

Shelter accepts deal with attorney general

By Tracy Early
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — New York state Attorney General Robert Abrams announced Feb. 27 that Covenant House, the shelter for homeless and runaway youngsters, had accepted an agreement that restructures the corporation and mandates procedures to ensure better oversight.

At the same time, Abrams announced an agreement with Franciscan Father Bruce Ritter, who headed Covenant House until his resignation last year, that imposes a lifetime bar against the priest's ever serving as a trustee of any charitable trust in the

state. The announcement of the agreement said, however, that the state was continuing its investigation of the Franciscan Charitable Trust, a secret fund Father Ritter established with part of his salary as Covenant House president.

"Since last March," Abrams said, "Covenant House's new board of directors has worked closely with my office to investigate charges of impropriety and to overhaul the administrative and financial operations and governance of this charity."

"By operating in a proper and prudent manner, under the terms of this agreement,

Covenant House will go a long way toward restoring the public's confidence in this refuge for troubled young people," he added.

The attorney general said Covenant House had voluntarily adopted many of the required changes. Robert W. McGrath, Covenant House communications director, said all substantive changes required by the agreement had been implemented by the end of last summer.

McGrath said Daughter of Charity Sister Mary Rose McGeedy signed the agreement for Covenant House on Feb. 26. Sister McGeedy, who became president in September and was formally installed Feb. 21, was acting with board authorization, he said.

Among the changes that had already occurred, Abrams noted, a key element was the establishment of a "strong board of directors" with authority to hire and fire all officers. Under the prior structure, Father Ritter was the sole member of the corporation, and as such named the directors.

In apparent allusion to various charges brought against Father Ritter's performance as president, the agreement specifies that agency executives cannot do

business with board members, relatives or staff without board approval, and that competitive bidding will be required for contracts amounting to more than \$50,000.

The agreement with Father Ritter required him to pay some \$1,500 in interest on a \$25,000 interest-free loan he received from Covenant House, the attorney general's press release said.

Such loans, it noted, are "in violation of state not-for-profit charity laws."

Abrams also said Father Ritter was barred from receiving the Covenant House severance pay he had sought after resigning.

The attorney general said the agreements concluded the civil investigation begun by his office after Manhattan District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau completed his criminal investigation. The latter ended with Morgenthau announcing the day after Father Ritter's resignation as president that there was "insufficient evidence" to prosecute.

Continuing investigation of the trust does not directly involve Covenant House because Father Ritter established and operated the trust separately.

Cincinnati sets 36-percent hike in assessment to parish income

CINCINNATI (CNS) — Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk announced Feb. 20 that parish assessments would be raised by 36 percent to avert a predicted archdiocesan budget deficit of \$1.5 million over the next three years.

The assessment, which operates much like a tax on parish income, will go from 4.2 percent to 5.7 percent effective July 1.

Directors of archdiocesan departments had earlier recommended a major restructuring of the archdiocese's central offices to help save money. But Archbishop Pilarczyk decided to increase revenues through higher assessments after consulting with priests and receiving reactions from archdiocesan employees and other groups.

In a Feb. 15 meeting, the archdiocesan priests' council advised Archbishop Pilarczyk to raise the assessment with the understanding that the new rate would be

re-evaluated next year.

A majority of priests saw the higher assessment rate as more favorable than combinations of office-restructuring plans with cutbacks on inner-city school funding and priest retirement benefits.

A letter from Archbishop Pilarczyk to pastors said the archdiocesan structure will remain intact "with some adjustments for economy and pastoral effectiveness."

Adjustments, he said, will likely include a hiring freeze, and he did not rule out the possibility of layoffs. "We're going to continue to look for ways to economize within the same structure that we have now," the archbishop said.

The archdiocese will start a major stewardship program in September and is forming a task force to look at ways to address the priests' retirement endowment — one of the biggest items in the archdiocesan budget.

Maryland law deemed permissive on abortion

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (CNS) — A bill abortion opponents called one of the most permissive in the nation was signed into law Feb. 18 by Maryland Gov. William Donald Schaefer shortly after final passage by the legislature.

Much of the discussion in the final days of the debate involved efforts to amend a "conscience clause" in the new law, which takes effect July 1. An existing, 24-year-old clause had allowed health-care workers to refuse to make abortion referrals on religious or moral grounds.

Anti-abortion advocates said the wording of the new conscience clause will force Catholic hospitals and health-care workers to make abortion referrals even though doing so would be against their religious beliefs or morals. Under the new law, hospitals will no longer be shielded from immunity if they do not make abortion referrals.

Pro-lifers who packed the State House for the final 84-52 vote on the bill by the House of Delegates called it the saddest and darkest day in Maryland's history.

Soon after the vote, Schaefer signed the bill in a hastily called press conference, which he said was "not a happy occasion."

A conscience-clause amendment proposed would have preserved the old law unless a woman's life is in danger. It failed by a 73-61 vote.

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