

Article for The Harvest, and The Montana Catholic

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By Moe Wosepka, Executive Director of the Montana Catholic Conference

This article is a first for us. A first for many of you to discover a bit about The Montana Catholic Conference, and a first to discuss some of the opportunities we have as Catholics in Montana to become more involved in Catholic Social Teaching as it relates to public policy. Over the next few months, as we prepare for our next legislative session, we will have the chance to talk about issues affecting us and those we are called to serve.

Let's start with a brief overview of the Montana Catholic Conference. Stay with me here. This part is wordy, but it's important to set the foundation of who we are, before our discussion can move onto where we are going.

The preamble of the Montana Catholic Conference By-Laws states: "Called by the gospel of Jesus to be a people of justice and peace, the Montana Catholic Conference provides a forum through which the bishops of the Catholic Dioceses of Great Falls-Billings and Helena act mutually and cooperatively to serve the common good by standing with the vulnerable and disenfranchised and by acting as a catalyst to transform the Church and society."

The by-laws clarify the preamble in the following statements:

The Conference is to serve the Bishops (Most Reverend Anthony M. Milone, Bishop of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings and Most Reverend George Leo Thomas, Bishop of the Diocese of Helena) by:

- 1) Surfacing from the people of God in the state of Montana, their social justice needs.
- 2) Informing and advising the Bishops...concerning matters of public policy, the legislative process, activities of governmental agencies, and personnel, and the social and moral implications of these issues.
- 3) Helping to shape public policy that protects the sanctity and dignity of all human life; nurtures the family; advocates for the poor, the sick, and the vulnerable; and promotes the common good.

The outreach begins through the board of directors consisting of ordained, religious, and lay persons from both dioceses. The current board members as appointed by Bishop Milone, and Bishop Thomas, are: Fr Jim Connor; St Mary Catholic Community in Helena; Fr Richard Schlosser; Holy Spirit Parish in Great Falls; Deacon Dan McGrath; Butte; Sister Eileen Hurley; Great Falls; Sister Judy Lund; Kalispell; Dr Craig Eddy; Missoula; Richard Martin; Great Falls; and Jim "Ziggy" Ziegler; Billings. In addition the Past State Deputy of the Knights of Columbus Art Gregor, serves on our board. Three Ex-Officio members Fr Jay Peterson, Vicar General of Great Falls-Billings, Fr John Robertson, Chancellor of the Diocese of Helena, and Deacon Tony Duvernay, Peace and Justice Director from the Diocese of Helena, hold non-voting positions on the board.

The board serves mainly as an advisory body to the two Bishops. They work as individuals, and as members of the four key committees. The Public Policy Advisory Committee assists the Conference in forming the bishops' legislative agenda. The Social Justice Committee works on issues such as poverty, healthcare access for the poor, homelessness, juvenile justice, and prisons. The Respect Life Committee works on the full range of life issues from conception to natural death, including issues such as embryonic stem cell research. The Rural Life Committee, will work with organizations such as the Eastern Montana Diocesan Catholic Rural Life Conference to promote rural life values. Our final standing committee is our Conference Outreach and Parish Involvement Committee. This committee will work to keep the parishes informed and involved in our legislative and public policy efforts. Legislators come from your towns, and your parishes. Yours is the first voice they will hear.

*Dorothy Day once said", ..by crying out unceasingly for the rights of the workers, of the poor, of the destitute...we can to a certain extent change the world. We can throw our pebble in a pond and be confident that it's ever widening circle will reach around the world."*

These words of Dorothy Day highlight what we hope to accomplish through our efforts with the Montana Catholic Conference. Our first step is to become aware of the injustices and needs in our state. Next, the Conference will bring these concerns to the Bishops. Then, working together we will attempt to affect public policy in order to protect the dignity and sanctity of every person, and to promote the common good.

In the coming months we will talk in this column about ways we can become more involved in public policy. The more we, as Catholics, stand together to throw our pebbles into the pond, the greater confidence we will have that the ever widening circle will reach around the world.