



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TESTIMONY REGARDING SENATE BILL 585 Presented by John Huebscher, Executive Director March 16, 2010

On behalf of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, I wish to present this informational testimony regarding Senate Bill 585.

The WCC approaches this bill in the context of Catholic teaching on religious liberty as expressed in the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* promulgated by the Second Vatican Council in December of 1965. We also assess this bill from the perspective of Catholic employees, Catholic employers, dioceses, and other Church-affiliated organizations.

The *Declaration* affirms that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person. All people have this right. This freedom means that all are “to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others, within due limits.” (*Declaration on Religious Liberty*, #2)

As we assess SB 585 in terms of the workplace today, we are not aware of instances when Catholic employees are required to attend meetings arranged by non-Catholic employers for the purpose of influencing their religious beliefs or preferences. Were that to happen, Catholics should be free to opt out of the meetings.

Neither are we aware of Catholic employers in the private sector compelling non-Catholics to attend meetings with the intent of influencing their religious beliefs or practices. For a Catholic employer to do so is inconsistent with the *Declaration* previously mentioned.

Church agencies, Catholic dioceses, parishes, and other Catholic agencies may from time to time expect Catholic employees to attend sessions that provide ongoing formation so that they may better understand their faith. The bill protects this in its language on page 6 at lines 12-15. This language states that the provision does not apply to employers who are religious associations or to organizations that are primarily controlled by a religious association, if the primary purpose of a meeting is to communicate the employer’s religious beliefs, tenets, or practices.

There are also occasions when Catholic agencies, such as Catholic hospitals and Catholic Charities, may provide mandatory sessions for all employees, including those who may not be Catholic. The purpose of such sessions is not to proselytize. Rather their goal is to educate staff on the relationship between Catholic teaching and the mission of the organization. We believe the bill does not cover such meetings because the meetings are not like those described on page 5 at lines 1-2 and because the exemption on page 6 of the bill protects these sessions as well.

Lastly, we raise one point of clarification.

Religious groups often witness their values by public advocacy. Such advocacy is related to a church's beliefs, tenets, and practices. Thus at times, church personnel meet to discuss and plan advocacy. This type of activity seems to be exempted by the language beginning on page 6 lines 12-15 and on page 7 at lines 1-3. However, additional clarity on this point would be helpful.

I hope this testimony is useful as you assess the need for, and implications of, this proposal.