

Convention aims to bolster innovative ways of fighting poverty

By [Ed Langlois](#)



Rachel Lanigan listens to Dennis Keenan at a free breakfast served to bicyclists.

Sentinel photo by Ed Langlois

Leaders from the church's main network for domestic social services gathered in Portland last week to devise ways to cut U.S. poverty in half by 2020.

The Catholic Charities convention called for unprecedented cooperation among anti-poverty groups, businesses and government, plus a plan to persuade and inspire the public via digital media.

It's a major step for more than 170 day-to-day service organizations now working for systemic change.

Catholic Charities leaders are proposing to use social Web sites like FaceBook, YouTube and an Internet wiki community to convince the nation of the need to reform its approach to poverty. The organization is even backing a cross-country bike ride next year, led by a Jesuit priest who plans to raise awareness.

"We must think and act anew," said Father Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA, the agencies' umbrella organization. Urging resolve, Father Snyder reminded the 500 employees that it took Franklin Delano Roosevelt four or five years to get New Deal policies in place during the Great Depression.

Catholic Charities has faced an unprecedented workload during the nation's economic crisis. Americans are still losing jobs, creating new and large categories of people in hard times.

"You are trying to do more with less," Father Snyder told the social workers gathered Thursday in a

Hilton Hotel ballroom downtown. “We are living in a 1930s-type era.”

By federal counts, 40 million Americans are in poverty and 15 million are unemployed. Last year, Catholic Charities agencies in the U.S. served 8.5 million people.

“Unlike McDonald’s, our goal is not to increase the number of people served,” Father Snyder said.

Yet Catholic Charities sees this economy as an opportunity to, as Father Snyder put it, “build a better nation that leaves fewer behind.”

And the Catholic Church is right to be in on the job, said Father Snyder, noting that two priests who helped found the movement in 1910 later played a role in developing Social Security.

Catholic Charities workers seemed fueled by the goal to reduce poverty, but unsure just how to proceed yet.

“Everyone wants to do it,” says Deacon Brian Escobedo from Catholic Charities in Albuquerque, N.M. “It’s not a matter of whether, but how you are going to do it. We won’t back off.”

Journalist-presidential advisor David Gergen challenged Charities execs to be leaders in this time for change. He called for socially innovative ways to tackle poverty and other vexing issues.

“If you want to go first, then go alone,” he said. “If you want to go far, then go together.”

Mark Ganz, president and CEO of Regence BlueCross/BlueShield of Oregon, sat on a panel that aimed to help form a strategy for reducing poverty.

“Instead of more activity, or even more money, we need more collaboration,” said Ganz, noting that Oregon alone has 15,000 not-for-profit groups addressing poverty. In neighboring Washington state, there are 24,000.

Ganz urged the social workers to “stay focused on relationships” between agencies and with the private sector, as opposed to limiting themselves within a model of “institutional responsibility.”

Kevin Walker, also on the panel, runs a Minnesota foundation that aims to reduce poverty in eight states. Walker says the goal will best be tackled by fixing the main problems that cause people to be poor — particularly expensive health care and failing schools.

The general public is willing to do more than donate money to address poverty, Walker said. His group did a survey in the region showing that a quarter of the public had opened their homes as shelter to a friend or loved one in need during the current recession. That’s a sign of massive will that Walker says

could be channeled.

“We need to redefine the sense of the common good and figure out what role each of us can play in getting us out of this trough,” he said.

Jodi Pfarr, a panel member who runs a Minneapolis non-profit providing housing for homeless women, said funders of anti-poverty programs need to be more patient. Grants that expire after a year don't give agencies time to get at the roots of problems, Pfarr explained, arguing that it takes about seven years to bring a systemic change.

Pfarr added that solutions to social ills work best when people of all classes are in on the design — the poor, the middle class and the wealthy.

Good collaboration, the panel concluded, takes humility, willingness to change, passion and enlightened self-interest.

Holy Cross Father Tom Doyle, executive vice president of the University of Portland, encouraged the workers in their gospel-based work.

“Catholic Charities goes to markets nobody wants to serve,” Father Doyle said. “There is a reason no one goes there. There is no profit, other than eternal life.”

In the days before the gathering in bike-friendly Portland, Catholic Charities served a free breakfast to hundreds of cycle commuters on one of the bridges crossing the Willamette River. Pre-convention activities included a group bicycle tour along the Portland waterfront, a place shared by homeless residents, joggers, picnickers and yachters.

The meal and the tour highlighted Cycling for Change, the cross-country poverty-awareness ride initiated by Catholic Charities of Kansas City-St. Joseph. It's set to begin in May on the Washington coast. Jesuit Father Matt Ruhl, 50, will lead the ride, which will stop in dozens of cities to discuss regional poverty issues.

Catholic Charities USA is marking its centennial. Following a year-long series of summits, leaders will convene in Washington, D.C. in September 2010 to mark the conclusion of the commemoration and put plans into action.

— Robert Pfohman contributed to this report.