



Illinois Great Rivers and Northern Illinois Conferences of The United Methodist Church

Bishop Frank Beard and Bishop Sally Dyck

To the people called United Methodists in the State of Illinois:

In this season of Annual Conferences, we, the episcopal leaders within Illinois, write to you concerning an issue that brings great concern to us.

On May 14, in a 6-3 decision, the U.S. Supreme Court cleared the way for states to legalize sports betting, striking down a 1992 federal law that had prohibited most states from authorizing sports betting.

The ruling was a victory for New Jersey and other states who have considered allowing sports gambling to be a way to encourage tourism and tax revenue. The NCAA, NFL and NBA had backed the federal prohibition.

The court said the federal law violated constitutional principles limiting the federal government from controlling state policy, unconstitutionally forcing states to prohibit sports betting under their own laws.

"The legalization of sports gambling requires an important policy choice, but the choice is not ours to make," Justice Samuel Alito wrote in the 6-3 opinion. "Congress can regulate sports gambling directly, but if it elects not to do so, each state is free to act on its own."

As United Methodists we have long held that "gambling is a menace to society, deadly to the best interests of moral, social, economic and spiritual life [and] destructive of good government" (Social Principles, ¶163G).

Our concern for Illinoisans is the seduction of an easy way out of our state's financial mess with unfunded pension liabilities and a backlog of unpaid bills. Advocates will once again parrot a familiar refrain that we can solve our financial problems on someone else's dime.

We do well to remember the experience of the Illinois State Lottery which, when enacted in 1973, was going to fully finance education. Today, the state not only doesn't take the primary role in funding, it isn't even paying school districts the amount they owe them.

We also remember riverboat gambling in the 1990's and the expansion that was to bring new business to communities. But good paying jobs have given way to pawn shops, predatory pay day lending outlets and other such ventures that help fuel addiction of our citizens.

Therefore, as citizens of the state, we need a strategy at both the state and federal level to address this problem. Since the Court has ruled the power resides in each individual state, we need to contact our state legislators in the General Assembly to oppose opening the door to sports betting. We reached a saturation point with gambling a long time ago but our state government is still addicted to promises that are never fulfilled. The door needs to be shut on more and different ways to chase those empty promises.



At the same time, we need to urge our members of Congress to take affirmative action regarding regulating sports betting in a way that can square with the recent Supreme Court decision. With the internet crossing state lines as well as international boundaries, we need a single standard on regulating the activity as a way to limit overreach by the gaming industry. Through its social marketing targeted at young people, gaming interests attracts new gambler with individuals between ages 25 and 34 responsible for the biggest increase in online gambling last year.

Above everything else, join us in prayer for our Representatives and Senators. Pray also for those who have fallen victim to gambling addiction. We have seen first-hand leaders within our churches who have embezzled funds to pay for a habit they cannot shake.

We ask you to take seriously the teaching of our Social Principles where we are to “promote standards and personal lifestyles that would make it unnecessary and undesirable to resort to commercial gambling – including public lotteries – as recreation, as an escape or as a means of producing public revenue or funds for support of charities or government (§163G). And through our witness, our communities, our state and even our world may be transformed in a way that models the Kingdom of God.

Sincerely,

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