

GLOBE EDITORIAL

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Checking out churches

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OTHER THAN tradition, there is no clear reason why religious organizations should be exempt from the duty to disclose financial information required of other nonprofit charities in Massachusetts. A bill scheduled to be heard today in the Legislature's Judiciary Committee, if passed, would help to bring religious groups into the modern era of financial accountability.

The measure, authored by state Senator Marian Walsh of West Roxbury, is rooted in the struggles of Catholic parishioners to glean financial information from the Archdiocese of Boston during the church's ongoing, controversial efforts to close 83 parishes. But donors, parishioners, and neighbors of any congregation, regardless of denomination, would benefit from the requirements for greater transparency.

The bill would also require every one of the more than 30,000 charitable organizations in the state, both religious and secular, to list each piece of real property it owns as part of its annual financial report. Currently, such information is scattered in property registries across the state, often under real estate trusts.

Nonprofit organizations other than religious organizations are required to provide the state attorney general with annual reports of basic financial data, such as top salaries, fund balances, and gross revenues and expenses. That is a small price to ask in return for freedom from property taxes, as well as state sales tax exemptions, special mailing rates, and other privileges. Donors to educational, medical, and social service charities use financial disclosures to track fundraising efforts and protect against waste and fraud. Contributors to religious organizations are just as deserving of such protections. But they are left in the dark.

"Financial accountability," reminds Walsh, "is another way to have moral accountability."

It is likely that opponents of the bill who testify today will perceive an assault on the church-state wall of separation. But it is hard to see how a requirement to disclose basic financial records amounts to a constitutional violation. Walsh's bill would apply equally to all denominations. And the bill poses no obvious threat of state entanglement with religious beliefs.

Walsh says that all charities, including religious organizations, were required to report financial information and property holdings in the 1930s and '40s, though enforcement was lacking. Churches used their unquestioned clout in 1954 to exempt themselves from the law, creating today's two-tier system of financial disclosure.

The Legislature now has an opportunity to serve the state's believers in financial accountability. ■