

Summit report urges reforms in church to forestall financial crisis

CLEVELAND (CNS) – Broad reforms that would contribute to greater accountability and transparency regarding church finances are needed to address the financial crisis the church faces and is intensifying because of the coronavirus pandemic, said a report emerging from a winter summit of lay, religious and clergy leaders.

The report assembled by the Leadership Roundtable from February's 2020 Catholic Partnership Summit called for the Vatican and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to "create structures and laws for ethical financial leadership."

The document, "We Are the Body of Christ: Creating a Culture of Co-Responsible Leadership," also offered recommendations that emerged from three other sessions during the two-day summit.

Recommendations focused on the development of plans for co-responsible governance of the church by laity and bishops, transforming relationships within the church to build a "new culture of leadership," and welcoming young people into church leadership roles to allow their voices to be heard.

However, it is the summit's proposals regarding financial reform that garnered the highest priority from the Leadership Roundtable.

The report suggested the structure for financial reform would be patterned on the call by Pope Francis in his 2019 "motu proprio" "Vos Estis Lux Mundi" ("You are the light of the world") and the steps the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops took in 2002 to adopt the "Charter for the Protection of

Children and Young People.”

The pope’s “motu proprio” emerged from a gathering of the leaders of bishops’ conferences around the world to address the church’s response to the clergy sexual abuse crisis. It details procedures for reporting complaints of sexual abuse of minors or of vulnerable persons by clerics and it holds bishops accountable for actions or omissions relating to the handling of such reports.

The charter outlined diocesan procedures in response to clergy abuse and establishing an audit mechanism to ensure compliance with the it.

Michael Brough, deputy director of the Leadership Roundtable, said the summit of 260 church leaders from 64 dioceses, including prelates, theologians, canon lawyers, philanthropists and young adults, recommended that similar steps were necessary regarding church financial reporting.

From such a gathering a “motu proprio” – meaning on the pope’s initiative – would emerge offering “the whole church ethical financial practices and a mechanism for implementing that consistently around the world,” Brough told Catholic News Service July 17.

Summit participants, he said, “believe the church is facing this looming financial crisis.”

Having definitive financial auditing and reporting standards would serve notice that church officials were serious about handling monetary resources from parishioners and donors responsibly, Brough explained.

The reforms could be extended to all Catholic institutions including religious congregations, colleges and universities, national organizations and charities, Brough added.

The church has faced a simmering financial crisis for years.

The credibility of church leaders has suffered in the wake of the ongoing clergy sexual abuse scandal, leading people to leave the church.

Added to the decline in membership is economic pressure from payouts to victims of the clergy sexual abuse scandal that have totaled in the hundreds of millions of dollars nationwide.

Finally, the pandemic has added to the financial woes because weekly Mass attendance has not fully rebounded because, despite the resumption of public liturgies in many dioceses, there remain public health officials' restrictions on congregation size.

Brough described the recommended reforms as those that can be readily undertaken.

"This is not innovation for us in the church," he explained. "It is about spreading the best practices that are already there. These are actionable reforms. These are not vague recommendations."

The report included other recommendations regarding finances such as training for members of diocesan finance councils that could be implemented by a lay association of council chairs and "ethical and faithful stewardship" regarding fundraising, parishioner engagement, disposition of gifts and investments.

Three other sessions of the summit led to recommendations for the U.S. Catholic Church as well.

The report called for creating a governance reform working group similar to one established by the Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference. It would look at how to move toward a "co-responsible" model of church governance whereby laity and clergy have equal say in decisions about church matters.

Summit participants cited retired Pope Benedict XVI and Pope

Francis in explaining the recommendation.

Pope Benedict said in 2012 that laypeople “should not be considered ‘collaborators’ of the clergy, but people who truly are co-responsible for the being and action of the church.”

Pope Francis, meanwhile, has urged greater lay involvement and “synodality” in the church, saying, “A synodal church is a listening church” that allows different parties to learn from each other.

The summit also encouraged church leadership to be transformed to “create a thriving church.” It encouraged the transformation of relationships that emphasize co-responsibility, listening, discerning and welcoming the diversity and talents of the body of Christ.”

A fourth recommendation focused on raising the voices of young adults within the church, allowing them to enter into decision-making roles. The summit called for investment in ministerial education and leadership development of young adults and a boost in pastoral care for people of that age group.

Brough said young adults specifically were invited to the summit to provide their ideas and give voice to the needs of the next generation of church leaders. “That was a significant step,” he said.

The Leadership Roundtable was founded in the wake of the 2002 clergy sexual abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston. It was officially formed in 2005 by lay, religious and ordained leaders to help the church address the abuse crisis and promote best practices and accountability in all areas of church leadership and governance.

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The full report is online at <https://bit.ly/2ZD1g4T>.