

PRESS CONFERENCE STATEMENT

October 1, 2009

My name is Bishop Bruce R. Ough. I am the episcopal leader of the West Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church. Along with my colleague Bishop John Hopkins of the East Ohio Conference of The United Methodist Church, I oversee and represent nearly 2,000 United Methodist congregations in Ohio.

We have convened this morning to announce that for the fifth time in 19 years, the Ohio Council of Churches and The United Methodist Church are successfully mobilizing tens of thousands of voters from many faith communities to vote against casino gambling in Ohio. This time we are working to defeat Issue 3, a dangerous proposal to insert new language into the Ohio Constitution to create a monopoly to run casinos in four specific locations.

Casino gambling always does more harm than good to families. That is why Ohio citizens have voted overwhelmingly against bringing predatory casino gambling into our communities each of the previous four times this has been on the ballot.

I am dismayed and outraged at this repeated, relentless and reckless effort to expand gambling in Ohio. With blatant disregard for the citizens of Ohio, who have consistently and resoundingly said “no” to the expansion of gambling, the gambling industry has once again mounted a well-funded campaign to introduce casino gambling to our state.

The proponents of Issue 3, just like their predecessors, allege they want to operate casinos in order to help the citizens of Ohio. Nothing could be further from the truth. They promise economic development, jobs and millions in revenue. In reality, they are motivated by greed, not by good will. In reality, they are exploiting the financial fears of Ohio citizens, not providing true economic growth. In reality, they are seeking extravagant profits, not stimulating sustainable productivity. In reality, they are fear-mongers, not benefactors.

Casinos are predatory by their very nature; they make windfall profits for their owners from the gambling losses of our most vulnerable neighbors. Casinos derive much of their profits from the poor who spend more than they can afford to lose. In effect, this is a regressive tax. Proximity to a casino increases the levels of addiction. National studies indicate that people who live within 50 miles of a casino are twice as likely to become gambling addicts. Problem gamblers ruin their lives and harm their families through increased debt, bankruptcy, home foreclosures, divorce, spousal abuse, child abuse and suicide. The social costs caused by problem gamblers exceed tax revenue from gambling 2 to 1. Let this sink in – for every dollar gambling generates, it will cost the taxpayers of Ohio two dollars in social costs. This is economic nonsense in a time when we most desperately need sound, sustainable economic policies.

Casinos do not bring positive economic development. Instead, casinos have the opposite effect of pulling money out of the local economy. This harms existing businesses and causes thousands of hard working citizens to lose their current jobs. This is documented anew in the report on statewide economic and social factors of Issue 3 that was just published by Hiram College on September 21st. The out of state companies that will operate these casinos will deplete the Ohio economy further as they take their profits elsewhere. Casinos ultimately lead to the loss of jobs and small businesses in the communities in which they are located.

The casino owners do not care about our state or our citizens. They are motivated by greed. They want to exploit Ohio's citizens for their own financial gain. In these hard economic times we cannot afford to bring parasitic casinos into our state.

Further, it is bad public policy and defies common sense to allow the for-profit casino interests to write their own section of the Ohio Constitution. Yet, this is precisely what they have done. They wrote the language in the proposed amendment and they paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to gather signatures to place their self-serving proposal on this November's ballot.

Their language not only grants them an exclusive monopoly on casino gambling for all time. It also dramatically limits the ability of the Ohio General Assembly to regulate their activities. The amendment specifically prohibits our state government from controlling the days or hours of operation, the size of the bets or even the types of gambling that will be allowed. In fact, the language states these monopolies can inflict on our citizens any type of gambling that is currently allowed in any other adjoining state or any new types of gambling these states may experiment with in the future, including live sports betting. Why would Ohio citizens insert into our Constitution language that delegates to other states the authority to decide what types of gambling will occur in Ohio? I do not believe Ohioans will sell their Constitution for the allure of a few shiny shekels. We are smarter than this!

These casino interests even dictated the maximum amount they will pay in taxes and wrote in an amount that is dramatically lower than in some of the surrounding states. Other language in the amendment creates a loophole stipulating they will not pay any taxes when cash is directly used to place the bets.

For all of these reasons, we are once again mounting an extensive effort to stop casino gambling from harming our citizens by defeating Issue 3. Our plan of action includes:

Yard Signs

We will place 10,000 yard signs in front of churches and other places of worship. These 10,000 yard signs will produce one million votes against Issue 3.

Education materials distributed at worship services

Starting on the first Sunday in October we will regularly distribute information opposing Issue 3 in church bulletins. A copy of the first of these bulletin inserts is available at this news conference.

