

Catholic Church Urged to Draw on Laity

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PHILADELPHIA -- Roman Catholic officials need to look to the laity for many parts of the church's mission that historically have been dominated by priests and nuns, participants in a Catholic discussion group said Saturday after a two-day conference.

Bishop William B. Friend of the Diocese of Shreveport, La., said there used to be large numbers of people taking holy orders, enough that Catholic schools and hospitals once were heavily staffed with nuns working as teachers and nurses.

"Now their numbers have diminished. But the good news is there are large numbers of young lay people" who are interested in helping the church, Friend said.

"We have to look at the support systems and the guidance systems that will bring them into the core of the ministry of the church," Friend said.

Catholic colleges and universities should talk to students about how they can aid in the church's mission without necessarily taking holy orders, participants said.

The gathering in Philadelphia of 175 lay and religious leaders, called the Leadership Roundtable, was organized by Geoffrey Boisi, vice chairman of J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. and former board chairman of Boston College.

A similar meeting organized last year in Washington by Boisi was criticized as excluding conservative voices. Conservative lay Catholics held their own meeting in September and urged bishops not to put people who dissent from church teachings on boards and in other high-profile positions.

Boisi said hundreds of people were invited to the Philadelphia conference from across the political spectrum.

Boisi said the meeting on Friday and Saturday was funded by groups including Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities Inc., a consortium of private Catholic foundations. It was held at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

The meeting was not open to the public, but several participants discussed what had happened at a news conference Saturday evening. Large parts of the conference were devoted to issues of governance, financial management and personnel.

Francis J. Butler, president of the consortium, recommended that each diocese comply with national financial standards and that there be financial audits of each diocese published annually. Doing so would increase public confidence and could increase donations, he said.

Boisi said he wants to see similar meetings, but did not know whether they would be repeated annually.