



# Pennsylvania Council of Churches

## Legislative Priorities 2011-2012 Legislative Session

November 2010

This Legislative Priorities list has been compiled by the Council's Commission on Public Witness (CPW), guided by the Council's *Principles for Public Advocacy*. In compiling the list, the CPW considered: (1) traditional issues for Council advocacy; (2) ongoing issues that received advocacy support by the Council and were not resolved in the previous session; (3) issues that have dominated our state and national policy agenda that are in need of significant change in order to truly benefit the common good; and (4) staff time and resources available to carry out the work. While only two broad issues are named as priorities for the 2010-2012 session, the Council will continue some level of work on issues that it has addressed in the past through coalition work, provision of resources, and distribution of information and alerts as needed.

### Top Priority Issues

The Pennsylvania Council of Churches has set the following as its top priority issues for legislative advocacy in the 2011-2012 legislative session. These are areas where the Council will take a major, active, role, either on its own or as a major player within a coalition or similar group.

#### 1. Human Needs<sup>1</sup>

The Council envisions a Commonwealth where government, businesses, and society: (1) recognize the value of all persons, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, age, socio-economic status, faith tradition, sexual orientation, or any other identifiable demographic characteristic—**AND** where government gives all persons a voice in making decisions concerning legislation and policies that have an impact on the ability of persons to survive and flourish in society; (2) promote, enhance, and protect the ability of all members of society to flourish; and (3) ensure that the most vulnerable citizens—children, elderly, poor, physically or mentally fragile—are not made to suffer, but have what they need to create a decent life. In order to promote this vision, the Council will work to:

- Ensure access to income security and adequate shelter, nutrition, health care, and education for all persons
- Provide adequate opportunity for all to work for their own benefit and for the benefit of their communities, with income sufficient to provide for at least a basic standard of living
- Prohibit patterns of discrimination in employment, housing, credit, health, education, or in any other areas that would limit or prevent access to all that would make for a secure and decent life
- Support legislation and policies that protect women and children
- Support legislation and policies that protect older citizens
- Support legislation and/or policies that provide for utilities security for the most vulnerable—protection from shut-offs, maintenance of assistance programs
- Advocate in conjunction with the Coalition for Low Income Pennsylvanians (CLIP) for a state level poverty commission/study to determine the core causes of poverty in Pennsylvania and consider responses to reduce poverty
- Promote the use of the Council's poverty study guide for congregations

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<sup>1</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: Pennsylvania Welfare Coalition, Pennsylvania Hunger Action, Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, Community Action Association of Pennsylvania, Coalition on Human Needs, Children's Defense Fund.

**Within the broad umbrella of Human Needs, special emphasis will be given to Health/Health Care<sup>23</sup>**

Our understanding of health comes from our belief that Christ is the great physician, for he “came that we might have life and have it abundantly.”<sup>24</sup> In a healthy society, the well being of all is a priority. Based on this understanding, the Council will:

- Support/promote policies and actions that address the concepts of health, healing and wholeness at all levels of government
- Educate the church of the need to fulfill its mission of health and healing, helping people to understand that they belong to God, and therefore must be good stewards of their bodies
- Support ongoing implementation of federal legislation passed in 2010 that sets a path for a fairer health care system, while continuing to work for legislation and policies for comprehensive health care that is available to ALL persons—health care that is inclusive, affordable, accessible, and accountable<sup>5</sup>
- Oppose medical malpractice/tort reform that limits the ability of persons to take action or recover damages in the event of medical negligence or gross errors; support medical malpractice/tort reform legislation that enforces accountability of attorneys filing medical malpractice claims to ensure that an investigation has been made to determine that malpractice has occurred so as to prevent costly unwarranted claims that drive up the cost of medical malpractice insurance
- Support sufficient funding for programs like Medicare, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) that protect the health of vulnerable persons—children, seniors, and economically challenged populations
- Support methods for reducing the cost of prescription drugs
- Support commissioning a study (including adequate funding) to evaluate the economic benefits to Pennsylvania of a system that is publicly administered and privately delivered

Specifically, the Council is looking most closely at universal, single payer health care options that involve contributions from employers and employees alike and that provide financial savings through the efficiency of having a single payer.

