board?s strengths and improvement areas, based on their answers to questionnaires submitted earlier this summer.

The goal, said Jesuit Father Stephen Katsouros, ICEL?s executive director, is to help trustees shift from ?management to leadership? and to decision-making that is grounded both in Catholic mission and sound principles of effective governance.

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Source URL (retrieved on *12/18/2013 - 21:40*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/schools-entrust-religious-mission-lay-boards-trustees