

Agency

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rectors, Maher's supporters have cited his May 6 dismissal letter as their proof that the agency cares more about its funders than it does about its position on such issues as abortion.

The letter outlines an incident in which Maher's actions reportedly upset Walter DeRouen, grand knight of the Knights of Columbus, an organization that had funded "a number of CFC services over the years," the letter said.

Maher had informed a *Catholic Courier* reporter about the Knights' vote to remain in the 19th Ward Association, in spite of the association's decision to lease space in its Thurston Road building to Planned Parenthood.

Maher has said that he acted as a private citizen and as a member of the 19th Ward Association in leading opponents of the leasing decision. When the *Courier* reporter called DeRouen for comment on the Knights' decision, DeRouen reportedly complained to Maher's superiors at CFC that Maher should not have informed the press of the Knights' vote, which supposedly had been secret.

"Your precipitous actions have jeopardized this and other relationships with outside parties and community groups," Maher's dismissal letter stated, in part.

Portanova, however, has consistently maintained that Maher's dismissal had nothing to do with his pro-life actions, either on or off the job. She has declined, however, to comment in detail on what led to Maher's firing, citing the agency's policy of confidentiality on personnel matters.

M. Lourdes Perez-Albuerno, associate director for Justice and Peace in diocesan

Social Ministry, echoed Portanova's comments that Maher was fired for reasons unrelated to his pro-life actions.

"His dismissal had to do with personnel issues that were longstanding," she said. "It has nothing to do with any one, specific issue."

Maher acknowledged that a number of incidents led up to his ultimate termination,



Carolyn Portanova

including his failure to complete a series of departmental reports on time and a dispute over his pay with diocesan social ministry.

He adamantly maintained, however, that it was his vocal pro-life activity that eventually cost him his job. That view was echoed by Greg Haehl, a former legislative coordinator for CFC who left his position in early 1990.

Haehl emphasized that he was "not one of the members of the Ken Maher worship

society." In fact, Haehl said he didn't think Maher was a particularly good manager when Maher ran the center's Justice and Peace Department, a position from which he was demoted last year.

But, Haehl asserted, Maher was no better and no worse than any other department head at CFC.

"Ken could have kept his job if he kept



Carol Crossed

his mouth shut," Haehl said.

The current dispute over CFC's stand on social-justice issues was foreshadowed by a report authored by the committee charged with combining three agencies into the Catholic Family Center as it exists today. The current agency was formed in 1988 through an amalgamation of the old Catholic Family Center, the Catholic Youth Organization and the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry.

Richard Dollinger, chairman of the merger oversight committee, said that a number of debates during the process centered on problems that could be produced as a result of the merger. Whereas CYO and the old CFC were concerned with providing needed services, the advocacy efforts within the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry were concerned with eliminating the very reasons such services were needed.

"Our concern was we couldn't have a social-service agency without a conscience, but we couldn't allow conscience to put us in a position where we couldn't address social need," Dollinger recalled.

Father John A. Firpo, director of diocesan Social Ministry, acknowledged that the merger of the three original agencies "hasn't been without its bumps and bruises," but said he believed that the social-justice advocacy now housed in today's CFC had been enriched, not weakened, by the merger.

Father Firpo also dismissed criticisms voiced by opponents of Maher's firing as "groundless."

Whatever the reasons for Maher's dismissal, those reasons should not be the concern of people like Crossed, according to the former president of CFC's board of directors, Thomas J. Biviano.

"Board members have no business getting involved in employees of the agency," he noted.

Biviano also had sharp words about Crossed's role on the board of directors. "Carol was rather a member *in absentia*," he said, claiming that Crossed never correctly used the parliamentary procedures for bringing issues to the board.

But Haehl maintained that the board was not interested in some of the social-justice issues that he and others wanted to address. Haehl said the board had failed to fully advance the church position on such issues as abortion, and cited a January, 1990, meeting with New York state Sen. John D.

Perry (Dem.-54th District) as one instance in which he felt the agency failed to support his lobbying efforts.

At that meeting, Haehl and a group of lobbyists from the Diocese of Rochester attempted to persuade Sen. Perry to support legislation that would require parental consent for minors obtaining abortions.

Haehl said his efforts on behalf of the bill were undermined not only by the senator's challenges to his arguments, but by Perry's contention that CFC's own board of directors hadn't taken a stance on parental consent.

For Haehl, the alleged incident was the last straw. "I've got to tell you, at the end of that meeting, I made up my mind to leave Catholic Family Center," he said.

Haehl asserted that Perry learned from Anthony Leavy, a member of CFC's board of directors, that the board had not adopted a position on the bill. Leavy also works as legislative counsel to Perry.

"People like Tony Leavy didn't think we should be involved in (supporting the parental-consent bill) because of potential loss of funding," Haehl claimed.

"Well, that's a lie," Leavy angrily stated in response to Haehl's contention. Leavy said he had never met Haehl personally and that Haehl never discussed with him the fact that the board had not taken a stance on the state parental-consent bill.

Leavy also emphasized that he did not speak to Perry about the parental-consent bill and, furthermore, that it is illegal for him to lobby Perry on an issue on behalf of the CFC board of directors.

Haehl also charged that Jama Dodson, CFC's associate executive director of programs, ordered him to omit from a monthly mailing to parishes a flyer explaining the parental-consent bill.

Shown the flyer about the parental-consent bill during a June 14 interview, however, Dodson said she did not recall ever having seen it before.

Maher suggested that the current controversy has roots extending as far back as one of the first executive meetings Portanova conducted during the fall of 1988, after the former Catholic Family Center had merged with the Catholic Youth Organization and the Genesee Valley Office of Social Ministry.

According to Maher, Portanova told those at the meeting that Joseph Calabrese, president of United Way of Greater Rochester, had told her: "I hope you're not going to let Catholic Family Center get involved in any of these anti-abortion activities."

Although Maher said Portanova directed the statement toward no one in particular, he remarked that, "I took it as personally directed towards me."

When asked about the alleged conversation with Calabrese, Portanova replied: "He did not say that to me."

She said she did recall talking to Calabrese on concerns they shared about the "divisiveness" of the abortion debate, and that she and Calabrese had agreed that pro-choice and pro-life activists often took actions that polarized people, rather than uniting them.

Calabrese likewise denied Maher's claims. He dismissed as "hilarious" and "crazy" the contention that the United Way would tie funding decisions on an agency to the agency's stance on abortion. He noted that the United Way operates in a "pluralistic" society, funding both the pro-choice Planned Parenthood and the pro-life CFC.

According to CFC's 1989-90 budgetary report, United Way of Greater Rochester provided more than \$1.4 million in funding to CFC — a contribution that constituted more than 22 percent of CFC's total revenue. In comparison, diocesan funding amounted to little more than 3 percent of CFC's total revenue.

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