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The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops holds its spring 2024 plenary meeting in Louisville, Ky. (Video screen grab)



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After the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced last week that it would restructure its department of Justice, Peace & Human Development, the department's partner organizations face uncertainty as they try to discern their next steps without knowing the full impact of the layoffs.

"We are hoping that there is some kind of alternative plan to keep the church going, to keep the justice and peace programs going, to keep our advocacy work going," said Steven Nabieu Rogers, executive director of the Africa Faith and Justice Network.

The [Africa Faith and Justice Network](#) focuses on empowering Africans to lead advocacy in their own communities while lobbying on those communities' behalf in Washington. Rogers described the bishops' office of international justice and peace as "critical to our work, because we act as that bridge engaging the African church with the American church here."

Rogers said that the partnership between his organization and the USCCB had allowed the two organizations to share critical information and that the USCCB had used resources to push forward priorities, such as convening African bishops from the Sahel region, that would not be possible for his organization to do alone.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops confirmed in a June 25 email to Religion News Service that layoffs and restructuring had been announced internally in the department the previous day.

"It can be more accurately characterized as really a retreat from the mission of the church," said Rogers, who cited Pope Benedict XVI's words that the church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice."

Rogers said he had learned that the positions of the policy experts focused on Africa and Asia had been eliminated. He pointed out that the church is seeing its fastest [growth](#) in Africa as well as significant growth in Asia. "That's where the church is going and so therefore that relationship has to be maintained," Rogers said.

Crux [reported](#) that on Friday (June 28) the U.S. bishops received a memo signed by the Rev. Michael Fuller, the general secretary of the conference, saying that four of 17 staffers at Justice, Peace & Human Development had been let go, as were six staffers at the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. That office was moved out of the department as part of the restructuring. The department, in addition,

would become the Secretariat of Justice and Peace, a different structure in the conference's bureaucracy.

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A spokesperson for the USCCB did not respond to RNS questions about whether there are any additional position losses because of retirees whose jobs will not be refilled.

In the USCCB statement to RNS, the conference cited financial reasons for the restructuring. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is funded through a national collection, or second offering held in parishes across the country one Sunday a year. At last month's national bishops' meeting, the initiative's future was under discussion, with the conference citing lower collections recently.

But several former leaders in the department [questioned](#) a financial justification, saying the cutbacks exceeded the department's dips in funds that have been attributed to the pandemic.

"As a Catholic, I strongly believe that the mission moves the church, not the money," said Rogers, who said all collections, including those that fund international justice and peace, had shown signs of recovering.

"The top priority is to get the (CCHD) collection back to a minimum of \$9 million," said Ana Garcia-Ashley, executive director of the Gamaliel Network, whose affiliates and national operation have gotten grants from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development for faith-based community organizing. In 2022, the collection [raised](#) nearly \$8.2 million, according to its annual report.

However, for more than a decade, Michael Hichborn, who leads the nonprofit Lepanto Institute, has spearheaded a campaign against CCHD, [linking](#) grantees of the program to groups who allegedly advocate for positions contrary to Catholic teaching, including "promoting abortion, birth control, homosexuality and Marxism."

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Hichborn told RNS he has met with "a couple of dozen bishops over the years to express grave concern over the grants issued by the CCHD, and when I was able to present printed evidence of my findings, the bishops expressed shock and a desire to change things."

"Our only desire is for the treasury of the Church to be used for the salvation of souls, not the funding of secular entities making worldly and empty promises," Hichborn wrote in an email, saying of the layoffs: "Unless and until the leadership of the USCCB reorients the entire department to reflect this integral aspect of the Church's mission, this move is just another shuffling of the chairs on the deck of the Titanic."

In a June 18 [column](#) where he suggested that CCHD should be replaced by a collection for Catholic education, Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Illinois, cited reports like those Lepanto produces, alongside financial difficulties, as prompting the bishops' earlier discussion of CCHD's future.

Noting that Catholic education has faced rising costs, Paprocki, who chairs the conference's canonical affairs committee, argued that "Strong Catholic education will help lift the poor out of the cycle of poverty." He also questioned the efficacy of CCHD.

Garcia-Ashley told RNS that "education is important and we are not debating that" but that CCHD is important because "you have to change policies and you have to engage the people in poverty in their own liberation in a very clear and powerful way."

As just one example of CCHD's success, Garcia-Ashley cited "over 7,000 families that now own homes as a result of the support" of CCHD in Milwaukee.

"It's hard to say when the day is that poverty is going to be over, but that doesn't mean that we don't stop working to eradicate it, just because we don't see the end game," Garcia-Ashley said.

Garcia-Ashley and Rogers both had praised staffers who had been let go from Justice, Peace & Human Development. "These are incredibly talented and committed

people, and I know that everybody is probably chasing them right now," Garcia-Ashley said.

Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice announced that Ralph McCloud, the former longtime director of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development who left the bishops' conference before last week's layoffs, had joined Network's team as a fellow the same day that the news of the layoffs became public.

As for next steps for USCCB partners, Rogers said his organization would continue its work and mission. "What it might also mean is for organizations like ours, the Africa Faith and Justice Network, and other nonprofit faith-based organizations that are Catholic to take on new roles" and search for new resources, Rogers said.

But he also said he was holding out hope that the bishops' conference would find "some type of replacement as opposed to a complete elimination" for their work with Africa.

Said Garcia-Ashley: "We're focusing on the bishops because they make the decisions. We're focusing on the national because that's where the power lies. But don't forget the power of the pews."

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)