**2. Environment<sup>6</sup>**

We expect that the integrity of God’s creation will be honored through policies that provide for sustainable practices that protect the environment. Given this expectation, the Council will:

- Support legislation and policies aimed at reducing climate change/global warming, including, but not limited to:
  - Greenhouse gas reductions at the federal and state levels
  - Production of cleaner, more efficient vehicles, appliances, and other consumer goods, and use of more energy efficient lighting and equipment in homes, businesses, and institutions
  - Opposition to oil/gas drilling in environmentally sensitive areas
- Support federal and state clean water legislation and policies aimed at:
  - Protecting rivers, streams and larger watersheds from high concentrations of chemicals, nutrients, sediments, or other materials that threaten aquatic life, human health, and persons whose livelihood depends on them
  - Prohibition of mountaintop removal mining that destroys water sources and supplies and diminishes the quality of life for residents of mined areas

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<sup>2</sup> The reason for including “health” and “health care” is that we are speaking of two separate but related concepts. Because we affirm the value of every human life we must promote both. Health goes beyond physical health to include healing and wholeness and health care means ensuring that all people have access to those things necessary to assist in maintaining health (as a matter of justice). Efforts concerning health and health care issues involve a variety of groups such as Faithful Reform in Health Care, Health Care for All PA, and others.

<sup>3</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: Health Care For All PA, Children’s Defense Fund, Families USA.

<sup>4</sup> John 10:10, NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> From “A Faith-Inspired Vision of Health Care,” Faithful Reform in Health Care (<http://www.faithfulreform.org>).

<sup>6</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: the Pennsylvania Interfaith Climate Change Campaign, PennFuture, PennEnvironment.

- Support federal and state legislation and policies concerning toxic materials aimed at protecting the environment and human health
- Support stronger state regulation of oil and gas drilling to protect the environment and human health, and the establishment of fees to provide revenue to support this work

### **Other Issues of Interest**

These are issues that are expected to be part of the legislative agenda in the 2011-2012 session, and they are of interest to the Council based on the Council's *Principles for Public Advocacy*. As second tier issues, the Council will engage in advocacy efforts on an as needed basis, which may include alerts to constituents, signing on to support an issue through a coalition or similar group (with the coalition or other organization carrying the load), and visibility as needed at media events or in the media through op-ed pieces or letters to the editor. Available time and resources and/or anticipation of legislative activity that could result in severe or significant negative impacts to vulnerable populations will dictate actual levels of effort.

#### **1. Public Education<sup>7</sup>**

Society has a responsibility to provide comprehensive, fair, adequate and cost effective public education opportunities for all children and youth. We expect that government should ensure that all people are educated and empowered, to the extent possible, so that they are able to engage in opportunities that ensure secure and stable lives. To that end, the Council will:

- Continue to address past injustices in our public education system, rooting out patterns of discrimination that impact the ability of specific populations to receive fair and adequate quality education—including continuing support for implementing the recommendations of the state costing out study completed in 2008
- Work for fair, progressive tax structures that provide for fair and adequate funding for all students and schools
- Advocate for ambitious but reachable standards for students and schools, and for providing resources and tools to help in meeting the standards

#### **2. Economic Justice<sup>8</sup>**

We expect that government will ensure that all have what they need to create a decent life by establishing policies that do not benefit some persons or groups over others, and believe the whole of society is strengthened as its members participate in and contribute to the common good. Therefore, the Council will:

- Support legislation to raise the minimum wage to a more sufficient living wage at the federal level
- Support just tax policies that:
  - Make taxation a shared responsibility of both businesses and individuals
  - Exclude income sufficient to keep reporting households above poverty guidelines
  - Are progressive
  - Continue to support revocation of or revisions to gambling legislation
- Oppose changes to the Social Security program that include privatization

We recognize that all persons are worthy of respect simply because they are, each one, made in the image of God. This recognition leads the Council to advocate for legislation and policies that protect the safety and dignity of all, including:

#### **3. Immigration<sup>9</sup>**

- We support comprehensive and compassionate immigration reform that includes:

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<sup>7</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: Good Schools Pennsylvania, the Education Policy and Leadership Center.

<sup>8</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: Pennsylvania Budget and Policy Center, Coalition on Human Needs, Let Justice Roll Living Wage Campaign.

<sup>9</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition, the Interfaith Justice Coalition, the Coalition for Low Income Pennsylvanians, and many denominational bodies.

- An opportunity for hard-working immigrants who are already contributing to this country to come out of the shadows, regularize their status upon satisfaction of reasonable criteria and, over time, pursue an option to become lawful permanent residents and eventually United States citizens
- Reforms in our family-based immigration system to significantly reduce waiting times for separated families who often wait many years to be reunited
- The creation of legal avenues for workers and their families who wish to migrate to the U.S. to enter our country and work in a safe, legal, and orderly manner with their rights fully protected
- Border protection policies that are consistent with humanitarian values and with the need to treat all individuals with dignity and respect

#### 4. Torture and Hate Crimes<sup>10</sup>

- We oppose the use of torture as cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment by:
  - Promoting endorsement the “Torture is a Moral Issue” statement prepared by the National Religious Campaign Against Torture (NRCAT)—endorsed by the Council’s Governing Board in 2006—and supporting policies and legislation that would prohibit the use of torture without exceptions
  - Supporting International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) access to U.S.-held detainees wherever they are being held.
  - Supporting a Commission of Inquiry or similar effort that would investigate the torture policies and practices of the U.S. since 9/11 in order to hold violators accountable for their actions
  - Supporting more humane practices in U.S. prisons that avoid the long-term use of solitary confinement and prohibit physical abuse of prisoners
- We will seek to prevent hate crimes by promoting active engagement of congregations within communities to repudiate any teaching that suggests that the Gospel of Jesus Christ advocates violence toward, rather than love of, neighbor

