

Article - Catholic Governance Bill Dies In Connecticut

By DANIELA ALTIMARI, The Hartford Courant

March 11, 2009

A contentious bill that would reshape the way the Roman Catholic Church in Connecticut governs itself is dead, at least for now.

But activists pushing for changes that would give parishioners a greater role in church business say they are not deterred by the political firestorm that the matter has sparked.

"I would like to hope that the Catholic Church in Connecticut, from the bishops to the laity, will see this as an opportunity to explore how the church can better manage its affairs," Paul Lakeland, director of the Center for Catholic Studies at Fairfield University, said at a press conference in Hartford Tuesday morning.

Like corporate shareholders seeking a stronger voice, these activists are part of a larger movement to empower parishioners and bring what they say would be greater oversight to church finances. And they believe civil law could be a key to accomplishing that.

Motivated by declining membership, the priest sexual-abuse scandals, parish closings and two cases of financial impropriety at churches in Fairfield County, one of those activists, Tom Gallagher of Greenwich, asked lawmakers to intervene.

The bill would have created lay councils of seven to 13 people to oversee the finances of local parishes, relegating Catholic pastors and bishops to an advisory role. It was pulled Tuesday by the co-chairmen of the legislature's influential judiciary committee amid questions about its constitutionality.

Church leaders bristled at government interference, which they and many legal scholars view as unconstitutional. They also firmly rejected the notion that parishioners have no say in the affairs of their church.

"The laity do have a voice," said Monsignor John J. McCarthy of the Hartford archdiocese. "They don't have the definitive voice ... but they certainly have a voice."

The role of parishioners is advisory, and church law requires the pastor to consider their advice. "I'm not saying a pastor should be a czar in his parish," McCarthy said.

"We have rules in the church," added Joseph McAleer, spokesman for the Bridgeport diocese. "You cannot unilaterally decide you want [the church] to be structured differently."

The Bridgeport diocese has instituted a number of controls, including finance councils and independent audits. Parishioners have access to all financial reports, and those who report improprieties are protected by a whistle-blower policy that is communicated to all parishioners, in four languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese and French-Creole. "We really went the extra mile," McAleer said.

But efforts to turn the church into a democracy are misguided, church officials say. "The Catholic Church is not structured that way," McAleer said. "As Catholics, we want to be part of a parish family, but we also want a father figure, we want to be inspired by him. This is not something we can change. This is the law of the church."

McAleer called the bill "irresponsible" and said critics looking to "reform" the church are really seeking to change its essential nature. "They can say 'it should be this, it should be that,' but this is how it is according to church law. ... If you want to attend a church that's run like that, there are other churches. ... You can attend the Congregational church," he said.

Gallagher said he wasn't thrilled with the bill as written; he would have preferred that pastors and bishops be given voting authority.

"My little idea was to simply add a few ... lay trustees to the Catholic parish board," he said.

A former securities lawyer and graduate of Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., Gallagher did pro bono work for Mother Teresa's religious order and is an active member of St. Catherine of Siena Parish in Greenwich. He said he is motivated by a love of the church.

Meanwhile, the political ramifications of the proposal continued to reverberate Tuesday at the Capitol, with dueling press conferences, political finger pointing and more angry phone call and e-mails to lawmakers.

House Speaker Chris Donovan expressed his opposition to the bill as well as dismay that it had become a partisan matter.

The church is planning a massive rally at the Capitol this morning, even though the public hearing has been called off. Hundreds of people, many of whom were angry about what they view as the state's inappropriate and perhaps unconstitutional incursion into church affairs, are expected to attend.

Republican lawmakers, who initially urged that the hearing be canceled, will hold an "informational session" today at noon.

"The co-chairs decided for whatever reason to cancel everything ... but there are an awful lot of folks who feel very passionately about this issue," said Sen. John Kissel of Enfield, the ranking Republican on the judiciary committee. "We don't have the authority to call a

formal hearing. But we felt it would be good for those folks who wanted to come down here to express their views."