E-mail network to mobilize volunteers to action

We have already reactivated our e-mail network of committed volunteers who helped to defeat Issue 6 last year. These grassroots leaders will once again encourage their friends, neighbors, co-workers and fellow church members to vote against casino gambling.

We are confident that the majority of voters will once again reject bringing casino gambling into Ohio. We will be successful in defeating Issue 3.

Sadly, at the same time the religious community is successfully organizing to defeat Issue 3, the equally harmful plan to install thousands of slot machines at seven Ohio racetracks is not yet fully off the table. Video slot machines are the most addictive form of gambling. Seventeen thousand video slot machines would increase the number of gambling addicts and have a devastating impact on Ohio families. Ohio citizens wisely voted down a previous proposal to turn racetracks into casinos with video slot machines.

The video slot machine plan as set forth in executive orders from Governor Strickland is fatally flawed and doomed to failure. Several lawsuits have been filed in the Ohio Supreme Court against the video slot proposal. The Court recently ruled in favor of one of the challenges, agreeing that the citizens of the state have the right to gather signatures to force a referendum vote. This decision means that the slot machine proposal may be delayed until a statewide vote in 2010.

Our legal counsel has reviewed the other lawsuits that are still pending before the Ohio Supreme Court and concurs that these cases have merit. These lawsuits assert that the slot machine proposal violates the Ohio constitution on several key grounds. We are confident that the Court will rule with the plaintiffs in these cases, declaring that the slot machine proposal is unconstitutional.

The video slot machine proposal was not well developed from its inception. The initial ill-conceived provision to allow 18 year olds to bet on slot machines is one salient example. This revealed a callous disregard for teenagers who are more susceptible to gaming addiction than persons over the age of 21.

Furthermore, the racetrack owners have already failed to comply with a variety of the requirements set forth in the governor's executive orders. Five of the seven racetracks failed to meet the deadline for the initial payment of \$13 million for the right to operate slot machines. This means the state of Ohio is already missing \$65 million in slot machine related revenue required to keep the budget balanced.

Yesterday, Governor Strickland displayed sound judgment and much needed executive leadership in proposing that the \$900 million gap in the current biennium budget be closed by freezing the income tax rates at the 2008 level, postponing the final year of a state income tax cut. I commend the Governor for his seeking to resolve the budget crisis without gambling money and for reaffirming his commitment to a budget that prioritizes public education.

Today I am respectfully requesting that Governor Strickland take the final step to move the budget debate forward and immediately withdraw the video slot machine proposal from any future budget considerations to avoid having this matter linger on in the courts, squandering precious resources. By rescinding his executive orders now, Governor Strickland will open the way for the Ohio General Assembly immediately to return to the essential task of appropriating adequate and sustainable funding for all essential state of Ohio governmental and human services. Further, I urge Governor Strickland to continue his public opposition to casino gambling in Ohio.

This is the moment for Governor Strickland and the Ohio General Assembly to permanently walk away from flawed proposals to fund responsible government through irresponsible means such as gambling. This is the moment for the Governor and legislative leaders to develop and implement viable strategies for sustainable revenue now, while there is still time in the current biennium budget.

The lingering economic downturn in our state and around the globe is frightening and devastating to individuals, families and institutions. All of us know persons who have lost their jobs, homes, pensions or health benefits. Many hearing this may be among this number. There is incredible pressure on our state and community leaders to turn to the lure of casino gambling as the answer to our economic woes. I understand this. But, I also understand that the gambling industry is well organized and well funded to exploit the current economic pain and fear experienced by so many Ohioans. Issue 3 is not about jobs. It is about altering the very fabric of our life together.

Noted economists call this “casino capitalism.” Casino capitalism contributes to an illusion of free money by preying on those least able to afford it. Across America, predatory gambling has helped create a culture based on financial gimmicks, false hopes and pure chance. This culture led to and perpetuates the massive economic crisis we find ourselves in today.

Persons of faith all across the great state of Ohio care deeply about this issue. Our presence here this morning bears witness to the deep concern that United Methodists, and other member communions of the Ohio Council of Churches, have concerning the harm caused by expanding gambling. I continue to believe the Governor and the Ohio General Assembly harbor a deep-seated passion to work for the common good of all of Ohio’s citizens. It is time to demonstrate this passion and to lead the way forward.

I urge Governor Strickland and the Ohio General Assembly to be statespersons, not politicians. Be persons of courage. Act with dispatch. Make the moral choice. Do the right thing. Do not expand gambling. Abandon, altogether, the flawed proposal for video slot machines at racetracks. Stand firm against Issue 3 and casino gambling. Develop and implement viable strategies for sustainable revenue and economic growth. Work together to care for Ohio’s families and children, and fund public education and the state budget in the old-fashioned way – with moral, intellectual and economic integrity.

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