

Covenant House seeks new acting president

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York announced March 9 that he would help find an acting president for Covenant House ministry to runaway youths. The cardinal said he was taking the action in response to an invitation from the agency's board of directors.

Cardinal O'Connor made his announcement at a press conference arranged by Covenant House but held at archdiocesan headquarters.

The cardinal said he did not yet know whom he would recommend. But he said that if the person delegated were a priest of the archdiocese of New York, the archdiocese would continue paying his salary at the existing level for archdiocesan priests.

Joseph Zwilling, archdiocesan spokesman, said priests receive a guaranteed minimum of \$7,200, though some earn additional amounts from extra Masses or other services.

The salary paid to Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter, Covenant House founder who was president until his resignation Feb. 27, was reportedly \$98,000. But the priest has said that in 1986 he began putting \$60,000 of that annual amount into a trust fund that has now become a subject of investigation by the state attorney general.

The Internal Revenue Service also said March 8 it had not turned up any documents filed with the government concerning the trust.

At the press conference, Ralph A.

Pfeiffer Jr., chairman of the Covenant House board, announced that three outside people had been added to the recently formed presidential search committee of board members.

They are: New York Auxiliary Bishop Emerson J. Moore, archdiocesan vicar for social development; Monsignor James J. Murray, director of the archdiocesan Catholic Charities, and Joan Ganz Cooney, president of Children's Television Workshop, producers of Sesame Street.

However, Cardinal O'Connor repeatedly emphasized that the archdiocese was not assuming responsibility for Covenant House or seeking to exercise control over it.

During the press conference, Pfeiffer also presented Robert J. McGuire, whose employment to conduct a full investigation of all charges against Covenant House had been announced earlier.

McGuire, a former New York City police commissioner and later head of the Pinkerton security firm, is now a senior managing director of the investigating firm Kroll Associates.

McGuire said the board had placed "absolutely no restrictions on my activity," but that he considered it "a very delicate assignment" whose purpose was not to "destroy" Covenant House.

McGuire said he was taking the job on a "reduced-fee basis" because he believed

the survival of Covenant House was "vital." At his request, McGuire said, the board was raising a separate fund to pay for the investigation so no money would be diverted from contributions made for the agency's work with homeless youngsters.

Pfeiffer said a summary of McGuire's findings would be made public, and would also be reviewed by a newly formed special oversight committee.

That committee, Pfeiffer said, will be chaired by William Ellinghaus, former president of AT&T, and will include Cyrus Vance, a lawyer and former U.S. secretary of state; Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, former interreligious affairs director and later international affairs director of the American Jewish Committee; and Paul Volcker, former chairman of the Federal Reserve and now chairman of James D. Wolfensohn Inc., a New York financial advisory company.

Although Cardinal O'Connor and Pfeiffer made no direct criticism of Father Ritter, their previously expressed confidence in the priest appeared to be weakening.

Asked if he considered it "irregular" for a priest of a religious order to have a salary and trust fund that he controlled independently, the cardinal replied, "A lot of this sounds irregular."

Father Ritter has been quoted as saying he did not want his order to know about the

trust fund, called Franciscan Charitable Trust, because he did not want his order involved in making decisions about the trust.

The trust eventually amounted to nearly \$1 million and was ostensibly to benefit Covenant House programs, but Father Ritter reportedly said no money had been spent for those programs because it had not been needed.

He reportedly took \$140,000 from the trust for his own expenses, and used it to make loans to his sister, two personal friends on the board who have since resigned, and a truck driver who had been a shelter resident.

Pfeiffer said he learned of the loans from the trust only on March 2. "I was dismayed and I was angered," he said.

Covenant House also was hit March 9 with news stories about a secret internal report dated last Oct. 22 and reportedly detailing serious operational problems.

The report was said to have found the Catholic shelter "as dangerous as a city-run shelter" with youngsters getting treatment of varying quality, and ethnic minorities on the staff feeling their opportunities for advancement were limited.

At the March 9 press conference, Pfeiffer announced that the New York firm of Cravath, Swaine & Moore had been employed as legal counsel to Covenant House.

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