MCC to face battles as General Assembly convenes

ANNAPOLIS – With issues like same-sex marriage, the death penalty and immigration likely to dominate much of the upcoming session of the Maryland General Assembly, it's shaping up to be a contentious year in Annapolis.

But while leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference (MCC) are bracing for some tough battles, they are optimistic their more elusive legislative priorities from previous sessions may finally become law.

The 425th legislative session begins Jan. 9 when 47 senators and 141 delegates convene in the state capital. The MCC, the Annapolis-based legislative lobbying arm of the state's Catholic bishops, will advocate for and against bills related to pro-life, social justice, education and other Catholic concerns throughout the 90-day session.

Repealing the death penalty highlights the legislation MCC leaders believe can be passed this year. The conference also has high hopes that a business tax credit to help nonpublic schools can be established this year, along with a proposed program to benefit women with unplanned pregnancies.

The conference will be fighting expected legislation legalizing same-sex marriage and a bill that MCC leaders say would cripple the church's ministries by allowing child abuse-related civil suits that had been previously prevented by the statute of limitations.

With Maryland facing a tight budget, MCC leaders said they will also make sure the poor and vulnerable are not overlooked and that social safety nets are safeguarded.

Banning the death penalty

Coming on the heels of New Jersey's ban on the death penalty, Richard J. Dowling, MCC executive director, said Maryland is well poised to follow suit and abolish capital punishment in the Free State.

Despite the strong support of Gov. Martin J. O'Malley, legislation that would have replaced the death penalty with prison sentences of life without parole was narrowly killed last year in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee when it fell one vote short. A similar bill is expected to be introduced this year.

"We're really, really close," said Mr. Dowling.

Two senators who serve on the committee, Republican Sen. Alex X. Mooney of Frederick County and Democratic Sen. James Brochin of Baltimore County, hold crucial votes on the issue. Last year, they voted against the measure, but Mr. Dowling believes they might be open to reconsidering their votes this year. The two senators will need to hear from death penalty abolitionists, he said.

"If we can change either mind, we'll have a bill on the Senate floor," he said.

Mr. Dowling said he hoped the governor will show stronger support for outlawing capital punishment by putting his name on this year's bill.

Pointing out that Pope John Paul II, the U.S. bishops and Maryland bishops have "led the charge" against the death penalty nationally and locally, Mr. Dowling said Catholic opinion has shifted among Catholic voters on the issue. Polling has shown them to be less supportive of the death penalty, he said, and a 2005 MCC poll found that 63 percent of all Marylanders view life without parole as an acceptable substitute for death sentences.

Help for women

Looking to support women in crisis pregnancies, the MCC will be lobbying hard for lawmakers to pass enabling legislation that would establish a pregnancy support services program. Modeled after a Pennsylvania program called "Real Alternatives," the initiative would assist pregnancy centers, maternity homes and social service/adoption agencies that do not provide abortions.

The MCC is also asking Gov. O'Malley to include money in his budget to fund the initiative. A pilot program based in Baltimore City and two counties would cost about $800,000, according to Nancy Paltell, MCC associate director for respect for life.

“It’s about making sure women understand all their options,” said Ms. Paltell, noting that the Pennsylvania program has been strongly supported by lawmakers on both sides of the abortion question.

“We’re pretty hopeful we’ve finally found a piece of legislation that is common ground,” she said. “If you’re for choice, you should be willing to support women who choose childbirth.”

Programs that support women dealing with unplanned pregnancies are struggling to meet the demand, and they are not supported with the kind of state funding that goes to abortion and family-service clinics, Ms. Paltell said. Help from the state would allow crisis pregnancy centers to serve more women, according to Ms. Paltell. The pilot program alone would benefit 1,500 women, she said.

Protecting education and family life

With Catholic schools throughout the state experiencing declining enrollment, Mary Ellen Russell, MCC associate director for education and family life, said it’s more important than ever for the state to provide more support for students in nonpublic schools.

Nonpublic schools annually save the state nearly $1.5 billion in per-pupil costs, she said. But with rising tuition and decreasing enrollment, some schools have been forced to close. Total enrollment in Maryland’s Catholic schools has declined 6 percent in the last five years, she said.

The MCC is asking Gov. O’Malley to restore funding for the Nonpublic School Textbook/Technology Loan Program to $6 million. It also wants to extend the existing Quality Teacher Incentive Tax Credit to certified nonpublic school teachers.

The MCC is also seeking to establish the BOAST (Building Opportunities for All Students and Teachers) tax credit for business donations to organizations that support public and private school students and teachers.

After a fall ruling by the Maryland State Court of Appeals that left open the door to legalizing same-sex marriage through legislation, Ms. Russell said the MCC will work to protect the traditional definition of marriage as being between a man and a

woman.

“This year could see a drastic change in marriage if people don’t get involved,” said Ms. Russell.

Noting that 27 states have passed amendments to protect marriage, she said the Maryland effort to alter the definition of marriage is “a trend not seen elsewhere.”

Concern for fairness

Concerned that it would cripple the many outreach ministries of the Catholic Church in Maryland, the MCC will again oppose legislation allowing civil lawsuits against the three Catholic dioceses serving Maryland for sexual-abuse claims stretching beyond the current seven-year limitation. While such a bill was defeated last year, another is expected to be introduced this session, Mr. Dowling said.

Similar legislation elsewhere has had a devastating impact on local churches, costing hundreds of millions of dollars, according to Mr. Dowling.

“This legislation doesn’t get the people who did the damages, it gets an institution that does a lot of good work,” said Mr. Dowling. “It only punishes one institution: the Catholic Church.”

Mr. Dowling emphasized that Maryland is one of only seven states that have no criminal statutes of limitations. A person who commits child abuse can be prosecuted any time, Mr. Dowling said.

“The dioceses in Maryland have model programs for protecting youths,” said Mr. Dowling. “We find it peculiar we’re being attacked.”

Lifting up the poor and vulnerable

One of the top priorities for helping low-income people in Maryland will center on affordable housing, according to Julie Varner, MCC associate director for social concerns.

The MCC will support an increase in affordable-housing funds, she said, while also lobbying for legislation to protect tenants from discrimination based on the source of

their income.

“We live in a very expensive region,” said Ms. Varner, chair of the Maryland Alliance for the Poor. “A two-bedroom apartment is much more expensive than in other parts of the country.”

With the state facing a budget crunch, Ms. Varner acknowledged that it will be difficult seeking new funds. But she said the poor must not be squeezed out.

As in previous years, the MCC will support legislation allowing children of undocumented immigrants who live in Maryland and attend Maryland schools to pay in-state tuition at public universities and community colleges, Ms. Varner said. The conference will also support increased funding for adult education and English for Speakers of Other Languages.

The MCC is prepared to fight legislation that would require pharmacists to dispense emergency contraception drugs that can cause abortions, Ms. Varner added.

“We believe a pharmacist should be able to say, ‘I’m not going to participate in potentially aborting a child,’” said Ms. Varner. “They shouldn’t be compelled to do so.”