

CATHOLIC CHARITIES STUNS STATE, ENDS ADOPTIONS

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DECISION ON ADOPTION

In a stunning turn of events, Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley and leaders of Catholic Charities of Boston announced yesterday that the agency will end its adoption work, deciding to abandon its founding mission, rather than comply with state law requiring that gays be allowed to adopt children.

The Rev. J. Bryan Hehir, president of Catholic Charities of Boston, and Jeffrey Kaneb, chairman of the board, said that after much reflection and analysis, they could not reconcile church teaching that placement of children in gay homes is "immoral" with Massachusetts law prohibiting discrimination against gays.

"This is a difficult and sad day for Catholic Charities," Hehir said. "We have been doing adoptions for more than 100 years."

Catholic Charities of Boston began in 1903 as an adoption agency primarily serving Catholic children left by parents who died or abandoned them.

Officials in government, social services, and gay-rights groups expressed disappointment about the decision. Catholic Charities is widely respected among adoption providers and has handled more adoptions of foster children than any other private agency in the state.

Harry Spence, the state's commissioner of social services, said he was "deeply saddened" to hear of Catholic Charities' withdrawal.

Lee Swislow, executive director of Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, said the outcome was "very unfortunate."

Almost immediately after the announcement, Governor Mitt Romney, who was in Tennessee speaking to a Republican group, issued a statement saying he would file legislation to exempt religious organizations that provide adoption services from the state's antidiscrimination laws.

"I ask the Legislature to work with me on a bill that I will file to ensure that religious institutions are able to participate in the important work of adoption in a way that always respects and never forces them to compromise their firmly held beliefs," Romney said.

Lawmakers have said that Romney's bill has little chance of passage, and some Democrats derided it as a presidential election ploy by the governor.

State officials and other adoption agencies were still absorbing the news yesterday, but said they would work to fill the gap left by Catholic Charities. The agency was especially adept at finding homes for so-called "special needs" adoptions, which include children who are older or who have significant physical or emotional disabilities.

Catholic Charities will shut down its adoption operation June 30, Hehir said. Adoptions underway will be completed, he said.

Hehir said he hoped the decision will end the tumult surrounding the gay adoption issue. The controversy began in October when the Globe reported that Catholic Charities had been quietly processing a small number of gay adoptions, despite Vatican statements condemning the practice. Over the last decades, the Globe reported, approximately 13 children had been placed by Catholic Charities in gay households, a fraction of the 720 children placed by the agency during that period.

Agency officials said they had been permitting gay adoptions to comply with the state's anti discrimination laws. But after the story was published, the state's four bishops announced they would appoint a panel to examine whether the practice should continue. In December, the Catholic Charities board, which is dominated by lay people, voted unanimously to

continue gay adoptions.

But, on Feb. 28, the four bishops announced a plan to seek an exemption from the antidiscrimination laws. Eight of the 42 board members quit in protest, saying the agency should welcome gays as adoptive parents.

That day, Hehir and O'Malley met with Romney in his State House office to make their case for an exemption, but Romney said he lacked the authority to do so. Hehir and O'Malley left the State House feeling that nothing could be done soon for their cause. The bishops had considered launching a court challenge, but Hehir said he and O'Malley realized it would cost "too much time and energy" without any certainty of victory.

"It became clear our options were narrow," Hehir said.

In recent weeks, Hehir said, he had become increasingly concerned that the struggle over gay adoption would detract from other important work done by Catholic Charities. Since its founding, the agency had branched out significantly, helping 200,000 people in about 130 programs, including food pantries, day-care services, immigration legal clinics, and substance abuse programs. Only \$1.3 million, or less than 4 percent of total revenues, is dedicated to adoption work now, Hehir said.

Some board members said another concern was the potential impact on financing. The United Way of Massachusetts Bay, which provided \$1.2 million to Catholic Charities last year and is the largest private funder of the agency, planned to review its funding if the agency discriminated against gays and lesbians in its adoption work.

By late last week, Hehir said, it became clear that the simplest approach would be to withdraw from adoption services altogether. He convened a meeting with the board yesterday morning, in which members voted unanimously to pull out. After that, Hehir said he visited two of the agency's offices in Boston and Lawrence to tell adoption staff that its services would be over by the end of the fiscal year. Currently, the agency has 15 full-time adoption workers who will need to find new jobs.

He said workers were tearful, but understood the anguishing decision that Hehir faced.

Board members of Catholic Charities said they were also deeply saddened by the news. Some members, however, expressed some relief that they no longer had to wrestle with the painful clash between gay rights and religious freedom. James Brett, a board member, said the withdrawal was approved "with a heavy heart," but it is preferable to a protracted battle over an exemption.

"This is a better resolution," he said. "It's more straightforward."

Despite the board's sentiment, the decision upset some Catholics yesterday. Some were angry at Catholic Charities for giving up the fight for an exemption on religious grounds. The bishops have said that a 2003 Vatican document says children are best raised by a mother and father and described gay adoptions as "gravely immoral."

"It's a defeat for religious freedom," said C.J. Doyle, executive director of the Catholic Action League, a conservative Catholic advocacy group. "Not only does the church and society suffer, but the church is allowing itself to be marginalized."

Meanwhile, Andrew Davidson, 35, who was adopted as a baby through Catholic Charities of Boston, said he felt betrayed that leaders of the agency would so quickly abandon their longstanding mission rather than accommodate a small number of gay adoptions.

"My first reaction is shame on them and disappointment," he said.

Davidson, a development officer at Harvard University and father of two, said it had been "a source of pride" to say he had been adopted as an infant through Catholic Charities of Boston. His birth mother had wanted to place him with an agency that would care about Catholic upbringing. He said the church has long told desperate pregnant women that the wrong choice is abortion, and the right decision is adoption. "And now they're getting out of the adoption business?" he said.

The decision by Catholic Charities of Boston does not affect the other dioceses in the state, agency officials said. The dioceses in Worcester and Fall River, which do a small number of adoptions, are reviewing the future of their adoption programs. The diocese of Springfield does not handle adoptions.

The reverberations over the issue are beginning to be felt outside Massachusetts. On Thursday, archdiocesan officials in San Francisco said they will be reviewing their practice of allowing a small number of gay adoptions. They were told this week by their former archbishop, who is now a top Vatican official overseeing church doctrine, that such practices are banned under church doctrine.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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