



THE RHODE ISLAND STATE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Faith & Order Commission

Authority of the Council in Public Life

There is a truism in national and local Rhode Island discussion that our society is in need of social, political and moral reform. While reform is needed for all levels of society, our Christian tradition calls most strongly for a re-invigoration of the Church's role to advocate for those less advantaged. For many years discussion has been dominated by leaders who have chosen to omit religious, and specifically Christian values, from their proposals and arguments. For the latter half of the 20th century it could be said that the style of public discourse was humanitarian to the exclusion of religious reference and thought. Then beginning in about 1980, religious thought again entered the public sphere, but this was dominated by one element of the theological spectrum, the "religious right." At the time, mainstream and liberal theologians stayed out of public discourse while secular liberals were left by default to oppose the conservative side. The tide may be changing. It is the aim of this report to broaden the terms of discussion to include both ends of the political religious spectrum. For that reason we were glad to receive the draft document, "The Authority of the Church in the World."¹ Our conclusion is that the Council and the Churches of Rhode Island are encouraged by Rhode Island's democratic traditions and structure, and commanded by our Christian traditions and scripture, to involve ourselves in political discussion to raise the moral base of our society, and to further aims of charity and justice. In particular we are concerned to respond to Jesus' parable of the judgement, "Just as you did to the least of these my brothers, you did it to me."²

There are many points of agreement, as well as points of disagreement, among the churches and in our society about the participation of people and institutions of faith in the democratic process. Most of them are discussed in ACW. Some more pressing issues picked out by the Commission were the authority of the Christian community amid the diversity of society; marginalization of the Church in modern society and Rhode Island particularly; the fragmentation of the Church into denominations and within denominations; and the focus of the Church and her members on principles of faith as opposed to assumptions and prejudices.

Diversity. The value of religious diversity is not considered in ACW. The Commission however pointed out the Christian principle of unconditional acceptance of people regardless of religious tradition or depth of faith.³ As a result we find the diversity of Rhode Island society a wonderful gift of grace, something to be celebrated. A corollary of our conviction is the necessity of support and respect for differing religious faiths, Christian and interfaith. Without respect to expectations of God's purposes in the end times, meanwhile we are called to care for and uphold the dignity of all people. In our appreciation of

¹ Faith & Order Department of the National Council of the Churches of Christ, "The Authority of the Church in the World: Draft: August 21, 2007" (New York, 2007). (Hereafter abbreviated ACW.) This document may now be downloaded at <http://www.nccusa.org/pdfs/newAOC.pdf>.

² Matthew 25:40 *passim*, *New Revised Standard Version*.

³ E.g. Jesus' healing of the Syrophenician woman, Mt. 15:22ff; and Peter's recognition of the Church's call to serve gentiles as well as Jews, Acts 10:28ff, among other places in both Hebrew and Greek scriptures.

other faiths, however, it does not help to dilute or downplay our expression of our own faith or other aspects of our different traditions. By the same token we must take care that our worship practices do not function as barriers to partnership among religious communities nor barriers to seekers.

Marginalization. ACW points out the diminution of the Church's influence in society and covers many of its causes.⁴ Some deserve comment. First let us note that those of us who spend our lives in the Church may find ourselves so surrounded by the initiated faithful as to miss the needs and viewpoints of the world at large. The liturgies of the Church in particular create, as they should, a community and environment of faith so powerful as to block out the habits and opportunities of those not already members. This is a great strength and also an obstacle which, if allowed, can impede the mission of the Church to the world in all ways save the passive witness of the Church's existence. One of the bishops of the Episcopal Church said, "The Church is the only institution that exists for those not already members."⁵ This sense of mission requires the Church's active participation in the affairs of all God's people. As the world in its culture diverges from the habits of the faithful, we risk becoming irrelevant to the world through outdated habits of communication, celebration, and response to human needs, which also change with dizzying speed.

In Rhode Island we are still blessed in that a majority of the secularized population retains a sense of catechesis, so that many of the Church's practices are still understood by most. This constitutes an opportunity, as long as it lasts, for the Church to share its ancient strengths with a sensitive public if only we can raise our public profile.

False Assumptions. Beyond the false assumptions we make as a result of the Church's sometime insularity, are assumptions commonly shared in contemporary American political life which may and do distract the faithful from the core message of Gospel: justice and love. The authority of the Church depends in part on the integrity of our actions and our words.⁶ The Commission went beyond the discussion of ACW to notice that both politically conservative and liberal circles carry baggage not only irrelevant to the Christian mission but actively in opposition to Christian values.⁷ Christian activists in public life must therefore be careful to filter out popular "truths" of whatever circle from the proper core concerns of the faithful. Again, we are called to a role of public education to correct misconceptions and to facilitate spiritual growth among the faithful and in secular society.

