

# New Maryland Legislature will face critical issues

ANNAPOLIS – The next Maryland General Assembly isn't going to have it easy. From the possible legalization of gay marriage to dealing with abortion in the implementation of federal healthcare reform, newly elected leaders will face a host of decisions that will influence public policy in fundamental ways.

As voters prepare to head to the Nov. 2 polls, leaders of the Maryland Catholic Conference are urging them to take stock of the issues and to examine where the candidates stand.

"Catholic voters shouldn't be afraid to bring their faith and their values with them when they cast their ballots," said Mary Ellen Russell, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, public-policy arm of the state's Catholic bishops.

"There is much at stake," she said.

## Gay marriage

While current law states that only a man and a woman may have a valid marriage in Maryland, the new Legislature is likely to consider proposals to alter that definition. A 2007 ruling by the Court of Appeals affirmed current law, but said lawmakers have the right to change it.

Early this year, Maryland Attorney General Doug Gansler issued an opinion that Maryland's law does not prohibit the recognition of same-sex marriages that are performed legally in other jurisdictions.

Russell noted that delegates and senators will be less reluctant to take on a controversial issue like gay marriage in the early years of their four-year term, increasing the likelihood that the issue will be raised in the coming year.

"Marriage precedes law and religion," Russell said. "It emerges out of our nature as men and women. It would be a mistake to say there wouldn't be adverse affects on

society as a whole and on our religious institutions if we were to change our understanding of marriage.”

### **Protecting the poor and vulnerable**

As new lawmakers grapple with a tight budget in a difficult economy, the Catholic Conference hopes they won't forget the poor. Louis Brown, the conference's newly appointed associate director for social concerns, will urge the General Assembly to preserve state funding for safety net programs and pass legislation prohibiting landlords from discriminating against rental applicants based on the applicant's source of income.

“We will be looking to restore funding and staffing within the Department of Human Resources to meet increasing demand for services,” Brown said.

As lawmakers implement health care reform, the Catholic Conference will urge them to protect the sanctity of life.

“We embrace the goals of federal health care reform,” Russell said, “but we do not want to see it used as a vehicle to further increase taxpayer funding of abortion.”

Russell said the church wants to work with lawmakers to expand access to health care, especially for the poor, immigrants and the vulnerable. Those goals shouldn't be compromised by the abortion issue, she said.

“This doesn't need to become a battle,” she said.

### **Defending life, protecting women**

In the wake of the recent deaths and injuries of women at Maryland abortion clinics, one of the Catholic Conference's top priorities is passing legislation to regulate abortion clinics as ambulatory surgical facilities. Current law regulates them as doctors' offices.

“It's about protecting the lives of women,” said Nancy Paltell, MCC associate director for respect for life.

Paltell noted that Maryland is one of four states that do not collect abortion statistics

and one of 17 states that fund abortion through Medicaid – dubious distinctions she hopes lawmakers will address in the new session.

“Maryland has some of the most permissive abortion laws in the country,” Paltell said.

The Catholic Conference plans to lobby to limit funding for stem cell research to the forms that do not result in the destruction of human life. It will also support the abolition of the death penalty.

## **Education**

While previous General Assemblies have come close to passing a long-sought business tax credit benefitting students in public and nonpublic schools, those efforts have repeatedly come up short. The Catholic Conference hopes the new Legislature will pass the tax credit, which would also benefit teachers.

“Catholic schools in Maryland save Maryland taxpayers \$690 million annually,” said Ellen Robertson, MCC associate director for education and family life.

Robertson said the conference will also advocate to preserve and increase funding for the textbook and technology program in the nonpublic schools.

“Parents have the right to choose the education that best suits their children,” she said.

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