#### 5. Government Reform<sup>11</sup>

We expect the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to ensure that all persons have a voice in government at all levels, and that access is not limited for any reason. In light of this assertion, the Council will:

- Support campaign finance reform measures that ensure fairness in funding to promote open and competitive elections
- Support legislation and policies that limit or end the influence of entities created solely to channel anonymous funding to affect the outcome of political campaigns, and that at a minimum establish transparency with regard to funding sources
- Support enforcement of lobbyist disclosure legislation that ensures that players with greater resources do not dominate or control government decision making
- Support changes that lead to a more open government system (such as open records, open meetings)
- Support legislation and/or policies that will ensure the integrity of the vote (such as a paper trail for electronic voting machines)
- Support redistricting efforts that create more competitive elections by eliminating gerrymandering to “safe districts” for parties or incumbents
- Support legislative reforms that include, but are not limited to: ensuring that Constitutional requirements concerning making of legislation are observed; putting an end to “walking around money,” known as WAMS; requiring accountability on the part of party leadership; requiring the actual presence of legislators for debate and voting; fair procedures for redistricting that promote competitive elections

#### 6. Other

- **Criminal Justice.**<sup>12</sup> We believe that there are significant problems in trials and sentencing, and that there should be no room vengeance and retribution in the Commonwealth’s criminal justice system. Because we

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<sup>10</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the National Religious Campaign Against Torture; for hate crimes, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission.

<sup>11</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, Democracy Rising PA.

believe every soul is redeemable, we oppose capital punishment in any form because it denies opportunity for rehabilitation and restoration and is often racist and classist in its application. In light of this belief, the Council will:

- Support legislation for a moratorium on or abolition of the death penalty in Pennsylvania
- Support legislation prohibiting the death penalty for mentally retarded citizens
- Support legislation and policies that address the problems within the criminal justice system that result in wrongful incarceration
- Support “second chance” legislation and policies that prohibit unnecessary discrimination with regard to employment and housing and restore the right to vote for offenders that have served their time and have been released back into society
- **Peacemaking and Global Security.** We believe that there will never be peace on earth as long as there is injustice, and that Biblical witness affirms over and over that those who are committed to peace need to work for justice for all of God’s people. To that end, the Council will:
  - Support efforts to build a safer world by elevating and strengthening U.S. investments in the non-military tools of global development and diplomacy<sup>13</sup>
  - Support treaties that seek to limit global arms production and distribution, like the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II)
- **Gun Violence.** We believe that a rising tide of handgun violence affects all corners of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and that this violence is not limited by the size of any municipality in the Commonwealth. The Council will seek to reduce the level of violence and deaths that result from illegal handgun possession and use by:
  - Supporting legislation to require the reporting of lost and stolen handguns
  - Supporting a limit on the purchase of handguns to one gun per month to reduce the incidences of “straw purchases of handguns for illegal distribution
- **Responsibility of Christians in the Public Arena.** We believe that it is the responsibility of all Christians “to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with (y)our God” (Micah 6:8). To that end, the Council will:
  - Continue to educate the faith community of its responsibility to engage in non-partisan public advocacy efforts<sup>14</sup>

### Unanticipated Issues

The Council needs to be prepared to engage in advocacy efforts concerning issues that are not on either of the lists above, particularly if the anticipated legislative or regulatory activity could result in severe or significant negative impacts to vulnerable populations. The Council’s engagement in such issues will be contingent upon whether or not the effort would be supported by the Council’s *Principles for Public Advocacy*.

The Council has policy statements that have been derived from the *Principles* that are designed to help guide decisions concerning unanticipated issues. While the statements contain a fairly comprehensive presentation of positions the Council supports based on the *Principles*, they are not designed to limit the Council’s advocacy efforts concerning issues that do not specifically appear in the statements, as long as advocacy efforts would be supported by the *Principles*.

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<sup>12</sup> Organizations the Council works with in partnership include, but are not limited to, the following: the Pennsylvania Moratorium Coalition, Pennsylvanians to Abolish the Death Penalty, the American Civil Liberties Union-PA.

<sup>13</sup> The Council partners with the Center for U.S. Global Engagement on this issue.

<sup>14</sup> This is an effort to help the Council’s constituents (at the judicatory level and in congregations) to understand the critical role they play in the Council’s advocacy efforts, and to encourage greater direct participation in advocacy efforts.