Unity. An additional challenge to the Church's witness and participation in the affairs of the world is our fragmentation. It's been said many places, including ACW, that the Church's disunity is a scandal to the Gospel. ACW points out that our fragmentation cripples our authority as "the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church."⁸ In addition, our disunity cripples our witness in public media and our political influence. Thus reconciliation of our different expressions of faith becomes not only an act of submission to God's commandment but a pragmatic necessity. While we struggle toward reunion in faith, however, it is still important to find common cause both in our witness to the public and our participation in political affairs. Until we find a better organic unity, this need raises the necessity and the role of councils of churches locally, nationally, and globally. Their role in this respect is to foster unity of faith while facilitating common participation for all the Churches in public life in its broadest sense.

At the same time it is important to recognize the difference between ecumenical and interfaith efforts. Ecumenical organizations and efforts have as their purpose to realize the unity of faith mandated by Jesus Christ in John 17.⁹ Interfaith coalitions, meanwhile, can surely be helpful in the American political arena to further initiatives embodying values shared across many faiths, as opportunities arise. However in the public

⁴ ACW, lines 73-115. Also to the same point, see Harvey Cox's *Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York, 1966) and Loren Meade's *The Once and Future Church* (Washington, 1991).

⁵ The Rt. Rev. David Birney, Bishop of Idaho, 1985.

⁶ ACW, lines 996-1004.

⁷ E.g. the rise of the contemporary "Respect for Life Movement," an ecumenical Christian community of concern rejecting both the conservative support for capital punishment and liberal support for abortion rights. This is discussed in Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco, 2005).

⁸ Nicene/Constantinopolitan Creed, as quoted in ACW, line 356.

⁹ The Commission does not understand unity of faith to require homogeneity or hierarchical merger. Nor can we disregard histories giving rise to our fragmentation nor disobedience within our different traditions, but pray and work to overcome the divisions.

eye it does not help to downplay the unique Christian Gospel nor to forget that the respect due other faiths requires honoring the differences, for Christ's sake. In Rhode Island the Commission realizes these differences of purpose will create a tension for our officers as a matter of practice.

Separation of Church and State. There is a false popular notion that separation of Church and State as a Constitutional principle forbids participation of the Churches in American political life. Not only is such an exclusion absent from English Common Law from which our Constitution descended, it is foreign to the U.S. Constitution and explicitly countered by the Constitution of Rhode Island:

Freedom of religion. -- Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free; and all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness; and whereas a principal object of **our venerable ancestors, in their migration to this country and their settlement of this state, was, as they expressed it, to hold forth a lively experiment that a flourishing civil state may stand and be best maintained with full liberty in religious concernments;** we, therefore, declare that no person shall be compelled to frequent or to support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatever, except in fulfillment of such person's voluntary contract; nor enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in body or goods; nor disqualified from holding any office; nor otherwise suffer on account of such person's religious belief; and that every person shall be free to worship God according to the dictates of such person's conscience, and to profess and by argument to maintain such person's opinion in matters of religion; and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect the civil capacity of any person.¹⁰

Of course the authors of the Rhode Island Constitution in colonial days, and the founders of the state's original settlements, were motivated by religion to settle where they did. Their assumption was that every citizen would have a faith, and it would be through the diversity of belief that the colony would prosper. History proved them correct. Now that the range of faiths of our society includes no faith, our constitutional principles still encourage us to share our different core values and build upon them for the benefit of all.

From these constitutional principles as well as the Christian vocation to witness to God's saving love, the Commission discerns a call to the Christian community to join in speaking, acting, and working to further Christian values in our society, God's justice and mercy in society and government, and charity among the people of Rhode Island. There are many tender issues for members of the churches when we enter the public arena. It is important that we exercise mutual consideration and charity to one another as always. But it is also important to be active, concerned participants in the world where God has given us birth and sustains our lives.

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Additional Reading Resources

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Economic Justice for All," November 13, 1986. May be downloaded from www.usccb.org/

Dionne, Jr., E.J., "Faith & Politics: After the Religious Right," *Commonweal*, CXXXV, 3.

¹⁰ Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Article I, Section 3 (our emphasis). The RI Constitution was not part of the Commission's original study of ACW, but requested by the Executive Minister to follow up.